

# Life and Death in the Mud: A Study of Beckett's *Comment C'est*

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The final phrases of *Comment C'est*<sup>1</sup> negate the novel's elaborate structure and affirm only the narrator and his most intimate environment. The narrator rejects one by one the hypotheses of existence to which he has previously devoted his energy and resourcefulness (pp. 173-177) and reduces his universe to five irrefutable constants: himself, his voice, the panting, the mud, and the darkness. The ultimate negation absorbs even the novel's tripartite construction: the notions before Pim, with Pim, and after Pim, lose all significance following the assertion of the final sequence, "jamais eu de Pim" (p. 175). Pim, like the sack, the scenes of life above, the scribes, the voice "quaqua" and the notions of order and justice, is a fictional existence which the narrative entertains and eventually dismisses.

From the very first page of the novel, the narrator speaks of a sack, a quite ordinary sack, "un petit à charbon cinquante kilos jute humide" (p. 10). The sack contains food: tins of moldy tuna fish, sardines, shrimp, and sprats; but it is more than a source of nourishment. Strangely comforting and appealing, it invites the narrator to crawl inside (p. 13). In a vision of life above, he is born from the sack (p. 108). It becomes in another scene a cherished mistress (p. 21). A possession to which he can assign the adjective "mon" (p. 21), the sack helps to extend his existence. Reluctant to release this extension of himself, the narrator considers with anguish the necessity to free both hands during meals: "le sac ma vie que jamais je ne lâche ici je le lâche besoin des deux mains . . ." (p. 42) and ". . . je lâche donc le sac mais minute il est ma vie je me couche donc dessus ça s'enchaîne toujours" (p. 43).

Questions raised by the sack lead the narrator to a confrontation with the fundamental mysteries of his existence. His initial encounter with Pim leaves him with a bewildered impression of injustice: Pim has a full sack whereas his has burst and been lost. The apparently unequal distribution of the sacks arouses confused feelings of resentment which later, when he again has a sack, yield to a desire to understand and to plot the possibly cyclical nature of the sack's possession:

. . . ça ne va pas quelque chose là qui ne va pas

le sac c'est le sac Pim est parti sans sac il m'a laissé son sac j'ai donc laissé mon sac à Bem je laisserai mon sac à Bom je quitterai Bom sans sac j'ai quitté Bem sans sac pour aller vers Pim . . .

. . . . .

ce sac donc que je n'avais pas en quittant Bem et que j'avais en allant vers Pim . . . je l'avais donc trouvé de la raison il m'en reste ce sac sans quoi pas de voyage

. . . . .

parti donc sans sac j'avais un sac je l'avais donc trouvé sur mon chemin voilà la difficulté aplanie nous laissons nos sacs à ceux qui n'en ont pas besoin nous prenons leurs sacs à ceux qui vont en avoir besoin nous partons sans sac nous en trouvons un nous pouvons voyager (p. 135)

With a certain perplexity, the narrator confronts the astonishing inefficiency of his universe which, although strictly regulated, consumes unproductively vast quantities of sacks. Aware finally of the controlled cyclical rhythm of his life, the narrator perceives the paradoxical absurdity of its regulated order: “. . . nous laissons nos sacs à ceux qui n'en ont pas besoin nous prenons leurs sacs à ceux qui vont en avoir besoin . . .” (p. 135). Life in the mud is consistent but not harmonic.

Having formulated the order which governs the distribution of the sacks, the narrator pursues the source of that order. Reviving for this purpose the religion of his childhood, he hypothesizes a supreme being, “celui qui fournit les sacs” (p. 150), a creature sensitive to the injustice of any deviation in the order which he has established (p. 150). With intelligence and love he provides the sacks: “. . . afin que nous soyons possibles nos accouplements voyages et abandons besoin de quelqu'un pas des nôtres une intelligence quelque part un amour qui tout le long de la piste aux bons endroits au fur et à mesure de nos besoins dépose nos sacs” (p. 166).

The supreme being who with love provides that every creature shall have a sack also furnishes to each creature a partner who will be alternately his tormentor or his victim. The narrator's insistence on the happiness experienced with Pim overshadows the obvious cruelty of the couple relationship. The violence of the narrator's system of communication and the free use he makes of the verb “torment” create an impression of sordid brutality. But this is the negative face of a relationship which is basically affirmative: “période heureuse à sa façon . . . la deuxième partie avec Pim comment c'était de bons moments bons pour moi on parle de moi pour lui aussi on parle de lui aussi heureux aussi à sa façon je le saurai plus tard je saurai de quelle façon son bonheur je l'aurai je n'ai pas encore tout eu” (p. 63).

The phrase “à sa façon” attenuates to some degree this notion of happiness; but in the midst of a solitary, painful journey through the mud, the anticipated encounter with a mate extends an appealing force. We can judge the strength of the appeal by the obsessional allusions in part one to the future life with Pim as well as by the sensation of pleasure provoked here by the distant promise of one day becoming a victim.

The couple experience offers more than this happiness. For the primary function of the association with Pim is the communication of scenes from life above. Through the evocative power of Pim's voice, the narrator experiences visions of life which he assimilates and makes his own. The scenes present visions of a life shared by Pim, the narrator, and countless other creatures of the mud: “cette vie donc qu'il aurait eue inventée remémorée un peu de chaque comment savoir cette chose là-haut il me la donnait je la faisais mienne . . .” (p. 89), and also “. . . qu'une seule vie là-haut d'âge en âge jamais qu'une seule . . .” (pp. 89-90).

The visions juxtapose nostalgic lyricism with a depressing grotesqueness. The narrator's expressed skepticism casts a shadow over some of the more appealing images (see p. 87, for example). The scenes pursue at some length a romantic adventure which had begun to unfold in part one with an outing in the

country, a young boy and girl holding hands and feeding sandwiches to one another. In part two, Pim and the narrator share the tragic conclusion of the adventure with Pam Prim: her fall or jump from a window (p. 94). The scenes portray in touching terms the continuation of this episode, a reconciliation in Pam's hospital room and a vain daily search for flowers. The story concludes with a general confession of aimlessness and failure: "ma vie là-haut ce que je faisais dans ma vie là-haut un peu de tout tout essayé puis renoncé ça allait la même chose toujours un trou une ruine toujours à manger jamais doué pour rien pas fait pour cette chinoiserie errer dans les coins et dormir tout ce que je voulais . . ." (p. 96).

The young lover's impotence, his powerlessness at the moment of Pam's death, his inability to find flowers for her, tear from him the confession that life above, no less than life below, has been a series of frustrating failures. The adventure with Pim furnishes two parallel commentaries on the failure of human intercourse: Pim and the narrator envision the tragic denouement of the Pam Prim story which echoes their own failure to know and to love one another (see pp. 148-149); life in the mud is not a hell from which Pim and the narrator recreate visions of a lost earthly paradise, for these visions of life in the light are either uncertain, grotesque, or tragic. They do not contrast favorably with life in the mud and do not represent a dream of eventual escape; when the narrator fashions his ultimate escape, it will not be an escape upward into the light.

In order to put an end to his wearisome life in the mud, the narrator must first understand the nature of the forces which limit his freedom. He gradually perceives that in addition to the physical incapacity which condemns him to crawl in the mud, there are even more serious restraints which shackle his imagination. In order to shape his own destiny, he must first seize control of his own narration from the external authors who dictate and transcribe his existence.

Kram and Krim, witness and scribe respectively, observe and record the narrator's life. Vaguely aware of them from the beginning: ". . . quelqu'un qui écoute un autre qui note ou le même" (p. 10), the narrator gradually elaborates their existence: "il vit penché sur moi voilà la vie qu'on lui a donnée toute ma surface visible plongée dans la lumière de ses lampes quand je m'en vais il me suit courbé en deux il a un aide assis un peu à l'écart il lui annonce brefs mouvements du bas du visage l'aide l'inscrit dans son registre" (p. 22).

But Kram is an inaccurate witness. Bored by long periods of inactivity, he occasionally reports more than he actually observes (p. 100). In addition, he is a poetic dreamer who allows himself forbidden distractions: "petit calepin à part ces notes intimes petit calepin à moi effusions de l'âme . . ." (p. 103). As a result of his distractions, Kram often misses parts of the narration (p. 99). In short, he neglects and corrupts his assigned task and thereby limits the accuracy of Krim's transcriptions. The creature in the mud, supposedly the narrator of his own life, is actually at the mercy of the eccentric witness who may omit or distort essential features of his adventure.

There exists, however, an even more serious and more fundamental distortion of the narrative, a distortion which begins even before the creature painfully murmurs his words into the mud. For it is quite clear that the words uttered by his panting breath are not based upon his own personal experience in the mud.

From the very first paragraph of the text, the narrator reveals that he is neither remembering nor inventing; he is quoting another source: "comment

c'était je cite avant Pim avec Pim après Pim . . . je le dis comme je l'entends" (p. 9). The English text eliminates the ambiguity of the verb *entendre*: "I say it as I hear it."<sup>2</sup> The narrator clarifies that what he hears is a voice, a voice which has become his unique source of information: "d'elle que je tiens tout comment c'était . . . comment c'est . . . comment ce sera des mots pour ça bref ma vie . . ." (p. 153). His whole life is no more than the narration of life which the voice furnishes. He does nothing more than to recapitulate approximately what he hears, to edit, as best he can, the narration of a life. At the same time, however, he lives. Tension gradually develops between his real life in the mud and the inaccurate narrated life imposed upon him; several times in the course of the narrative this tension provokes brief revolts. The creature repeatedly rejects certain words, phrases, and ideas forced upon him which do not coincide with his perception of life. This rejection takes the form of the often repeated phrase, "quelque chose là qui ne va pas."

What is the voice and where does it come from? The narrator provides some basic information and adds to it his own hypotheses concerning the nature of the voice. He imagines that the voice is the product of a sort of collective consciousness: "quaqua notre voix à tous quels tous tous ceux ici avant moi et à venir solitaires dans cette souille ou collés les uns aux autres tous les Pim bourreaux promus victimes passées si jamais ça passe et future ça c'est sûr plus que n'en défit jamais la terre sa lumière ces tous-là" (p. 131).

The voice of the brotherhood of creatures in the mud, victims and tormentors, past, present, and future, all dictating a single life which it is one creature's lot to narrate: the image is appealing but not conclusive, for the narrator continues to explore the nature of the voice through a series of grotesque hypotheses involving loudspeakers and recordings (p. 130). In a display of apparent independence from the voice, the narrator explores a specific error committed by it and attempts to discover the cause of the inaccuracy. This rejection of the voice's authority is more substantial than the intuitive, "quelque chose là qui ne va pas," and more imposing than the occasional emotional outburst in which the narrator desperately denies the voice (see pp. 91 or 106). Yet it seems that the voice itself dictates all of these denials of its own existence and authority (see p. 138) and that the creature's apparent revolts are no more than submissive responses to the voice's dictation.

The narrator's vain efforts to gain control of his own existence lead to further affirmation of his lack of control. He sadly acknowledges that the narration of his life is hopelessly false and remote: "ma vie une voix dehors quaqua de toutes parts des mots des bribes puis rien puis d'autres . . . bribes les mêmes mal dites mal entendues puis rien un temps énorme puis en moi dans le caveau blancher d'os des bribes dix secondes quinze secondes mal entendues mal murmurées mal entendues mal notées ma vie entière balbutiement six fois écorché" (pp. 161-162). Despite its inaccuracy, the voice and the subsequent narration constitute, for the narrator, life, the only life he is allowed.

In the course of his interrogation of the nature of the system in which he is imbedded, the narrator evokes on several occasions an order which governs the procession of tormentors and victims. He speaks in terms of a regulated order (p. 135), a mathematical justice (p. 136), and eventually, as we have seen, hypothesizes a supreme being, "celui qui fournit les sacs" (p. 150). The formulation of this being ultimately permits the narrator to eliminate Kram and Krim and to give to his narration a more reassuring destiny: "ou pas de Kram ça aussi . . . une oreille quelque part là-haut et jusqu'à elle le murmure qui s'élève . . . là où il y a une oreille un esprit pour comprendre la possibilité

de noter le souci de nous le désir de noter la curiosité de comprendre . . .” (p. 162). The existence of such an ear is obviously a comforting possibility; it gives to the procession in the mud and to the narration of that procession a semblance of meaning. It places the creature under the protection of a doubly benevolent being who provides sacks for his well-being and who notes with great concern his murmur. Further reflection, however, upon this being and upon the nature of his universe leads to the supposition of an even more devastating futility; for the ear which listens and the voice which dictates must belong to the same deity: “le voilà donc ce pas des nôtres . . . qui s’écoute soi-même et en prêtant l’oreille à notre murmure ne fait que la prêter à une histoire de son cru mal inspirée mal dite et chaque fois si ancienne si oubliée que peut lui paraître conforme celle qu’à la boue nous lui murmurons” (p. 167).

The narrator’s investigations, pushed one step beyond the promise of order, meaning, or salvation, unfailingly uncover chaos, absurdity, and denial: the regularity of the distribution of the sacks barely conceals the ludicrous inefficiency of that distribution; the tenuous possibility of love between two creatures fades before the certain lack of mutual knowledge; and finally, the redemptive, benevolent being who listens and notes does both badly thus perpetuating a false narration.

The possibility of change, that is of an end to his life in the mud, fascinates the narrator from the beginning of his narration. In the third part of the narrative the creature formulates a supreme being from whom he might seek deliverance. But the unresponsiveness of that being does not permit the hope that his care and concern might eventually bring about an end to the eternal crawling through the mud. Given, however, the nature of existence and the senseless function of the supreme being which is to perpetuate that senselessness, the narrator asks quite justifiably if he too might be anxious to put an end to it all: “celui qui ma foi je cite toujours doit parfois se demander si à ces perpétuelles fournitures communications écoutes et rédactions il ne saurait mettre un terme . . .” (p. 168). Certain finally that the voice too is eager to end definitively the narration (“ce pas des nôtres ressasseur fou lui aussi de lassitude” p. 173), the narrator quickly abandons several moderate formulations of change in favor of a more radical solution: “. . . je cite toujours une solution plus simple de beaucoup et plus radicale” (p. 173).

With the obvious complicity of the voice (“je cite toujours”), the narrator begins to ask a series of questions which he himself will answer in order to negate those elements of his universe which bind him to the mud (pp. 173-174). He begins by affirming that all the explanations and calculations he has made from the beginning to the end are completely false, that the voice “quaqua” does not exist, that his is the only voice: “il s’est passé quelque chose oui mais rien de tout ça non de la foutaise d’un bout à l’autre oui . . . qu’une voix ici oui la mienne oui . . .” (p. 174). In subsequent phrases he affirms only the panting, the mud, the darkness, and his murmur, and denies all other external factors.

A crucial stage in his new formulation of existence is the affirmation that the panting increases while his voice diminishes: “. . . haletant oui de plus en plus fort pas de réponse DE PLUS EN PLUS FORT oui . . .” (p. 176), and again, two paragraphs later: “. . . quelques mots oui quelques bribes oui que personne n’entend oui mais de moins en moins pas de réponse DE MOINS EN MOINS oui” (pp. 176-177). The decline of the narrator’s vitality—to which he has previously alluded (p. 125)—introduces conclusive evidence of a possible modification of his situation. He greets enthusiastically this possibility, “alors ça peut changer” (p. 177), and anxiously explores its consequences: “alors ça peut

changer pas de réponse finir pas de réponse je pourrais suffoquer pas de réponse m'engloutir pas de réponse plus souiller la boue pas de réponse le noir pas de réponse plus troubler le silence pas de réponse . . . CREVER hurlements JE POURRAIS CREVER hurlements JE VAIS CREVER hurlements bon" (p. 177). The responsive screams to the postulation of an eventual death express the violence of self-destruction. But the adjective "bon" greets the creature's ultimate release as the narrative comes to a close, "bon bon fin de la troisième partie et dernière voilà comment c'était fin de la citation après Pim comment c'est" (p. 177).

Within the four words "fin de la citation" resides the ultimate irony of the creature's death. He is not independent and responsible for he has merely quoted a denouement dictated to him by the voice and has given an illusion of independence which his final phrases shatter. They reaffirm his inescapable dependence and leave the reader with the knowledge that the real drama is not the creature's, but is rather the drama of the dictating voice, of the original creator who uses the creature in the mud as a pawn so that he may escape from his endless narration. The novel's conclusion is a sort of double suicide, brought about by a single lucid consciousness.

To try to find meaning in the narrator's adventure is a vain task. Despite his analytical and philosophical pretensions, the novel is neither analytical nor philosophical. It is a purely descriptive vision of "how it is." Beckett has his creature in the mud present interminable hypotheses of existence, not as a consistent philosophical argument, but rather as a demonstration of the working of a mind in a universe which may or may not be related to ours. The novel explores a vision of life in the Beckettian universe, complete with many of the familiar motifs of that universe, namely absurdity, physical and mental decadence, solitude, sadism, a desire to die, an inability to communicate, a need to communicate, and through all the frustrations of this existence a certain contentment with life, a satisfaction with life's small pleasures, such as moldy food, a comforting sack, and a partner.

If at the end of the novel a creature escapes, breaking the bonds of his muddy universe and finding freedom in death, it is not because he has outwitted the voice which dictates his universe, but rather because the voice itself has willed the contrived escape. The creature's reasoning, his analyses, his postulations, all come to nothing; they cancel one another out. Each successive hypothesis negates a preceding conclusion or exists simultaneously with its contrary. Reason, logic, philosophy, theology, and mathematics fail to find order and a way out. The muddy universe encourages these activities which lead to nothing except perhaps to an illusion of order which makes life bearable. Reason entertains him, keeps him from perceiving accurately his own misery, keeps him alive, until the voice, defying logic ("aussi invraisemblable que cela puisse paraître" p. 174), dictates the creature's death. As he dies, he annihilates along with himself his false formulations, and nothing remains in his wake.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Samuel Beckett, *Comment C'est* (Paris: Les Editions de Minuit, 1961). All subsequent references are to this edition.

<sup>2</sup>Samuel Beckett, *How It is* (New York: Grove Press, 1964), p. 7.