

The Cybernetic Organism and the Failure of Transhumanism in Samuel Beckett's *Endgame*

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Abstract

The following essay examines the notion of transhumanism and its relevance to a critical understanding of Samuel Beckett's *Endgame* (1957). It will be argued that the play explores the possibility of permanently refining the human form by technological enhancement, before finally rejecting such a possibility as ultimately sinister and, to some extent, fruitless. In order to do this, contexts for *Endgame* and the Huxlian notion of transhumanism will be provided before I examine the effects of technology on the human condition and the role of the cybernetic organism within the context of the play. Lastly, the way in which *Endgame* notionally rejects such transhumanist aspirations will be discussed.

Under the influence of modern evolutionary synthesis theory¹, biologist Julian Huxley predicted a near future in which human physicality could find a meaningful and permanent form of refinement. According to Huxley, the human condition – as well as social conditions everywhere – would improve through the progress of the natural sciences and through the discovery of new, innovative technologies to combine the organic and the inorganic. In *New Bottles for New Wine* (1957), Huxley defines an ideology that had recently been gaining attention:

Scientific and technical explorations have given the Common Man all over the world a notion of physical possibilities [...] The human species can, if it wishes, transcend itself [...] We need a name for this new belief. Perhaps transhumanism will serve: man remaining man, but transcending himself, by realizing new possibilities of and for his human nature [1].

Huxley's belief that the next step in human evolution would inevitably be a product of man's own design is a sentiment that necessarily presupposes the notion of the cybernetic organism². Defined by Donna Haraway as "a hybrid of machine and organism" [2], the merging of the organic with the artificial can serve a number of purposes; however, in most cases, the intended outcome involves the improvement and extension of human life. Impermanent alterations of the human form have already become prominent in the domestic setting: Elaine Graham has dubbed such technology as increasingly "commonplace," being an expression of the way in which "humans and machines are increasingly becoming assimilated and interdependent" [4]. It is also noteworthy that Beckett himself maintained a prominent interest in the discoveries of evolution and the future progress of

human physicality. Daniela Guardamagna and Rossana Sebellin provide commentary on the playwright's heavily worn and annotated copy of Darwin's *On the Origin of Species*, identifying its influence on Beckett's work by the numerous allusions to Darwin's caterpillar³ made in *Murphy*, *Watt* and the lesser known "Echoes Bones" [5]. In the context of Beckett's dramatic works, Yoshiaki Tajiri also notes the playwright's interest in the debilitating effects of prosthetic technology on the human form, particularly regarding the partially subsumed bodies in *Play*; the recollections of a disconnected machine in *Not I*; and the stage directions that compare Lucky's cognitive process with a malfunctioning machine in *Waiting for Godot* [6].

Arguably, however, it is *Endgame* that shows the greatest preoccupation with the progress of human physicality and transhumanism. Contemporary with the release of Huxley's publication and defining of the term, *Endgame* was first performed in 1957 and features a cast of characters that appear to be products of transhumanist preoccupations. Such characters demonstrate a pronounced reliance on various forms of constitution-altering technology, either for their survival or for the enhancement of their natural abilities. As operator of dark glasses, a gaff, a whistle, and even a catheter, Hamm is the most technologically reliant and ultimately at the center of *Endgame's* transhumanist investigations. Most crucially, it is his relationship with his wheelchair that commits the character most effectively to the role of cybernetic organism. Described as "in an armchair with castors [...] a rug over his knees" [7 pp.92-93], Hamm is quite literally half man and half machine. From the knees down, he is rigidly affixed to the wheelchair, and has become fully dependent on this machine for any sense of mobility. *Endgame's* second central character forms an interesting contrast within a transhumanist context: Clov is a more organic figure and, when not climbing a ladder, appears to retain his autonomy of movement without the assistance of anything mechanical. However, various forms of technology still play a crucial role in Clov's life, the most important being a telescope, which grants him artificially enhanced sight: "[He gets up on the ladder, turns the telescope on] Let's see. [He looks, moving the telescope] Zero... [he looks]... zero... [he looks] ...and zero" [7 p.106]. The majority of critical responses to this sequence have been fairly general and inconclusive, with Ashkan Shobeiri stating simply that Clov's numerical statement reflects a "featureless landscape without any signs to guide them" [8]. However, when placed within a transhumanist context, this moment becomes less enigmatic. While operating this ladder and telescope, Clov embraces his momentary state as a cybernetic organism as he appears to communicate with Hamm in binary, a mechanical language that expresses the desolation that lies outside the walls of their enclosure. Additionally, given that Clov's movement is staggered and stiff [7 p.92] and he has a tendency to

complain about “the pains in [his] legs” [7 p. 115], this character’s demonstration of arthritic symptoms draws attention to the limitations of organic composition and its tendency to degrade gradually to become a source of immobility and suffering. These properties are indeed the antithesis of the Huxlian vision. Therefore, while not being as visibly reliant upon the mechanical as Hamm, Clov demonstrates a pronounced integration with various kinds of constitution-altering technologies, thereby representing a crucial embodiment of a degrading organic form.

While their cybernetic nature initially appears positive due to its ability to compensate for human shortcomings, each of the main characters develops uneasiness with the transhumanist vision. Clov, in particular, exhibits a complex and contradictory relationship with cybernetic technology. At one point, he demonstrates an affinity for mechanical transportation by reminding Hamm, “When there were still bicycles I wept to have one. I crawled at your feet” [7 p. 96]. Here, he reflects upon his strong desire for a bicycle and the advantages associated with owning one much as he revels in the use of his telescope. Later, though, Clov appears at odds with transhumanism and with the notion of improvement via the cybernetic organism, as he reverses his attitude toward the telescope. He claims that there is “No need of the glass” [7 p.105] despite Hamm’s demand and, similarly, demonstrates sudden indifference toward the possible construction of an artificial raft. As the play progresses, Hamm adamantly proposes, “Let’s go from here, the two of us! You can make a raft and the currents will carry us away” [7 p.109]. Initially, Clov delights in the proposition and in the possibility of obtaining artificially-enhanced mobility on water. Critics have interpreted the raft to be symbolic of numerous things, though the predominant view is that this moment is “derived from the biblical narrative of Noah’s ark” [9], with such a device potentially allowing the characters to escape from their present surroundings and their associated misery. Yet, despite the obvious advantages of such technology, both characters bizarrely seem to lose interest in it; this is apparently due to the improbability of being attacked by sharks.

Nagg and Nell demonstrate a similarly complex relationship with prosthetic, constitution-altering forms of technology. Paralleling the technological interests of Hamm and Clov in cycling and sailing, the elderly couple reminisces humorously about the time that they “crashed our tandem and lost our shanks” [7 p.100] as well as when they “went out rowing on Lake Cuomo” [7 p.102]. However, their appreciation for transhuman machinery appears merely notional and a product of nostalgia as Nagg’s struggle with his own encasement is described in troubling detail: “Nagg’s hands appear, gripping the rim. Then the head emerges” [7 p.116]. This anxious and strained emergence from the ashbin illustrates Nagg’s very corporeal struggle with his own constitution as a cybernetic organism. Indeed, “the head” depersonalizes the character, abstracting the individual from his physical constitution and his bodily extremities. This moment is particularly disquieting for its demonstration of the traumatizing effect of technology on the constitution of the human body. Ultimately, each character (excluding the small boy discovered by Clov [7 p.130]) appears reliant on some form of cybernetic technology, and faces a struggle between appreciation and discontentment with his or her artificial alteration⁴.

Certain moments in the play question the value of the cybernetic state directly. One example is Hamm’s eccentric ride

around the extremities of the stage: “Take me for a little turn. [Clov goes behind the chair and pushes it forward] [...] Right round the world!” [7 p.104]. The ride is not only depicted as entirely absurd, but also as a source of irritation for both characters. It seems that Hamm’s wheelchair and its ability to provide him with limited mobility are largely pointless, as the wheelchair only grants him the trivial ability to traverse his immediate area – with assistance – while not providing more effective means for an escape. In addition, Nagg and Nell’s ashbins become examples of primitive, inhibiting cybernetic technologies, as they are artificial and permanent appendages to these characters’ otherwise organic constitution. Such devices protect the characters from their cold surroundings and ensure their survival (“I’m freezing. [Pause.] Do you want to go in?” [7 p.100]), but ultimately appear ridiculous for their inhibition of physical movement. *Endgame*’s representation of Nagg and Nell as artificially enhanced is not just absurd, however, but also sinister. Indeed, G. Farrell Lee has recognized the elderly couple’s ashbins as an ominous symbol, representing the disposability of human life [10]. It is entirely appropriate, then, that Nagg and Nell rely so heavily on their ashbins in order to stay warm and extend their own lives. However, their encasements ultimately prove to be debilitating, rendering the couple immobile and isolated: “[*Their heads strain towards each other, fail to meet, fall apart again*]” and then “[*They turn painfully towards each other*]” [7 p.99]. While they are able to extend their lives by these artificial means, the devices also inhibit their physicality, isolating them from the outside world and quite literally entombing them by the play’s conclusion: “[*Clov lets go of her hand, pushes her back in the bin, closes the lid*] [...] She has no pulse” [7 p.103]. These moments effectively demonstrate the shortcomings of the cybernetic form, highlighting the way in which human physicality can be dismantled and compromised by artificial means. And so, despite the characters’ ability to realize the transhumanist aspiration of life-extension, this perceived benefit appears to come at a perturbingly high cost.

Given that cybernetic technology is generally employed for the purpose of the extension and improvement of human life, the ultimate goal of the transhumanist vision should be the attainment of eternal life by these artificial means. According to Michael McNamee, the infinite extension of human life can be a meaningful way of improving the human condition and creating a greater sense of well-being in the individual: “According to the extreme transhumanism programme, technology can be used to vastly enhance a person’s intelligence; [...] to lengthen their lifespan, perhaps to immortality; and to reduce vastly their vulnerability to harm” [11]. *Endgame* critiques this aspiration, however, depicting characters who struggle with their own infinite existence: “Will you never finish? [*With sudden fury*] Will this never finish?” [7 p.103]. Indeed, Josie Barth has observed that the characters’ anguish is due, in no small part, to the interminability of their existence, claiming that “all action and dialogue in the play consist of the characters’ attempts to distract themselves from waiting for an end that will not come [...] [they are] trapped endlessly in the same argument” [12]. Nagg and Nell are particularly noteworthy in this context, as they represent the extension of life through artificial means, with their ashbins protecting them from the lethal cold. Given the fact that the characters’ very existences appear to be the source of their suffering, the transhumanist aspiration to live longer, or even forever, appears absurd. Indeed, the play seems to emphasize

that wellbeing is not guaranteed just by the artificial extension of human life, but that it is often better to terminate existence rather than to extend it artificially. The transhumanist aspiration of immortality is thus depicted as undesirable because of its ability to become a source of suffering in the cybernetically enhanced individual, thus defeating its own attempt at improving the human condition.

While *Endgame* does criticize the transhumanist ideology through its depiction of the pointless and sinister pitfalls associated with cybernetic enhancement, the characters themselves also articulate a conclusive rejection of transhumanism. Early in the play, Nagg is shown retreating into his bin, thus avoiding the deathly cold outside of the encasement. Crucially, however, Nell utters, "I am going to leave you" [7 p.101] before defiantly exposing herself to her frigid surroundings. This self-destructive gesture represents a decisive denunciation of the cybernetic technology that has come to surround her organic body. She chooses to abandon the safety of her ashbin and allow nature to take its course, terminating her own life. Hamm makes a similarly defiant gesture towards the end of the play: "*He throws away the gaff [...] He tears the whistle from his neck [...] He throws the whistle towards the auditorium*" [7 p.133]. He is seen abandoning the various forms of ability-enhancing technology that he was once reliant on. Even more rebelliously, Hamm attempts to liberate himself from his own mechanical constitution: "Perhaps I could throw myself out on the floor. [*He pushes himself painfully off his seat, falls back again*]" [7 p.126]. Given that his wheelchair has come to represent the main technological constituent of his physical body, Hamm's attempt at escaping from it represents an attempted escape from his state as a cybernetic organism. Ultimately, he is unsuccessful, failing to sever his connection to the wheelchair. Yet despite this apparent failure, the character can still be seen rejecting notionally the artificiality of his own physical form. Nell, similarly, also fails to become liberated from her cybernetic condition, but the gesture itself remains apparent. Thus, by the play's conclusion, these characters have rejected the cybernetic form and the aspiration to achieve a transhumanist state, and have demonstrated that those are ultimately sinister and absurd.

Beckett's *Endgame* grapples meaningfully with the possibility of physically enhancing the human body through technological means. Indeed, through the uneasy attitudes of the play's central characters toward the notion of cybernetic enhancement and through the depictions of such technology as both absurd and sinister, *Endgame* raises questions surrounding possible next steps in the human body's evolution. Beckett's menacing depiction of what would soon be known as cybernetic technology is

indeed prescient, as it effectively anticipates the debate over transhumanism that came to command widespread interest throughout the following decade.

End Notes

1. Modern evolutionary synthesis is the contemporary notion of evolution held by modern geneticists based primarily on the discoveries of Charles Darwin and Gregor Mendel. Notable for its prioritization of natural selection as the prominent evolutionary mechanism, it emphasizes historical and geographical factors in its model of gradual genetic change.
2. While the term "cybernetic organism" was first coined by Manfred Clynes and Nathan Kline three years after the play's debut, the concept itself has had a presence in literature since at least the mid-nineteenth century [see Edgar Allan Poe's "The Man That Was Used Up" (1839)]. This essay will, therefore, employ the term retrospectively in order to refer to an idea that was well-known at the time of the plays composition.
3. "As in repeating a well-known song, so in insects, one action follows another by a sort of rhythm; if a person be interrupted in a song, or in repeating anything by rote, he is generally forced to go back to recover the habitual train of thought: so P. Huber found it was with a caterpillar, which makes a very complicated hammock; for if he took a caterpillar which had completed its hammock up to, say, the sixth stage of construction, and put it into a hammock completed up only to the third stage, the caterpillar simply re-performed the fourth, fifth, and sixth stages of construction" [3].
4. Beckett suggests that even Mother Pegg has become reliant on technology, her survival being directly contingent upon the amount of "oil for her lamp" (Beckett 129).

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