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The Hitler Salute

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Preface. A Diary Entry

While traveling in Germany on March 3, 1937, Samuel Beckett noticed a sign fastened over the portal of the Dominican Church in Regensburg and noted in his diary, “Leave,¹ pass the Dominican Church, which I do not view, noticed though, that the ‘Grüß Gott’ (lit. Greet God) sign over the north portal has been crossed out & replaced with ‘Heil Hitler’!!!” This entry complements his collection of notes, the “flotsam,” the “names and

¹ Translating “Gehe weg” without context is tricky, but I think it should be OK as it stands. I’ll be happy to make any changes necessary.

dates,” and becomes one of the many “straws” that enable Beckett to retain the incoherent and chaotic aspects of his experiences in the hope of understanding them. Suspicious of every form of unifying analysis -- evidence for any kind of historical necessity “makes a person throw up” – Beckett lends weight to the montage-like protocol of his observations, which is expressed almost imperceptibly in his use of punctuation. It catches his eye that the greeting formula has been replaced. The discovery merges with impressions from his encounters with Germans in Hamburg, Berlin and elsewhere and the ever-present usage of the Hitler salute he has already noted many times, “the incessant HH” or “even the toilet attendants greet you with Heil Hitler.” But this notation ends with three exclamation points, ciphers, which set the observation apart from lapidary reporting, as is occasionally also the case with other entries. Multiple exclamation points denote a special irritating quality in the alien elements that strike the traveler’s eye, and a call is issued to reflect on them. One month later, in April 1937, Beckett left Germany to find permanent quarters in France. His amazement over the linguistic subversion that he perceived but did not grasp fades into the shadowy memory traces of a young man in search of an aesthetic-literary self. Only a few years hence he would establish his worldwide renown by making a central literary theme of the termination of moral human relations in the dissolution of the dialogue potential of speech. Our objective is to investigate Beckett’s exclamation marks and the intuitively perceived, monstrous disruption of meaning that they scream into his diary. Our discussion will focus on German greetings and the far-reaching consequences of their perversion.

1. Shaping the Beginning

The way a society handles its communications culture is not something we gather from high-flying stage productions of good intention. It is not the well-meant candlelight processions, but rather the small gestures, for example, greetings and salutations like “Hi. How’s it going?” that provide the information about how people communicate with each other, how they draw their boundaries, what they reveal about themselves and how they maintain the secrecy of their person. The individual who offers a greeting directs his attention to another person and renders himself accessible to the person in a special way. In this respect a greeting is the first symbolic gift given to another. It is the most abstract form of a gift, but it also involves a concrete sequence of obligations for the person who receives the greeting as well as the one who offers it. A triad of giving, accepting, and responding is inseparably connected with the act of greeting. As the shortest social stage play that humans perform together within the infinitely rich choreography of their encounters, a greeting opens a door to the other, assigns the roles, establishes presence and throws the space open to history and innovation. Every greeting – even a greeting denied – reflects the self-images of the participants and the manner in which they mutually perceive their relationship. However, the manifestation of greetings and the rules governing how they are delivered are subject to historical change. They also differ regionally. Not only greeting formulas from the Middle Ages would be received with a shaking of heads in 21st-century Germany, even the Bavarian “Grüß Gott” or “Servus” (Hi) has a curious ring in Hamburg. Meanwhile, “Moin-Moin” (Hello), a ubiquitous greeting along the north German coast, or “Ei – Ei gude wie” (Hi, how’s it going?) used by laconic Hessians waiting for matters to unfold, will cause

occasional wonderment outside of their local areas. Greetings always conform to established norms, thereby expressing the degree of civility, stylization or – formulated in the terminology of current philosophical discourse – dignity to which a solidaristic community considers the social exchange appropriate and expectable. To the extent that a greeting sets in motion a sequence of obligations that no one can escape, it embodies a universal social fact. In the words of Ortega y Gasset: “Of itself it is not a genuine act, not a custom with useful content of its own, but rather the custom that symbolizes all other customs, the custom of customs.”¹ The act of greeting enjoys the privilege of shaping beginnings. Its preeminent position is explained by the fact that – together with a farewell – it acts as a moderator of human encounters. It establishes a framework that defines the initial rules within which communication will occur and indicates the place that the communication assumes within the social nexus. Everyone recognizes the difference between a casual greeting among friends and the formal greetings of an official ceremony. It is customary to view the act of greeting as an insignificant ritual that people employ unconsciously in order to concentrate on “what follows,” i.e., on the objectives that have been set and the course of the exchange which the salutation initiated. Our attention, however, focuses on the meaning structure of the greeting itself, its prerequisites and consequences. Based on its nature as pure “reciprocity” (Georg Simmel) and as a door opener for communication, on its Janus face as a formula that both reveals and conceals, its simultaneous role as a connecting link and dividing partition between two people, as well as on the multiplicity of its manifestations, the act of greeting has special significance for questions of evolutionary theory and the ethics of civilization. Greetings are part of the natural history of encounters and provide exciting insights into the manner in which members of one

and the same species encounter each other at close range. One is quick to pronounce judgment that the act of greeting lacks sufficient gravity to be able to influence the functioning of social institutions. But can we conceive of a society that dispenses with greetings and manages without using a salutation as an opening gesture directed toward the other? All reflection upon demeanor, manners, and the cultivation of exchanges begins with the question of how greetings are handled – in schools, in the workplace, during the public appearance of officials, but also in the private realm of family and partnerships. Not least, for this reason greetings also enter our field of vision with respect to the question of the normative integration of complex societies. “What holds society together?” is the modern version of the venerable sociological question of what makes social order possible. The act of greeting manifests empirically in a spectrum as variegated as the forms of human communities themselves. Each one makes use of its own opening and closing rules, whereby the order of the greeting sequence is frequently prescribed: the person of lower status greets the one of higher status; the younger person greets the older; men greet women; the person who enters greets those who are present. What follows is a discussion of “German greetings,” in particular the historically unique “Hitler salute” which formed the politically mandated, universal communications framework for a period of twelve years. The salute, which consisted of the elliptic formula “Heil Hitler” and a simultaneous extension of the right arm at eye-level with the palm open, overspread the exchange culture after the National Socialist Party seized power. “Following the suppression of the party state, the Hitler salute has now become the German greeting,” reads a letter circulated to top-echelon Reich officials in 1933 by the Reich Minister of the Interior. Greetings in use until that time as techniques to create self-evident familiarity were thereby nullified, and a

prescribed framework was imposed upon familiar communication spaces. The comradeship education guidelines of the National Socialist German Student Association formulate the breach with existing greeting customs as follows: “The German salute must become second nature to you. Discard ‘Grüß Gott,’ ‘Auf Wiedersehen,’ ‘Guten Tag,’ and ‘Servus’.” And further, “Thus, a person who does not wish to come under suspicion of deliberately taking a negative attitude will offer the Hitler salute.” This transition encompassed not only the accustomed routines – spoken or written – that were used in public as salutations or farewells for official, social, and civic contacts, but in like manner the symbols and buildings of the new government. The salute was offered without specific instruction while singing the national anthem or the Horst Wessel Song, in the presence of the flag of the Nazi Party or its subdivisions, before official representatives of the Wehrmacht and the police, as well as at consecrated sites of the National Socialist movement. For the duration of the regime, complying with the salute stood as an expression of loyalty. Its adoption and spread mark a clear caesura in the order of interaction and provide one of the most striking examples of Germany’s collective regression to “the peculiar happiness of pre-modern rites” (Joachim Fest). Like Samuel Beckett, many foreign observers were taken aback by the phenomenon of the rapidly spreading salute. Naturally, indifferent, reluctant or negligent individuals did exist, but acceptance of the salute seemed unstoppable. At the Berlin Olympic Games in 1936, three years after the National Socialists had seized power, the French and English teams made their reverence to the host country by marching into the stadium with arms outstretched. By 1935 the salute had already been included under “Grußformen” (forms of salutation) in the *Großer Duden*, the pictorial dictionary of the German language. But that reflects only one side of

the matter for every greeting simultaneously reveals the self-interest of the person who offers it as well as the way he perceives the bearing of his action on the common weal. This is particularly significant when it comes to the “German salute.” When people offer a greeting they begin to lift the secrecy of their private lives, but this can never be entirely separated from the overarching structural relationships of communal life. Moreover, it always points to the perception of the public arena to which the individual also appertains. An individual who appeared enthusiastic about raising his arm in public, for example at work, on the street or even in the lobby of a building, could still be a determined opponent of the salute in the privacy of his own home. Even more intriguing than the question of the spread of the Hitler salute, its precursors or its obvious political function, however, is how the act of greeting as an elementary form of human communication could become so deformed. It was not, after all, a case of gradual habituation, as when a person says “Morning” and omits the word “Good” out of convenience. This emerges clearly from a memory related by Helga Hartmann, born 1938 in Bad Camberg (Taunus): “I was five years old, and my grandmother sent me to the post office to buy stamps. My seven-year-old cousin accompanied me. The post office was housed in a private residence and managed by a young woman. We entered the post office room and greeted her with ‘Good morning.’ The post mistress frowned and ordered us out the door with the words, ‘The first thing would be to enter the room properly.’ We looked at each other and didn’t know what we’d done wrong. Then my cousin thought that maybe we had to knock on the door. So we knocked, and loudly proclaimed, ‘Good morning’ again. At that, the post office lady took us by the hand, went out the door with us and demonstrated the way one saluted the Führer when entering a public office. That’s my lasting memory of the Hitler salute, which I haven’t

forgotten to this day.” A similar experience was recalled by a young oarsman at the Ruderclub Neptun (Neptune Rowing Club) in Constance. “When I came into the club house for training one evening in the spring of 1935 and – as usual – offered a greeting of ‘Salut,’ an insolent rascal approached me and asked in a very audible voice, ‘Aren’t you aware that the German salute is *Heil Hitler?*’ At first I thought it was a bad joke and looked around at the others. But there was only awkward silence. Not one face showed any expression. There was no doubt about it: he was serious. Without a word I went to my locker, packed my odds and ends into my gear bag and walked out of the place, wordlessly and for good.”² Incidents such as these demonstrate unmistakably that the mandatory salute imposed a clear breach of custom. After all, the children at the post office did follow the rules of etiquette, and the sporting friends at the rowing club could also have placed greater importance on the arrival of a well-known comrade than on his cavalier adherence to the new greeting regulations. In the act of greeting we encounter ourselves, not only others, and a greeting marks an amazing process of realization. It places those who are greeting each other on a level of temporal synchronicity that offers options for action from which they then select. The one who offers a greeting first has the action advantage of the initiative, but must make the initial decision whether or not to greet. While the options of the person who responds are already restricted by the greeting itself, he must make the parallel decision whether or not to accept the greeting, that is, to respond or withhold response. If we pursue the question of how each person develops a relationship to socially binding rules and how he or she acquires the ability to recall and anticipate as the basis for realization, then personal relationships emerge as a form of life, that offers an opportunity to withdraw from the public frenzy of the salute.

Simultaneously, they appear as a place where internal acceptance of the mandatory greeting is prepared. For example, when a person walks out of the house in the morning and, contrary to all previous custom, calls out “Heil Hitler” to his neighbor, which the latter accepts and returns with the same nonchalance or even resolution. Or when someone avoids offering the greeting by slurring it into “Heitler” or – when making the inevitable bureaucratic rounds – by opening the door to an office and saying, “Anybody in here?” and thereby circumventing an express articulation of “Heil Hitler.” How does a person end up transforming centuries-old forms of address and salutation into a physically elaborate and semantically uncommon procedure, one – as Charlie Chaplin drastically showed in his film *The Great Dictator* – that has a grotesque effect when removed from its ideological and social frame of reference. It is a question of the criteria for biographical consistency, i.e., the question of being true to oneself, the cognitive consonance¹ of individual maxims of conformity and the elasticity of moral standards, and of the relationship between leading a private life and one’s publicly perceivable demeanor. And so it is a question of psycho-social processes in a workshop, an office, a club, a shop or simply in an encounter on the street, that define an exchange in split second sequentiality. The greeting becomes the practical application of the internal acceptance of the required affiliation. In contrast to the obvious interpretation that the Hitler salute was nothing more than a component of a general prospect of salvation, and its spread a compromise that the populace believed it had to make between moral reservations and the hope for a better future, we would like to discuss the act of greeting in terms of shaping an encounter, as the practice of

¹ Strictly speaking, one could do without the word “cognitive” but I think it helps the reader and accurately reflects the author’s intention.

opening oneself to the other with its concomitant prerequisites and consequences. When a collective abandonment of the criteria for moral judgment occurs, as was expressed in the acceptance of a regime such as National Socialism, the process is underpinned by an upheaval of the micro-social foundations of human encounters. This is a precursor to the glaring pathos of the ideological exclusion of aliens as enemies. What stands at the beginning is not anti-Semitic furor, organized crime and extermination camps, but rather indifference. My theory holds that the disintegration of morality does not come about suddenly and for no particular reason. Instead, it results from a loss of sovereignty and the ability to shape one's sphere of personal existence. A fractured relationship to oneself is the precondition for underestimating the effectiveness of changes in social interactions. This enabled charisma – in this case Hitler's charisma – to unfold its immense power and, in the words of sociologist Max Weber, to upend "rules, traditions and, indeed, all concept of anything sacred." When actions (one's own as well as those of others) are examined with respect to their consequences for exchanges with others, they are perceived from a restricted perspective. This is explained by an inclination to attribute what is experienced in the present, even the act of greeting, to causalities other than the actual actors who are involved in the encounter. The result is a shut-down of perception which goes unnoticed and insidiously clouds the standards of establishing an elementary relationship, even before moral indifference and moral perversion can close in as an objective consequence, and even without the necessity of a corresponding conviction being present in a developed form which can be articulated. The object of what follows is not to research historical causes. But even when one takes into account current insights into the rise of National Socialism and the causes of a breathtaking, profound collective emotionality, moral self-

abandonment and willingness to declare allegiance, we remain astonished at the tiny step of altering a greeting with which people renounced their self-evident “reserve of pride, sentiment, self-certainty and dignity” (Sebastian Haffner) and subordinated themselves to the Hitler salute. An amplified yearning for bonding also befell other European national societies at the beginning of the 20th century. What interests us in these developments is the direction setting process that announced itself in elementary forms of social life apart from the populist frenzy. The Hitler salute, sinister gesture of the National Socialist era, (moderated)² (modified) the triviality of human encounters and appointed them with the leaden threat of sanctions. How did it emerge? How did it spread? To what degree did people conform with the mandatory greeting? How did noncompliance or compromise express themselves, and where did the prerequisites lie for internal acceptance of the salute? These are the questions that will occupy us. When one considers the catastrophic consequences, the specter of a twelve-year symbolic and gestural disguise of outset and departure seems almost unimaginably brief, but it cast a magic spell over encounters and silenced the moral correction of ethical miscarriage. Thus, the salute documented a transition to tactlessness in two respects. In situations where it was practiced it stamped the encounter as one where the greeting was out of place. In an historical sense it marked the gestural triumph of social radicalism over the fragile interspace of dignified demeanor.

¹ y Gasset, O., 1957, S. 246.

² Ohne Gewaehr - bedauere!! Nach Ruecksprache mit einigen “eductated native speakers” u. Kollegen habe ich nicht 100% herausbekommen koennen, was er Autor eigentlich mit “moderiert” meint – “modifiziert” waere auch denkbar. Moderieren heißt fuergewoehnlich entweder leiten (Rundfunk/TV-Sendung) im übertragenen Sinn oder mäßigen als ursprüngl. Bedeutung. Ich bin aber gerne bereit, weiter daran zu arbeiten. Setze mich gerne mit dem Autor in Verbindung wenn’s notwendig sein sollte.

² Schoop, A., 1985, S. 34