

Beckettia

by [Paul Illidge](#) (April 2025)



Adrift (Andrew Wyeth, 1982)

I

Live and invent, so Beckett wrote:
We are all born mad, some remain so.
Words, he maintained, are the clothes
Our thoughts wear.

Have you never wondered, he once asked,
What God was doing with himself
Before the creation? Or what the ostrich
Sees in the sand?

Le fond ne change pas, he declared.
Le what? I asked, not knowing the language.
The essential doesn't change.
That's how it is on this bitch of an earth.

II

So I said again I thought it was
Hopeless and no good going on,
And she agreed without
Opening her eyes.

I asked her to look at me,
And after a few moments she did,
But her eyes were just slits
Because of the glare.

I bent over her to get them
In the shadow and they opened.
Let me in, I said as we
Continued to drift among
The bulrushes and stuck there.
The way they went down,
Sighing before the bow.

I lay down across her
With my face in her breasts
And my hand on her.
We lay there without moving.
But under us all moved,
And moved us, gently,

Up and down, and from side to side.

III

Live and invent. I have tried.
I must have tried. Invent.
It is not the word. Neither is live.
No matter. I have tried. While within
Me the wild beast of earnestness
Padded up and down, roaring,
Ravening, rending. I have done that.

And all alone, well hidden, played
The clown all alone, hour after hour,
Motionless, often standing spellbound,
Groaning. That's right, groaning.

I couldn't play. I turned till I was dizzy,
Clapped my hands, ran, shouted,
Saw myself winning, saw myself
Losing, rejoicing, lamenting.

Then suddenly I threw myself
On the playthings, if there were any,
Or on a child, to change his joy
To howling, or I fled into hiding.

The grownups pursued me, the just
Caught me, beat me, hounded me back
Into the round, the game, the jollity.
For I was already in the toils of
Earnestness. That has been my disease.
I was born grave as others syphilitic.
And gravely I struggled to be grave no
More. To live, to invent.

But at each fresh attempt I lost
My head, fled to my shadows as to
Sanctuary, to his lap who can neither
Live nor suffer the sight of others living.
I say living without knowing what it is.
I tried to live without knowing what
I was trying. Perhaps I have lived after all,
Without knowing. I wonder why I speak
Of all this. Ah, yes, to relieve the tedium.
Live and invent. Live and cause to live.
There is no use indicting words. They are
No shoddier than what they peddle.

IV

Live and invent, old Malone had said.
To pass the time before the finishing up,
The going hence, the pages filled with
What needed to be said to pass the hours.
To tell what became of me, and where I went
In the months and perhaps the years
That followed. But no. For I weary of
These inventions, and others beckon to me.

Though first, in order to blacken a few more
Pages, may I just say I spent some time
At the seaside, without incident.
There are people the sea doesn't suit,
Who prefer the mountains or the plain.
Personally I felt no worse there
Than anywhere else. Much of my life
Has ebbed away before this shivering
Expanse to the sound of the waves
In storm and calm, and the claws of the surf.

Before, no, more than before, one with,

Spread on the sand, or in a cave. In the sand
I was in my element, letting it trickle
Between my fingers, scooping holes
That I filled in a moment later or
That filled themselves in, flinging it
In the air by handfuls, rolling in it.

And in the cave, lit by the beacons at night,
I knew what to do in order to be no
Worse off than elsewhere. And that my
Land went no further, in one direction
At least, did not displease me. And to feel
There was one direction at least in which
I could go no further, without first getting wet,
Then drowned, was a blessing. For I have
Always said, First learn to walk,
Then you can take swimming lessons.

But don't imagine my region ended
At the coast, that would be a grave
Mistake. For it was this sea too,
Its reefs and distant islands, and its
Hidden depths. And I too once went
Forth on it in a sort of oar-less skiff,
Paddling with an old bit of driftwood.

And I sometimes wonder if I ever came
Back from that voyage. For if I see myself
Putting to sea, and the long hours
Without landfall, I do not see the return,
The tossing on the breakers, and I do not
Hear the frail keel grating on the shore.

[Table of Contents](#)

Paul Illidge's true crime memoir *RSKY BZNS* (New English Review Press, 2022), is a "fascinating story" (Frank Abagnale, Jr., author of *Catch Me if You Can*), a "gripping and intricate read" (Conrad Black). His memoir *THE BLEAKS* (ECW Press), was a *Globe & Mail Canada* Best Book of 2014. His new book *THE COYOTE TABERNACLE CHOIR* is a collection of 17 creative nonfiction stories. His modern prose versions of Shakespeare's seven greatest plays, *The Shakespeare Novels: Hamlet, King Lear, Othello, Twelfth Night, Midsummer Night's Dream, Macbeth, Romeo and Juliet*, are all available internationally at www.kobobooks.com

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