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What it is their Humanity Stifles

He is free. He does not allow himself to be led by preconception. He advances alone, in search of that little-known being that lies at the heart of ourselves.

Bram Van Velde on Beckett

…The self, which is all that is known as desire, leads away from fulfilment, and to its own breakdown

Raymond Williams, Modern Tragedy

Self and zero: Eleutheria and the voice of soul

Olga: You used to love me. You used to work. You used to have a joke with your father. You used to travel. You…
Victor: It was bluff.¹

Unavailable to the reading public until the mid 1990s, Eleutheria displays the essentially contradictory relationship between the Western humanist identity, which is tagged by the terms self, situation, furniture, and the effected collapse of that identity in the state of Victor Krap. He, as heir to the bourgeois, is supposed to perpetuate its character. The fact that he does not do so exposes the bourgeois’ invested expectation of continuity, along with the emptiness of the continuity it is supposed to maintain. Much has been written on the reasons why Beckett didn’t want the play published or staged after 1948 and its then rejection.² But whether or not the reason was its too-plain exposition of the basic theme that all his previous and subsequent works were to more subtly animate, the helpfulness of such a case-note as this play is undeniable. Where the mythic constant is often ‘subcutaneous’ or systemic in Beckett’s work, here for once it is graphically plain.

P. Davies, Beckett and Eros
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The evidence is written – the metaphor *hard-wired* would not be an exaggeration – into the play’s structure, the split-scene demanding that its one half be regarded as

in fact […] not so much a place of action as a site, which is often empty. […] a site and of a person in stasis…³

And of the other half, as in the case of Ibsen, Chekhov and Strindberg, we quickly see that the Krap family’s bourgeois clutter of belongings, and corresponding mental furniture, are self-incriminating, especially in view of the dual stage, intended to maximise the ‘flagrant discrepancy between the furniture on either side’.⁴ Onto this scene, when not implicit in it, then, are projected the expectations of the humanist ego-identity on the one side, and on the other the condition of a human not subscribing to them but nevertheless surrounded by, immersed in, such a welter of expectations as this:

He can drop dead, now […] or he can go back to his family, revive his mother, bury his father, come into his inheritance, satisfy his fiancee, found a review, a church, a family, a film club, God knows what. Dead or alive, he belongs to us, he’s one of us again. That’s all we had to prove. That basically there’s only us.⁵

That *there is only us* is all the humanist ever has had to prove, and increasingly anxiously the more doubtful his anchorage of self becomes, through crisis or other happening, or by the example of a man such as Victor. As becomes evident at the end of the play, the very existence of this non-subscription to the humanist order is deeply threatening to that order, such that its exponents cannot leave Victor alone, but must constantly range him against the humanist standards which they are established in. Gradually there emerges the discourse of tolerance, intolerance and interrogation, which characterises the mixed despotism and fear of the humanist order. This is a discourse by which the entirety of Beckett’s work from 1945 is to be marked:

_Glazier_: It’s time you explained yourself. […] Things can’t go on like this. […] it would do you good to explain yourself. […] Define yourself, that’s it. […] So that the whole thing can look as if it makes some sort of sense.⁶