Thinking Literature across Continents

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PART IV

Teaching Literature
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Everything in the seminar must, in principle, begin at fictive zero point of my relation to the audience: as though we were all “complete beginners” the whole time.

—Jacques Derrida

One cannot without intellectual dishonesty assimilate the “production” of texts . . . to the production of goods by factory workers: writing and thinking are not alienated labor in that sense, and it is surely fatuous for intellectuals to seek to glamorize their tasks . . . by assimilating them to real work on the assembly line.

—Fredric Jameson

Entering my postgraduate Indian classroom of seventy-odd students to teach Samuel Beckett’s Endgame is taking a plunge into a cocktail of challenge and fun. The classroom becomes atmospheric in billowing expectations constructed on the pillars of existential philosophy, modernist aesthetics, European dramatic tradition, and certainly Beckettian philosophy and ethics of writing. So theoretically Endgame has already had its rules of interpretive gaming ready and formed and my presence in the classroom stays entrenched in a prefigured circulation where the students and the teacher function as satellites around a heliocentric textual gravity. However, once I decide to activate the battle lines across disciplines, the “throb” in the classroom changes and teaching, a beginning conducted at fictive zero point, generates “desire lines” that demand able and prescient protection from official and sanctioned pathways of communication and travel.1 My teaching tries to sniff out how differences across cultures of understanding and traditions of thought can be the strength of communication, the nutrition of good learning and understanding. What Marjorie Garber calls “discipline envy” becomes for me the “disciplinary eros” in the classroom. Garber observes: “But I use envy here to designate a mechanism, a kind of energy, an exhilarating intellectual curiosity as well as what Veblen called emulation. Envy in this sense is not the same as jealousy (‘fear
of losing some good through the rivalry of another; resentment or ill will toward another on account of advantage or superiority’). Rather it corresponds to older notions of the word that are generally positive rather than negative: a ‘desire to equal another in achievement or excellence; emulation’ and (a sense derived from the French *envie*) a ‘wish, desire, longing; enthusiasm.’

What if I import transcultural envy into the classroom? How does that change the desire lines, introduce a sense of loss and limit, create problems in the identification of paradigms of understanding, *schadenfreude*, the pleasure at the expense of someone’s discomfort and unease? But what gain does this unease bring? Pursuing and practicing humanities in the classroom is setting out on a search for the “blue bird.” Garber refers to the symbolist play by the Belgian writer Maurice Maeterlinck called *The Blue Bird*, where two children embark on a quest for a special blue bird. Garber writes: “The children set out on their journey. In the space of what they think is a year but what turns out to be a long Christmas night’s dream, they travel to the Land of Memory, the Palace of Night, the Graveyard, and the Kingdom of the Future, but although they often glimpse a bluebird, they can never quite capture it.” They return home only to discover that their pet turtle dove, a caged bird they paid scant attention to, is indeed blue in color. Garber rightly notes “that the children of this story needed to travel around the world, and to the worlds of the past and the future, in order to recognize that what they had been seeking was at home with them all along. They had neglected or failed to value it, because it seemed so ordinary. Their bluebird, when they finally put it to work in the world, giving it to the neighbor’s child and curing the child’s illness, ultimately escapes.”

I would like to argue that any literary text in a classroom has a blue bird that actually is the link, the continuum, the vestibule, the unease, between what the text possesses and the critical peregrinations that occur around it. The blue bird occasions exciting angles and turns in a text that, again, are not what strictly define a text. It enhances the choices that a text delivers, the points around which the text vanishes and reappears; the text somehow eludes captivity.

It has to be agreed that “any pedagogy that eliminates the classroom text from its questioning repeats the colonizing gesture. Critical problematizing should therefore interrogate the authority relations that seem at once so stereotypical and so natural.” So a text dynamically inscribed into the notion of the uncanny (the transcultural uncanny as elaborated in chapter 5) cannot be immured within the dialectic of the center and the
periphery, which has influenced facetiously our universals of critical understanding. Rather, a “new universalism” is under critique and awaits appropriation where the West and the East have ceased to sit on either side of the fence in a triumphalist and imperialist way; interestingly, de-centered thinking has come to change our discourses in an equation where Pozzo and Lucky (characters from Beckett’s Waiting for Godot), as representatives of crosscultural epistemic and conceptual parameters, as it were, are not master-slaves changing batons, but become proficient and productive in their exchanges for each other’s configurative identities. The “contact zone” speaks of inequality in power, values, and ideologies; but such inequalities result in freedom, echoing Alexis de Tocqueville, to create spaces to test the limits and frontiers of negotiation. Equality constrains and, hence, the transcultural planetization of reading and reception is about breaking norms, courting the “unpeace”: the meaning it makes is both within and beyond us. This is not without rules, rules that lend rationality to understanding and interpretive claims, but must take into account the ability of the interpreter to reframe few rules, reinvest his or her critical understanding to bend the game to his or her advantage, to rally home a point, or winsomely score from a deft, perceptive nexus of ideas, leaving behind a trail of surprise and serendipity.

Within such a restless aesthetic, a kind of “revenge of the aesthetic,” Beckett’s Endgame has a disquiet that beckons transcultural momentum and movement, provocatively dislocating the play from its Eurocentric anchorage by relating it uncannily to a world with which its apparent relation looks contradictious and ambiguous. How pertinent is the paradigm of archetypal existentialism in our understanding of Endgame even after the play has crossed the borders of the Indian subcontinent and invited a renewed epistemic achievement? So let me begin by arguing that Beckett’s works are about the human condition and, hence, cannot avoid being dialogic with different worldviews. They bring in their wake ambivalence and the splitting of concepts that only transculturalism, with its odd mix of congruence and contradiction, can generate. Thus, within the dynamics of “border-art,” the play, when read and performed in India, can predominantly, albeit arguably, remap itself within a Hindu worldview. This attitude is contrary to what Rukmini Bhaya Nair calls the “lotus eater syndrome,” one that “the typical English literature teacher is guilty of perpetuating.” She writes (indeed, an appropriate observation whose reality has not changed much between the time her piece was published and a general Indian literature classroom today): “The English literature classroom
in Indian universities is one such well-defined cultural context in which pre-selected texts are placed before us, sign-posted as it were, explained with the help of earlier deified generations of critics, positively evaluated in terms of other non-canonical texts, and thus raised to full glory before the bemused eyes of students. . . . [Students] have so internalized the received explanations, comparisons, definitions and deifications that their own linguistic awareness is silenced or suppressed.” My reading of Beckett’s *Endgame* here is a demonstration of how such intellectual faineance in the classroom can be overcome with all its attendant complications and spin-offs.

**Producing a New Object**

The blue bird is the provocation to think outside disciplines, the meaningful inspiration for transdisciplinary mobility and momentum. It does not belong to anyone, is not to be understood as “purely on its own terms,” exists to multiply the color of a text and enthuse a maieutic reception.9 Louis Menand notes:

> What humanities departments should want is not interdisciplinarity or postdisciplinarity, and they should definitely not want consilience, which is a bargain with the devil. What they need to do is hunt down the disciplines whose subject matter they covet and bring them into their own realm. To the extent that programs and particularly graduate programs consist of a guided tour of the Norton Anthology, literature programs are perpetuating their isolation. Why aren’t all literature majors required to take a course on the sociology of literature? Or a course on literature and philosophy, or literature and science? Why do students of literature have to take their history courses in history departments when literature departments could offer them history for literature students? This seems a minor curricular point, but it goes to the fear academics have that their fields will be dumbed down if they stray from their traditional boundaries. It’s the boundaries themselves that are dumbing us down. Interdisciplinarity begins at home.10

Academic freedom, whether in a classroom or outside it, does not necessarily invest in disciplinary disciplehood—a typical Indian provincial university syndrome—daunted by disciplinary dictates and communal fealty. Working under the arch of a discipline is espousing sheltered freedom, structured and well premised. The autonomy that such spaces constitute primarily sponsors a negotiation between a critical purveyor
and the integrity of disciplines. A literary critic, for instance, need not be swamped by a continental philosopher, for each of them is committed to safeguard disciplinary integrity and independence. However, academic freedom inspires opening onto each other, with a Derridean impiety, with a mind that has caution, critical care, innovation, invention, experiment, audacity, a kind of “step careful and step careless” attitude (to appropriate Robert Frost). Douglas Steward notes that we might pastiche Derrida: “there is no outside-the-humanities.” He observes:

The pastiche may seem flippant, but in the age of genocide and terrorism the notion that nothing human could be alien to us as humanists in the world’s sole superpower could not be more relevant. This relevance is exactly what many in the humanities have wanted to engage when they have been accused of impertinent politicking in the classroom: to ask if language can be more adequate to the truth; to ask if history has been recounted truthfully; to discern the alien as human; to learn the language and culture of the other; to explore the history of the inhuman/e in the human/e; to demand an expansion of human rights; to interrogate the border rather than the human being at the border; to discover what rhetorics of language and image mobilize a border around who counts as human; to question who is patrolling the border and with what ends. These questions can only be impious.11

Herein lies the need to create a new ethics of an Indian undergraduate and postgraduate classroom for teaching literature, the need to interlocute impious questions that would form a genuine part of academic freedom and would not perniciously threaten interdisciplinarity. I agree with Miller on the strategic strangulation that a common core curriculum can produce, which is why college and university teachers in India are subjected to a “syllabus” approved by a central committee trusted to unleash a near common program of reading for students across the country, under the aegis of the University Grants Commission. The question is heavily centered on what we should read to get a degree that would enable and endow a professional career. The agony is probably less in being strapped under a generally agreed syllabic sky than when a teacher encounters a text in a classroom. The common Indian graduate and postgraduate classroom-teaching has a direct connection with the kinds of questions that end-of-semester examinations would demand of the students. Students should read a particular text, and teachers should teach the text in a particular way because questions should be set in a particular way. It is difficult,
if not impossible, for Beckett’s *Endgame* to manifest on the students in the way it exists in this chapter because the autonomy and design of teaching literature in a general Indian classroom is much prescribed, unfortunately mapped and formalized through generational transmission, collective parity, and subservience to a consensually settled standard.

But should teaching and the experience of literature be what most teachers in India are familiar with and immune to? Literary texts should be reinvented in the classroom through the conjoined commitment derived out of the patience and curiosity of the students and the desire and indulgence of the teachers. Disciplinizing interdisciplinarity, then, is making allowance for an entangled discursivity where the “already spoken” builds on and polemicizes the “not yet spoken”—a “smooth” classroom milieu caught in dialogized consciousness. As I have argued elsewhere in this book, the entangled generation of meaning is not always something that we figurize or extrapolate; it already exists in a life of its own, within a self-sustaining chamber (Beckett’s thoughts about life and humanity at large peremptorily coexisted with or superposed Hindu ethics and certain paradigms of Hindu philosophy, existing before what I thought I had unraveled for my students in the classroom).

Rey Chow observes that ultimately “aesthetic judgment involves a reflection of the terms of the reflecting activity (or subjectivity) from within rather than only a reflection of the external object it judges, bringing with it a potential for dismantling those terms precisely as the reflecting activity (or subjectivity) tries to reach for the universal. Defined along these lines, aesthetic or reflective judgment seems poignantly germane to those areas of knowledge production in which problems of radical otherness are the most acute.” A classroom must encourage aesthetic and reflective judgments that stay circumscribed by cultural difference and the denationalization of literature. There is, thus, an “instant” in such an attitude, the pursuit of an instant in its radical presentness. It works on the gains of a fraught now, the hope that its perpetual pregnancy generates, “intermittently eclipsed by an awareness of the present as deferment, as an empty excited openness to a future which is in one sense already here, in another sense yet to come.” Being unavailable to itself, the instant is continually under pressure to lose its instantness. By wrestling with the now, transcultural poetics keeps diverse subjects in company, enfolds one present into the other and stays ironically “present imperfect.” This is about routing the uncanny in the classroom, which turns into a literary zone, a zone that Vilashini Cooppan describes as the “disjunctive merging of the
familiar and the strange, the present and the past, the repressed and the returned,” where no text is pure and original and no work can avoid being “inserted into the globalized processes of migration, borrowing, adaptation, and retelling.” Cooppan adds, “Temporally, it haunts, ghosting new texts with the residual presence of older ones, or indeed, old texts with the anticipatory presence of new ones. Because the time line of the uncanny is not chronological, it invites us to resist the impulse to read only some texts—usually modern, postcolonial, emergent, or otherwise belated texts—in the shadow of their greater others, and to recognize instead a ghostly alienness animating every text.”

Let me unveil, at this point, the teaching of Endgame within an uncanny transcultural eros. Working within the ambit of Hindu ethics and philosophy, one may begin the class by arguing that it is the problematization of the dharma of existence that deeply informs many of Samuel Beckett’s plays, particularly Waiting for Godot and Endgame. And so it might be worthwhile to ask: what is dharma? The word comes from dhr, which means to form, sustain, and support, and “in its widest sense,” as John Koller observes, “it refers to that which sustains and holds together the universe itself.” Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan interprets dharma as the right action. He points out that “in the Rg Veda rta is the right order of the universe. It stands for both the satya or the truth of things as well as the dharma or the law of evolution.” In fact, to hold and sustain order, the observance of the necessary acts becomes essential; it helps to keep the order of the world. Hence, it is karma, action, that eventually becomes the determinant for the sustenance of order. Every form of life cannot deny its dharma of existence, the law of its being, and this concern with order—the order of being, the being-in-the-world, the ever-impinging world of alien entanglements, the order of values—brings us to interrogate the text in the classroom with a host of questions: to what extent have Hamm and Clov honored the dharma of their being as evolutionary and generative? Do Hamm and Clov suggest everything that life represents or does not represent? Within the limitations of their mutilated selves, how far can we consider them to be the representatives of all humanity? Are we to assume that there is no other side to this benumbing world of the play? Can we not look into the substratum of this enervating predicament and finger the nerves that evoke this hellish milieu? How can we perspectivize the prevalence of “evil” spacing itself out in such an existential configuration? Despite Hamm’s self-reflexive moves to change the horizon of existence, the inherent immovability of suffering remains the “unyielding sureness
of reality,” which does not fail to cross our will. Why this persistent suffering and what is the suffering for? Does Endgame provide us with the means by which we can judge the reality and vitality of suffering? How do we account for such a dismembered and disjointed world? Is it the collapse of dharma, the loss of order, in every conceivable sphere of existence? It is worthwhile to see how ideas emerging from Indian knowledge systems argue a case for the play, putting forth a critique pronouncedly removed from what we have come to accept as inherited modes of reception.

The samkhya-karika sees three kinds of suffering, bodily or physical, environmental, and mental. It is virtually impossible to remove suffering: “From the torment by three fold misery arises the enquiry into the means of terminating it; if it be said that it is fruitless, the means being obvious to us, we reply no, since in such means there is no certainty or finality.”18 Suffering, in Endgame, cannot end “the abject and indigestible husks of direct contact with the material and the concrete.”19 Spinoza, who had a great influence on Beckett, has this to say in his “On the Improvement of the Understanding”:

After experience had taught me that all the usual surroundings of social life are vain and futile, seeing that none of the objects of my fear contained in themselves anything either good or bad, except in so far as the mind is affected by them, I finally resolved to inquire whether there might be some real good having power to communicate itself, which would affect the mind singly, to the exclusion of all else: whether, in fact, there might be anything of which the discovery and attainment would enable me to enjoy continuous, supreme, and unending happiness.20

Beckett’s Endgame seems to be shorn of any “good”; sarvam duhkham (universal suffering), the classically elemental, unimpassioned ritual of agony, permeates every crevice of the play. This sarvam duhkham charts out value-bereft lives for both Hamm and Clow as it does to all of us on earth. If we take Patanjali’s thesis in Yoga-Sutra (2.15) and Visuddhimagga we find that duhkha is born out of the agony of the search, the dissatisfaction and the rebutted craving. But duhkha, as embedded in the searching conditions in Endgame, is not plain corporeal suffering or mental affliction. It is not a state of paranoia about a loss of pleasure and also not a hedonistic concept that could be critiqued in conflation with suṣkha (pleasure or happiness). Duḥkha in Endgame is, rather, a realization that we are essentially in a conditioned state where there is a complete lack of freedom (compare the samskara-duhkha of the Visuddhimagga). In our conditioned state, there is
a marked awareness of this utter absence of freedom and it is what makes duhkha a profound realization. Buddhist philosophy would have us believe that everything is suffering because everything is conditioned and is in a state of impermanence and flux. The Nyaya school would instruct us to judge everything as pain, for we do not have any experience of unmixed pleasure, or sukha. The Hindu concept of suffering argues this phenomenon as an “eternal return of events.” There is no harm either in being tempted to perceive a kind of eternal recurrence of the same monotonic life-activities in Endgame, which simultaneously engender ennui and enigma. Arthur Danto elaborates: “Imagine having endless times to go through what we all have gone through once, the mastering of our bodies: learning to walk erect, learning to control our bowels and going through all the same stages of emotional awakening again and again with all its embarrassments, all the torments. . . I think the knowledge would be shattering. The mere tedium of it all could not be borne.”

There is no escape for Hamm and Clov from this loop of duhkha. The absurdity of the situation is heightened by the fact that while they can take this view and realize what they do in life is arbitrary and meaningless, they cannot disengage themselves from life by this awareness. It may be said that we realize the truth while we remain, as we must, immersed in the ocean of untruth. This immersion in the sea of untruth is very difficult to rationalize: an inertial force powerful enough to defy systematic rationalization takes over. Even if they choose to undertake a self-transcendental step backward, they are regressed by the question about the available freedom to do so. Are they really free to make a move? But is the truth of suffering the only reality that Hamm and Clov are faced with? Can we argue that the submergence in a sea of untruths is what makes the experience of suffering for both a ceaseless and encompassing phenomenon? We can within the classroom concur to argue that the situation in the play is not as depressing and calamitous as it seems on the surface. The prospects of karma lie implicit within; it, thus, triggers karmic possibilities, unrealized on most occasions, of freedom and positive authenticity against the grain of a soul-deadening suffering that stays conspicuously written into the very heart of the play. Could they then invent a transcendental meaning, a value within their arbitrary, hollow, and purposeless life? One must admit here that when duhkha exists as a persistent and insuperable reality the responsibility rests with man’s weakness, what Hindu ethics would term as the “untruth,” and not with God. Is sarvam duhkham a child of man’s
incompetence to realize his predicament? Are the weaknesses and untruths enough of a hindrance to preclude the rationalization of absurdity?

Pain, argues Rabindranath Tagore in *Sadhana*, is the feeling born out of our finiteness, our incompetences: “It is what error is in our intellectual life.” The embedded evil in the circumambient situation precludes Hamm and Clov from consorting with the “whole” or the dharma of existence. “Evil is ever moving,” writes Tagore. It becomes characteristic of man “to represent statically what is in motion” and “in the process things assume a weight in our mind which they have not in reality.”22 Evil and suffering are the manifestations of the imperfections in our knowledge, our available power, and in the application of our will. Beckett’s protagonists have revealed their weaknesses to themselves, resulting in choking depression. Human life is drawn up within a narrow frame in which miseries and failures are made to loom large and limitations are allowed a dominant voice. Failing to hold the core of things (“Am I right in the centre?”23 questions Hamm), they hit the self hard in a confounded state of understanding that brings them before an unavoidable “hollowness.” Hamm: “Do you hear? . . . Do you hear? Hollow bricks! . . . All that’s hollow!”24 They fail to realize that the ideal of truth is not in the narrow present, not also in our immediate sensations, but in the consciousness of the whole that gives us a taste of what we should have in what we do have.

Hamm: . . . Put me right in the centre!
Clov: I’ll go and get the tape.
Hamm: Roughly! Roughly! . . . Bang in the centre!
Clov: There!
Hamm: I feel a little too far to the left. . . . Now I feel a little too far to the right. . . . I feel a little too far forward. . . . Now I feel a little too far back.25

This wobbly, indecisive state, informed by a struggle to remain at the center, comes from an incomplete sense of the self. Beckett’s world, with its elusive focal point, cuts at the root of a deep inner growth that we may describe as the liberating enterprise to “work at ourselves.”26 Dharma, in Hindu ethics, demands a self that has a proper sense of the center, becomes the totality of our functional resources, and is not built on reason or feeling alone. It encourages the development of a knowledgeable self that can tell the right from the wrong, the beautiful from the ugly.27 The “ought” of dharma gets appropriately responded to by an “I ought.”
answer emerges from one’s awareness and conscience to explore the poise at the center, a belief that leads us back to the deep-welling foundations of life that I would like to qualify as “being-needs.”28 It is the demand on the self to remain in accord with a wider system of values, a demand to look beyond survival needs.

One pole of Hamm and Clov’s being, in the words of Tagore, is hitched to “stocks and stones.” They are faced with a reality that has an inexpugnably dictating and compulsive presence. However, when the searchlight is on the other pole of their being, the identity of their existence takes on a kind of alethic truth. This pole is “separate from all.” “There,” as Tagore explains, “I have broken through the cordon of equality and stand alone as an individual. I am absolutely unique, I am I, I am incomparable.”29 There is a discernible lack of individuality in the atmosphere that hangs grimly over the play. We notice that the characters, within the ethics of their existence, struggle to maintain themselves against the “tremendous gravitation of all things”—the centripetality of an abyss of dead matter. The individual is sorely out of place. But can we perceive Hamm as being possessed with a discernible mission to trace his individuality? Is the struggle worth the isolation that provides the meditative space to rethink Beckett’s man-world nexus? Hamm tries; at least, he dares to. He fails; he tries again. Beckett, it must be admitted, wills his failure to an appreciable extent. By willing it, however, Beckett, it may be argued, unearths the need for a superstructure of the self that would revel in a karmic thrust. The drugged dimension of existence is willed to unconceal some vital promises that can thus encounter the regnant disabilities of a normalized inert existence. This elemental, existential bankruptcy stems from a desiccation of individuality, something that we can call our very own. What Hamm and Clov do not—rather cannot—imbibe is a relation between the “I” and the “they” that intersubjectively enriches our existence. A communion with the other and the world at large is sustained through continual reformulation of the internal laws of the self, the smithy of the “I.” The predicament of every human is a misplaced understanding of gaming without ends, when one gets busy with the nets and neglects fishing. As part of this philosophical rejoinder to the Endgame crisis, one can argue that the problem is not in being able to unlearn the knowledge of “imperfection”; there is no effort to burn up the error that could set free the light of unshackled existence. Hamm and Clov are all too self; they fail miserably to encourage and establish such an understanding and knowledge with their “own” and
what exists outside of their own. The confusion springing from the struggle to come to grips with the state of things, thus, persists unabated.

Hamm: Do you know what’s happened?
Clov: When? Where?
Hamm: (violently) When! What’s happened! Use your head, can’t you!
   What has happened?30

They fail to widen the limit of the self. It is the misconstrual and lack of understanding of the “life of the self” that causes all such complications and contradictions, upstaging the dharma of their present. Beckett’s play hinges on a dialectical tension between the self trying to think positive thoughts and the persistent opposition that it faces to snuff out any semblance of hope. For me the text builds itself on this “growing out while collapsing in” principle that nourishes a tension and makes an oppressive life less tortuous in nature and potency. The sense of self grows out of the consciousness of sin, of the benignity of grace, and of the self’s very atmospheric existence. Hamm’s radius of the self is not defined on such lines of consciousness. To what extent does Hamm realize that he has been degrading himself, that his sense of the self has been inadequate and non-discriminatory (viveka-yuktena-manasa)? The evil and ennui confronting Hamm emerge from his inability to redefine his self-identity. The contingent, atmospheric stress dominates him in that the limit of contraction becomes the limit of blindness. In a dehumanized set up, tethered to the dead weight of the finite, Hamm fails both to evoke and participate in the “peak experiences.” These peak experiences (one needs to note what Hamm means by trying to have an “idea,” a “bright ideal!”)31 shape the self into being decently volitional, strengthening it in the process. However, it is what could have turned the situation of Hamm and Clov into both axiogenetic and axiosoteric.32

Does Hamm demonstrate certain signs of a prospective generation of “values” indicative of a positive resistance to the great neutralizing enterprise of absurd existence? Hamm, for me, has made some meaningful efforts, the consequences of which may belie the initial thrust of will. Yet Hamm shoots through with a positive desire—hoping for a “gull,” the “sea,” the “sky”—amid the crippling limitations of the present.

Hamm: No gulls?
Clov: (looking) Gulls!
Hamm: And the horizon? Nothing on the horizon?33
In Hamm we record a certain fluctuation in mental attitudes—a waxing
and waning of hope, desire and effort. This desire is for a vital or higher
existence that may offer a contrast to the profaneness of a soul-
numbing finitude. Hamm says: “If I could sleep I might make love. I’d
go into the woods. My eyes would see . . . the sky, the earth. I’d run, run,
they wouldn’t catch me.”34 Such an urge to romanticize, to sail beyond the
repressive encapsulation of reality, must be read as a positive commentary
on the need to reinterrogate the dharma of existence. Hamm’s perennial
“act of sitting” is the reflective part of our existence, the reflectiveness
that chooses to impose questions on our predicament. Hamm evinces the
human capacity of self-consciousness (karmic possibilities) as he takes a
step backward to reflect on life and the futility, the absurdity of our striv-
ings, hopes, aspirations and evaluations. But Hamm’s psychic state, in its
reflective awareness, radiates a reflexive dynamicity to find a place for
imagination, a possibility of hope and a curiosity for a horizon. The karmic
propensities to rationalize a way out of the depressive undertow of events
cannot be ruled out. Attempts made by Hamm, albeit abortive, are none-
theless attempts to determine a choice; these are efforts to look at the
other side of hell to see whether the possibility of happiness can be raised.
Hamm’s effort to unleash himself becomes a truncated, though promis-
ing, projection of an image of man repeatedly thwarted and disclaimed.
So being decisively dwarfed cannot avoid manifesting the culpability of silence
and inaction. Hamm proposes to write out a meaning and in the process
opens up the possibility of reframing the reality of absurdism and the pol-
itics of normalized given.

But such karmic affirmations are sparse as they die out under the heft of
a relentless surge of dead energy (the tamasic state in Hindu philosophy).
Herman Keyserling, applying the Hindu doctrine of karma, perceives the
activism of the self, which in “what is free in it” becomes a significant com-
ponent of the agent. Efforts made to overcome the given is a way to self-
transcendence. 35 The Gita ascribes it as dhriti, the conative persistence, the
rigor to signal a growth of being. But the karmic propensities in the play could
not be realized in concrete acts; the world of the play lacks proper “naviga-
tors” whose growth, at best, is stunted and whose discourse of growth does
not have the gestaltic relationship between the self and the world.

Hamm: I am asking you is it very calm?
Clov: Yes.
Hamm: It’s because there are no more navigators.”36
The anxiety of living in *Endgame* is traumatic. The will to navigate and the freedom to step into the shoes of a navigator are decimated. Perhaps the specter of deindividualization in the soul-killing suffering sparks a propensity to dream of the gulls, the sail, the seas and the urge to look down, over the window. When Hamm says—“Let’s go from here, the two of us! South! You can make a raft and the currents will carry us away, far away,”37 we realize their urge to experience “what is free” in the self, the desire to realize “being-needs” over “survival needs.” It is the urgency to “build the raft” that matters (Hamm: “Get working on that raft immediately”38). Hamm and Clov need to build the raft and learn to navigate.39

Thomas Nagel writes: “We cannot live human lives without energy and attention, nor without making choices which show that we take some things more seriously than others. Yet we have always available a point of view outside the particular form of our lives, from which the seriousness appears gratuitous. These two inescapable viewpoints collide in us, and that is what makes life absurd. It is absurd because we ignore the doubts that we know cannot be settled, continuing to live with nearly undiminished seriousness in spite of them.”40 Clov does tend to live this absurdity with seriousness. But Hamm, entrapped by an overpowering disability, generates some energy to make a choice that points to another version of seriousness. This seriousness interrogates the other side of the prevailing predicament but is countermanded by the “seriousness of absurdity” that Clov cannot avoid representing. This is what makes for the *duhkha* in life, resulting in dissatisfaction embedded in valuelessness. The value judgments that would otherwise have come from questioning life or existence “seriously” are annulled deterministically. Karma is a spiritual necessity which makes one judgmental and adjudicatory, forging a way through the *maya* (illusion) and *avidya* (ignorance) of life. *Niskarmakrita* (remaining inactive) means contravening dharma. *Gita* describes karma as something that springs from *guna* (dispositions). It is, however, difficult to find *gunas* in Hamm and Clov that are strong enough to challenge *niskarmakrita*. *Gunas* have manifested in brief bursts; desire for karma raises, at best, a transient promise. But circumstantial immovability has not allowed the self to grow. The world of Hamm and Clov cannot produce the mechanism to raise the self by the self, the existent self raised by the karmic self. The Hamm-Clov ensemble puts forth a self that requires a construction through the establishment of another self; it is reinvesting one’s prevalent self, says the *Gita*, through the karmic potency of another self, adding to a genuine sense of it and *vidya* (knowledge). Hamm needs to
keep Clov affected by the choice (as pointed out earlier) to extend the dimensions of his choices within the ambit of the existentialist enigma of duhkha.

Human existence that fails to combine the reflective karma with the dynamic karma is fated to get weighed down in schism and sickness. The karmic reflexivities that we notice in Hamm do not lead him to an orderly and poised dharma of existence and certainly not to any deeper realization of values and order. Added efforts of Clov, significantly under Hamm’s direction, to reach up to the sight beyond the window (the symbol of the ladder is significant) can be ascribed as the bid to appropriate truth—an entity that lies beyond the world of appearances as incomprehensible and indescribable. In fact, what can be seen through Murphy, Moran, and Molloy is a perception of the core that, however, is a fugitive entity delimited by a mere glimpse of the idea and the inability to realize it. Hamm’s effort then becomes an emaciated plowing of the surface without digging enough into any formative stage of understanding. Hamm’s spasmodic efforts (a fleeting intimation of self-transcendence: “What? A sail? A fin? Smoke?”) are hopelessly caught midway between an alleged determinism of circumstances (nothing can happen) and an ever-mounting self-thwarting conservatism of the individuals (since nothing can happen inaction remains the only possible action). Such consciousness of an overpowering eventuality makes the absence of freedom the defining signature of their lives. Hamm and Clov also dread “waking” (an alive, alert consciousness of circumambient reality) and, therefore, cannot evade espousing the avidya or avidyas; this allows the deception to continue unabated. What lies amiss in the Endgame world is jnana (the emancipatory wisdom) that is a “realized” and realizable experience. If the arrival of Godot is an eagerly awaited event, looking beyond the window for sights that would rejuvenate the prevalent levels of existence is also an intense requirement. Hamm and Clov fail to reach the desired dharma because their will is not informed by the knowledge of the potential of the self. The self must act centripetally, pedaling within, to wade across the muck that engulfs them both from without; it is also about enjoining the sundered notes within, piecing the shards together, to trigger an initiation toward some vital and redemptive moments. Both Hamm and Clov, in their adharmic patterns of existence, have chosen to flinch from the boy’s presence, failing to explore a possibility of redemption and deliverance. Steeped in avidya (the ignorance springing from the lack of sense of self) they are not ready to accept the generative impact of a new procreative force. The boy offers a
possibility to mend walls and is the beckoning to *vidya* that promises to replace the self-debilitating life of the mind and soul with a true emancipatory one, an inner emigration. Tagore, in *Gitanjali*, characterizes this situation poetically: “I am ever busy building this wall all around; and as this wall goes up into the sky day by day, I lose sight of my true being in its dark shadow.”

Blinded to the reality and potential of true being, the *Endgame* world awaits redemption. So the prevalent strains of *adharma* in Hamm and Clov’s lives do not allow a wholesome perspective on existence, disrupting in the process the integrality that lies enshrined in the conceptualization of dharma. Within this aspect of Hindu thought we find a refusal to appeal to a whole human being, a denial to speak to an integrative worldview. The entropic disability in Hamm and Clov’s predicament points to an abuse of life, a life that leaves no door open for modes of liberation and enlightenment. Perhaps Beckett’s world in *Endgame* has denounced the rebel in the human; it loses sight of or, rather, is denied the sight of, the internal revolution in every human; the betrayal of self, thus, is the violation of the dharma of existence.

Finally, I am tempted to refer to *Gita* (section 18) again to my students to analyze the five factors—*adhishthanam* (the matrix of action), *karta* (agent), *karanam* (the diverse instruments of action), *chesta* (coordinated, well-meaning effort), and *daivam* (the wider expanse of action beyond the immediate). The disabled *karta* (Hamm and Clov) and their enfeebled *chesta* contribute to the *tamasic* state (the dark state of suffering). Inhibited thus, it fails to achieve the *daivam*, which I interpret here as the world beyond the immediate consequence of objective karma—the zone of being-needs. It is the *karta* or doer’s intensive *karanam* (modes of action) that discloses a world beyond the causal existential web. Dharma through good action and voluntary action becomes the inner law of being. Hamm and Clov prove a failure and the failure signals the collapse of dharma and the consequent relapse into *tamas* (darkness). So the evil remains and the *tamasic* state continues. This evil, unfortunately, does not allow suffering to be seen as positive—the positive suffering, or *duhkha*, that encourages molting, the act of sloughing off the self that meekly surrenders to absurdity. Differently argued, it may be pointed out that the mere fact of our continuing in existence proves that existence is worthy of continuance. Within the world of the play, a Hindu view of life would seek to question and problematize this worthiness to continue living. The classroom can converge on the fact that Hindu philosophy of dharma can make
a “difference”—somewhat radical, though—to our transcultural understanding of the play, educating ourselves differently on Beckett to produce a “new object.”

**Resetting the Teaching Machine**

*Endgame* in the classroom then splits into two texts: a pedagogic one that is more oriented to the conventional teaching machine devised and encoded for the writing examination and consequent grading; perhaps our repressive ways of grading and examination system maim our teaching ways in the classroom. Our illocutionary and pedagogical persuasions drive us to experience a literary text within certain conditions that a classroom straps on us, conditions that are at once constitutional and institutional. Texts are usually tried in their syllabic and received constitutional countenances, within laws that have made them look similar every semester, every year, in every encounter. Most Indian literature classrooms avoid working as pedagogical outlaw; they are heavily daunted by disciplinary envy that might thicken the air of teaching with less visible or discernible lighthouses. Classrooms promote a parody of reading and replication of reading strategies that dodge individualism for a collective critical consciousness. A student rarely reads but duplicates the rituals of learning inscribed within institutional modes of instruction and performance appraisal. The second part of the split is the “performative,” which challenges the cultural and affective bounds of learning literature, becoming a happy victim of the teacher-critic’s desire-lines. Are we then conflating and contrasting two different kinds of textual disciplines in the classroom?

On what possible lines can a modernist text speak to students in the classroom? Or should I rephrase the question: In what “erotic” ways can a modernist text articulate itself to students attending a literature class? The performative classroom, then, is always interdisciplinary, a source and space for “intersubjective vitality,” where teaching comes as a “task verb.” Although we cannot ignore disciplined interdisciplinarity, we must prefer delicate randomness of connection—the “transgression of law,” the monster that Alain Badiou instructs us to seek—that might just choose to trip over the strictness of righteous disciplinary claims. Outlawing literature has its value and the fun owes a lot to some law deficit. This is a kind of “guerrilla pedagogy” that Jody Norton argues is “dislocative, decentering, confounding and clarifying. . . . mobile, improvisational, contingent, and unpredictable.” She writes:
There are two crucial ways in which guerrilla pedagogy is unlike guer-
rella theater. First, whereas guerrilla theater presented explicitly radical
messages, guerrilla pedagogy does not have an agenda, other than tex-
tual analysis, ideological critique, and self-examination. Conservatives
can interrogate and affirm (or modify) their own ideas and values as
easily as liberals or radicals. The guerrilla teachers are open about their
politics, but work hard to keep authority separate from belief systems,
so that the latter must convince or not on their own merits. . . . Secondly,
whereas guerrilla theater, operating rapidly in noisy public areas, had a
practical need for “simplicity of tactics” and was self-consciously “not
subtle” . . . , guerrilla pedagogy, carried on over eighty minutes in the
quiet, private space of the classroom, can afford as much complexity
and difficulty as the discussants can generate and absorb.48

Outlawing the teaching machine is inscribed in the abilities and va-
lence of translation, the repeated demands on one’s background, cultural
consciousness, and the complex negotiations with textual alienation that
such consciousness infuses. There is a vibrant tangle between the vernac-
ular that my students speak—the multilingual Indian classroom—and
the medium of classroom instruction, which is English. So when Endgame
comes to enliven the classroom in its polydiscursivity, we cannot ignore
how different linguistic backgrounds deliver different levels of affect and
connotative understanding. The textual affect here deepens and widens
in its singularity. The whole game I am implicating here is worked out on
a unique axis that has to appreciate that I am not teaching Endgame in
translation (say, in Hindi or Bengali) but in English interpreted through
concepts and paradigms that are imported from the non-Anglophone tra-
dition. How does the text adjust to sitting on these transcultural cross-
points of meaning generation? But this teaching across traditions and
cultural consciousness produces its own affect that transcends the lan-
guage in which the reading was executed. The textual affect might become,
for instance, Buddhist or Hindu or Zen without being required to have it
“translated” into Tibetan, Japanese, or Hindi. This becomes a kind of de-
rial of language, rather, an overcoming of the language to generate a radi-
antly different experience of textual impact and textual density. Tejeswani
Niranjana notes appropriately:

If English literature is indeed being transformed—at home and abroad—
into English studies, it seems pertinent to consider the gap between the
roles we as teachers are prepared to play and that we may choose and
then prepare to play. The first is a result of conditioning and envisages our own role as that of a catalyst—unchanging but capable of transforming others. The second involves using our alien selves as prisms and filters to explore and understand our historical situation. It is one of the few privileges that our discipline affords us—a painful but promising way out of the canonized readings of our texts and ourselves.49

So the teacher’s self in this new classroom is seriously complexified, in that a nonnative English speaker reads a text written in English or translated from French into English with a big group of students whose native language is not English, with diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds. The text in the classroom is read in English but thought both in English and in non-English ways, a continual process of remapping conducted both consciously and unconsciously, a unique vein of sensitiveness to the text that refuses to “use a torque wrench at 65 pounds of pressure to bolt Idea A into Student’s B brain.”50

The things that Miller wants a Chinese reader or a video-games-playing Western young man or a student in an Indian classroom to know to appreciate W. B. Yeats’s “Cold Heaven” (see chapter 8) are precise and perceptive. I agree with Miller that reading a poem, as much as reading a play, requires a roadmap, a cartographic familiarity with context, stylistics, sociocultural peculiarities, and certain other sets of information that are instrumental in building the pathway to the province of the poem. But is our knowing the kind of bird the rook is or the kind of flower daffodils are always insurmountably essential to the understanding of a poem? My students would have little idea about the Irish landscape (the materiality or embodied understanding of the poem) and, in this case, the sights and sounds of the train-journey that Yeats undertook from Manchester to Norwich on February 21, 1911, when he drafted the poem. In many ways, a poem or a play or a novel set in a European context is in all likelihood a step away—a bit withdrawn and reclusive—from my students in the Indian classroom. The sociocultural displacement of a text in a classroom is a reality that the reading and experience of literature have to encounter. I agree mostly with the fifteen points that Miller makes about knowing the poem, but what I still stay interested in is the worlding that a poem provides in the classroom, both in its aesthetic and postaesthetic ways. Yeats, with his proven familiarity with Indian and Chinese philosophy, Japanese drama, and Zen Buddhism, occult practices, Goethe, Winckelmann (he did not know German), Tagore (he did not know Bengali), and
Upanishadic thought, magic, theosophy, and other fields of interest endow his poetry with the profound potentialities for worlding. The across factor is high and decisive when we find Arabia, as part of Yeats’s engagement with Asia, making a presence in his poetic sensibility. His acquaintance with Alfarabi and Avicenna, of whom he wrote in Rosa Alchemica, teachings of Arab en Shemesh, Arabic folklore, Charles Doughty’s book Arabia Deserta, T. E. Lawrence’s book Seven Pillars of Wisdom, and enthusiastic explorations into The Arabian Nights develop several avenues of communication that brought his Irish consciousness to flank notes and queries into Arabia, explorations into Chinese thought, Japanese ways of life and action, incursions into Upanishad and Vedic thought: a febrile and fecund association in trans-now. The more than global impetus must try to make a variety of (in)fusionist inroads into Yeats and Arabia beyond poems like “The Gift of Harun Al-Rashid,” “Solomon to Sheba,” “Solomon and the Witch,” “The Second Coming,” and “Michael Robartes and the Dancer,” which have Arabia or Arabic influences as conspicuous categories of reference. Yeats notes, “Certain typical books—Ulysses, Mrs. Virginia Woolf’s Waves, Mr. Ezra Pound’s Draft of XXX Cantos—suggest a philosophy like that of the Samkara school of ancient India, mental and physical objects alike material, a deluge of experience breaking over us and within us, melting limits whether of line or tint; man no hard bright mirror dawdling by the dry sticks of a hedge, but a swimmer, or rather the waves themselves.”

Under (in)fusion-trans-now can the classroom read “The Cold Heaven” within the philosophy of Daimon or the artifice and apocalypse of Mirror? Why cannot our ways—one of them Miller’s predominantly rhetorical method and the other being my emphatically philosophical, transcultural ways of reading—be brought into a dialogic plexus to re-premise the experience of a literary text in a classroom? Our “whys” are not divergences but synergic peaks of contrastive studies.

A democratic community in the classroom, then, acknowledges that cultures are unequal as much as forms of class-life, text-life, and student-teacher life are continuously under mediation and resuscitation. The classroom of literature is parrhesic and stays alive through a lively dialogue both with the past that a student brings and the critical consciousness that a teacher imports. Such forces synergize to argue how a text can come alive in the present—a performative narrative caught between the pulls of tradition and the creative accents of individuality. The subjectivities of students then become both multiple and democratic, composite and anti-essential. Students dwell genitively in such spaces with both oppositional
and transformative consciousness. So the experience of reading literature is both humanist and skeptical, never beyond criticism and dialogue; it is aware of the limits of reason and committed to the defense of reason, encouraging subject positions implicated in intersections of power, knowledge, politics, desire, and affect. However, the dynamics between the teacher and the student are subjected to “pedagogy effect,” which Gregory Ulmer qualifies as “a kind of symbolic violence.” It becomes a submission to “magisterial effect,” which, without the depropriation of authority the teacher privileges over the students, quite disingenuously cuts off the participation of the students in the discursive domain of the classroom. Endgame’s interpretive articulation predominantly emerges from the teacher’s end. But teachers cannot be completely neutral either. Perhaps knowledge-generation in the classroom has an imbalance to it, calling for participation but not without its own scale-tilting, where the slant is more on the freshness that the teacher can bring.

Teaching literature is perhaps always a failure—the inadequacies in making literature get taught. We pedagogize, paradoxically, in effective failure. Shosana Felman, in discussing Lacan and Freud on pedagogy, speaks of a “pedagogical imperative” that is inimical to “desire,” the desire to speak otherwise, removed from established protocols of teaching. The classroom is held in the cusp of repression and license, the seriously vexed borderline between conventional pedagogy and the desire to undo it. This sets us up with the “impossibility” of teaching, the “doing away with pedagogy,” and the concomitant challenge that refuses to die out. Ignorance in the classroom is a reality that refuses to get dislodged under the mounting attainment of knowledge because the untotalizable quotient of learning and teaching cannot be ignored. Teaching Beckett expressly addresses the consciousness of the text, its uncanny ways and haunted terrains, but cannot forget its career stewed in ignorance, in regimes of thought that stay at the realm of the unconscious, the unarticulated voices, the domain of teaching or thought that the teacher would not be able to reach or access. Felman explains:

Ignorance is thus no longer simply opposed to knowledge: it is itself a radical condition, an integral part of the very structure of knowledge. But what does ignorance consist of, in this new epistemological and pedagogical conception? If ignorance is to be equated with the a-totality of the unconscious, it can be said to be a kind of forgetting-of forgetfulness: while learning is obviously, among other things, remembering
and memorizing (“all learning is recollection,” says Socrates), ignorance is linked to what is not remembered, what will not be memorized. But what will not be memorized is tied up with repression, with the imperative to forget—the imperative to exclude from consciousness, to not admit to knowledge. Ignorance, in other words, is not a passive state of absence—a simple lack of information: it is an active dynamic of negation, an active refusal of information.55

Resistance to the learning and teaching of a text comes with its profits. It combines ignorance at both levels of the interlocutor and the recipient. Roger Simon argues: “What is to be recognized in a dialogic pedagogy is that both student and teacher are doubly ignorant, not only of their structured resistances but as well of the knowledge of what it is that resists in the other. Given this doubled structure of ignorance in a pedagogical encounter, each then must listen for the silence in the other, helping each other to knowledge that is inaccessible. This knowledge is not in the teacher; it cannot be given. It is only to be acquired in the conversation between the teacher and students as coinvestigators of each other’s resistances.”56 The passion of the classroom is both knowledge and ignorance. I teach Endgame reveling both in ignorance and knowledge as a pedagogue and antipedagogue because teaching is also about the impossibility to teach and think all that teaching can do. Deficit is ignorance, which inversely is the excess that keeps the passion in the classroom going.