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Engelberts, M.

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Beckett's Prose Fiction and *Waiting for Godot*

The Boy(s) Undoing the Inner/Outer World Split

Matthijs Engelberts | ORCID: 0000-0003-1150-5592
University of Amsterdam, Amsterdam, The Netherlands
m.engelberts@uva.nl

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Abstract

Waiting for Godot is not often presented as homologous with Beckett's narrative fiction. However, a close consideration of the status of the boy(s) in the play shows that the drama text undermines the dichotomy between inner and outer world, which Beckett was addressing in comparable ways in his novels and art criticism.

Résumé

En attendant Godot n'est pas souvent considéré comme homologue des romans de Beckett. Une étude détaillée de la position du garçon qui apparaît à la fin des deux actes montre que la dichotomie entre monde extérieur et intérieur est sapée dans la pièce, tout comme elle l'est de façon comparable dans les récits et la critique d'art de Beckett.

Keywords

Waiting for Godot – relation between Beckett's theatre and his prose fiction – hierarchy between genres – the boy(s) in *Waiting for Godot*

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Waiting for Godot, and Beckett's theatre generally, is not often compared in detail to Beckett's narrative fiction. This may in part be due to Beckett's own deprecation of his drama. Writing for the stage was for Samuel Beckett, in 1948/49, "a relaxation, to get away from the awful prose I was writing at that time" (in Duckworth 89); *Waiting for Godot* is "this fucking play" (*Letters II*, 563), and also "a mess" (Beckett 1993, xi)¹—"how I dislike that play now" (*Letters II*, 413)—, and prose fiction is "the important writing" (Bair 562). *Waiting for Godot* in particular is apparently relegated at times to a position behind the novels and other prose. Beckett's theatre has indeed sometimes tended to become the 'other' of his prose. This is the case even though many critics have not followed Beckett's lead, and despite the plethora of academic criticism that *Waiting for Godot* has given rise to (although a large part of it is didactic in the sense that it is primarily aimed at students, more than seems to be the case for critical works on Beckett's other texts).

Some criticism however has not refrained from devaluing Beckett's theatre, particularly the early plays. A 1961 article states: "Even though Samuel Beckett as a dramatist has frequently taken critical precedence over Beckett as a novelist, his five novels assume the burden of demonstrating his originality, with the plays forming merely a footnote to what the novels indicate with greater range and force" (Karl, 661). More than forty years later, the *Grove Companion* concludes towards the end of the article on *Waiting for Godot*: "There was nothing really new about the play. For Samuel Beckett, it revisited familiar themes rather than reflecting ideas he was exploring in the fiction (notably the voice). Its elements have been part of Judeo-Christian culture for thousands of years" (Ackerley & Gontarski, 623). "Nothing really new"² compared to the fiction: whether this is an echo of Beckett's own attitude or not, the strategy at work is a longstanding critical tradition of downgrading the theatre as a minor form of writing compared to the author's narrative prose.

Thorough comparisons between Beckett's first performed play and his prose fiction are thus relatively rare³—even for the novels Beckett was writing at the time he conceived *Waiting for Godot*.⁴ Though other approaches are possi-

1 There is however no reference for "a mess" in the text, and Walter Asmus does not note this expression in his 1975 article.

2 Another article states: "The period embraced by these supreme fictions [the 1950s *Texts for Nothing* and *How It Is* (1961)] is also that of Beckett's most celebrated drama, but for all its radical theatricality the drama is thematically the more conservative." (Ackerley 42)

3 Logically, one would in fact expect that the downgrading of the theatre requires a prior in-depth comparison of the drama and the novels.

4 Duckworth compares the play to the novel *Mercier and Camier*, but does not deal with the

ble,⁵ it might be time to look in more detail into the relationship between the fictional worlds of the play and the novels.

I would suggest that there are indeed major parallels between *Waiting for Godot* and the (contemporaneous) prose fiction, and not all have received much attention. I apologise beforehand that I will be teasing out—in painstaking detail, somewhat compliantly and naïvely—the implications of well-known texts (*Waiting for Godot* especially), to such an extent that I may seem to engage in a form of close reading which refuses to stray from the numerous trails suggested in the text only (and mostly stops before issues of history, theory, philosophy or politics come into view). I hope it will emerge that the topic may at the moment, and against all expectations, require such an approach, even at this advanced stage of the reception of Beckett's work. There is, hopefully, no harm anyway in diving into the evergreen text that Beckett started marginalising at some point, more radically than most of his other work; which didn't prevent him from finally keeping the manuscript of the play all his life due to "an irrational reluctance to part with it," as Beckett said in 1969 (Van Hulle/Verhulst 49), and never selling it nor giving it away as he planned several times, and did with many of his other manuscripts.

For reasons of space, this article will concentrate on a single topic, 'figments of the mind'—one of the most characteristic features of Beckett's work.

Vladimir and Estragon are often seen as representing two aspects of one character. As is well known, there are indeed quite a few instances in the text and the structure of the play that suggest a close connection, perhaps amounting to a unity. The hat—Vladimir—and the boots—Estragon—are representative of the complementarity of the two characters, which is also underlined in Estragon's repartee: "He has stinking breath and I have stinking feet" (42). These and other examples of connectedness, sometimes in complementarity, have been read as an indication that Gogo and Didi are a single entity. Seen in a Cartesian context, they would coincide more or less with the opposition and

aspect of the novel that will be addressed here. Duckworth reverses the traditional valuation, but only in regard to *Mercier and Camier*, by stating for instance: "Didi and Gogo positively glow by comparison; their condition is so infused with timeless, tragic quality that it acquires a density and depth quite lacking in the novel" (100). My aim in this article is not to contend the aesthetic superiority of *Waiting for Godot* or of Beckett's theatre generally.

- 5 A comparison of the theatre and the novels that sidesteps a *paragone*, a supposed hierarchy between the two genres, does not need to be limited to tracing parallel 'themes' in both genres. It might also involve foregrounding the theatricality of the plays, for instance, or on the contrary stressing the presumed intermediality of Beckett's writing (e.g. narration in the plays, and theatrical performances of the novels).

inseparability of body and mind (States 112, Cohn 213), or amount to a critique of this opposition; considered in a Freudian light, they represent “the conscious and the subconscious mind” (Boxall 32; cf. Metman 55, in 1965 already).

More texts besides *Waiting for Godot* seem to buttress the interpretation of Vladimir and Estragon as a single subjective entity. As is well known, *The Unnamable* calls the two main characters of the novel *Mercier and Camier* a ‘pseudocouple’ (291), and this coinage has become a much used concept in Beckett criticism. In the entry on the pseudocouple, the *Grove Companion* expands the concept into the split between voice and character in the later fiction and drama: “In later works that inseparable duality is represented by an external voice a solo character perceives. In *Company*, *That Time* and ‘Rockaby’, for instance, the voice is familiar and alien, the self and other” (464–465). The same *Companion* also identifies another bicephalous entity in *Waiting for Godot*: “[T]he men and women who make up Samuel Beckett’s teetering twosomes are tied to each other, figuratively, or, like Pozzo and Lucky, literally.” (463) Considered in the light of the ‘pseudocouple’ that is introduced as a concept in Beckett’s prose fiction, then, the characters in *Waiting for Godot* would seem to become even more doubles of their companions than they appear to be in the play as such.

If we look at another presumed ‘couple’ in the play, the fictive world of *Waiting for Godot* might start to topple even more radically—since as we will see, ultimately, all of the characters are liable to be seen as figments, in this early play already, losing their status as separate entities. Besides the two best known complementary couples, there is indeed one more, who the audience never sees together. However, the play suggests that the boy who enters at the end of each of the two acts has a brother, who lives with him in like circumstances. Not much attention has been paid to the implications of the mere fact that this messenger or these messengers appear on stage, as characters on the same level as Vladimir and Estragon and as Pozzo and Lucky. I will not discuss the relation between the boy and his supposed double, but I will concentrate on the observation that the boy brings a message from Godot and what this shows about the play—and its relation to the prose fiction. Let’s probe, quite basically, how the fact that the boy appears on stage functions in the fictional world as it is presented in the text, and points, unobtrusively and perhaps less basically, towards an unsettling of the ontological underpinnings of the action of the play.

Since the boy brings a message from Godot, we might—firstly—suppose that Godot ‘exists’, even if he doesn’t seem to come, and can thus indeed send a messenger to let Vladimir and Estragon know he does not keep his appointment. The first thing to note is probably that Godot’s attitude can in this case be

considered as unaccommodating, harsh, cruel perhaps, since it becomes clear that he is often, perhaps continually postponing his presumed appointment. The strict god of the old testament springs to mind, and perhaps most acutely the story of Job, often referred to in criticism of *Waiting for Godot*. However, Job is 'saved' in the end, and rewarded for his unflinching faithfulness. In the case of *Waiting for Godot*, it might be more accurate to compare the strict Godot to a demiurge: a malevolent godlike being, in gnostic religions, who has imprisoned mankind in the material, sublunary world—as is the case in Orphism. Beckett is known to have been aware of these ancient theories and used their ideas in his works (Ackerley 2004, Engelberts 1990, 2006). But let's stick to the basics, for now. A question might arise from the cruel act of postponing; it is often asserted that the play asks more questions than it provides answers, but this does not mean we should refrain from uncovering which questions exactly the reader and spectator are led to ask, and what the possible answers might show. Why should Godot in fact let Vladimir and Estragon know each day that he will come tomorrow? The absent character may apparently have a stake in the waiting—otherwise, why announce he will arrive soon? If there is a Godot, and if it's he who sends a messenger each day, then he would appear to be personally involved in the action. Whether this is because the waiting characters secure him a ground for his own existence and his domination, in the same way as Lucky and Pozzo are 'tied' to each other, and mutually dependent, because the slave is foundational to the master and vice versa, is a question that is suggested by the text, but we need not pursue this now since it concerns another topic.

However, if Godot has an interest in Vladimir and Estragon's waiting, the question also comes up which means of access he has to their waiting. This is again a naïve question, but it is legitimate if Godot is taken to be the one who would actually send the messenger. Is Godot completely absent from the action and has no access to it, other than through the messenger—as may seem to be the case since he does not appear in the play and nobody is able to give details about Godot? Perhaps. It is not excluded, on the other hand, that he has access to the action—that he can see the characters, and is witnessing their world, perhaps in order to profit more directly from the waiting he inflicts on Vladimir and Estragon. This suggestion—which the text of the play elicits without endorsing it as the only option—obviously gives him a different ontological status from the other characters: he is apparently on another plane. If so, one can of course interpret him unsurprisingly as a godlike force, who has access to the world inhabited by Estragon and Vladimir. It is relevant to note that this godlike figure is in the same structural position as the audience: the spectator too has access to the action, whereas the characters on stage cannot see the onlookers,

at least not most of the time. The theatrical context thus makes Godot and the audience coalesce in this respect—the onlooker in the auditorium occupies the same position as the godlike, malevolent onlooker in the fictional world.

In a Beckettian context, however, and especially with regard to the novels, the divergent status of Godot might also be viewed differently. In the novel on the ‘pseudocouple’, as the Unnamable calls the two characters who at the start of *Mercier and Camier* miss their appointment with each other, Mercier feels at some point that they are being observed:

Strange impression, said Mercier, strange impression sometimes that we are not alone. You not?

I am not sure I understand, said Camier.

Now quick, now slow, that is Camier all over.

Like the presence of a third party, said Mercier. Enveloping us. I have felt it from the start. And I am anything but psychic.

Does it bother you? said Camier.

At first no, said Mercier.

And now? said Camier.

It begins to bother me a little, said Mercier.

461–462

Critics often underscore the relation between this passage and the first sentence of the novel: “The journey of Mercier and Camier is one I can tell, if I will, for I was with them all the time” (383). Hugh Kenner has stated this plainly: “The point of ‘I was with them, all the time’ [...] is the sly point that I invented them, and made up their journey” (86). The prose fiction, especially from the trilogy onwards, indeed often presents a character who appears to be imagining a world. In the later theatre especially, we sometimes find a patently comparable structure, for instance in *What Where*, or in the television plays. Nevertheless, in *Waiting for Godot* the idea that there is an imagining consciousness from whom emanates the action is also present, and is suggested in a less direct manner. ‘A third party enveloping’ all the characters on stage: someone imagining two people waiting endlessly, imagining the encounter with two others travelling endlessly, and imagining the messenger. The boy as an envoy of the one who imagines what happens on stage: this is one of the paradoxical suggestions looming in the play when one considers the boy as a messenger of a Godot who can indeed send a messenger, even if he devised the messenger, along with all the other characters.

We should, however, also take a look at the boy(s) if we suppose that Godot does not ‘exist’—in whatever realm of Gogo’s and Didi’s fictional world. The

play's absent character might of course be as empty a concept as the bold soprano mentioned only once in the dialogue of Ionesco's eponymous play—both authors, albeit immensely different, partaking in a critique of language that has taken many forms in the twentieth century. The text indeed does not appear to allow the reader and spectator to conclude definitely whether the alleged Godot 'exists' in the fictive world of Vladimir and Estragon, in whichever realm, or whether he does not—although critics have from the start occasionally suggested rather insistently that the latter option is the only viable way to consider the play (cf. Anders 145). In this case, Vladimir and Estragon would patently appear to have imagined someone for whom they wait—probably to give them the impression they will be able at some point in the future to escape from the reality they are living in.

This seems rather obvious, so far. Now if Godot is a fabricated being, a fantasised *objet du désir*, how does this affect the perception of the arrival of the boy(s) at the end of the day? Logically, one might suppose that there is perhaps some other, unknown character in the world of Vladimir and Estragon who has an interest in taking advantage of Vladimir and Estragon's belief in 'Godot'. This would however take us back to the first supposition we discussed: there is someone in or above the fictive world who perpetuates the situation. If however there is no Godot nor a proxy in Didi's and Gogo's world, whether malevolent or not, then the status of the messenger becomes problematic. Without a Godot present at some level, it seems that the boy can only be a means for Vladimir and Estragon to maintain the illusion they created. The boys are in this case imaginary beings in Vladimir's and Estragon's world, figments of the needs of their mind(s)—inventions which allow Didi and Gogo to shore up the illusion that there is a reason for their waiting.⁶ The point is simply, however, that the play does not in any clear way present the boy(s) as pertaining to another ontological sphere—in the way Hamlet's father for instance is said to be a ghost in

6 My aim is to examine the way in which the arrival of the boy(s) changes the perception of the status of the action in the play, and not to interpret the character. Considering the appearance of a child in Beckett's texts, mostly at the end, it seems possible to say that they represent the recommencement of a (terminating) world. The enigmatic name that the boy gives to Vladimir ('Mr. Albert') might be viewed in this context. It has been suggested that the name refers to Albert Camus, and this does not seem implausible, as long as the critical dimension of the reference is foregrounded. The boy in *Waiting for Godot* makes the action continue, just as Sisyphus in Camus' *The Myth of Sisyphus* continues to push the rock up the hill. Importantly, though, there is no sign in the play that the characters must be 'imagined happy', as Camus stated in the famous and crucial last sentence of his essay: "One must imagine Sisyphus happy."

Shakespeare's play, even if he appears on stage twice and is seen by his son (but not by Hamlet's mother). The boy is physically present in Vladimir and Estragon's world, as a character who is apparently on the same level as the others. If the boys can be viewed as figments and are nonetheless present on the stage just like the other characters, then it becomes quite possible to conceive of the other characters in the play as figments as well. This goes for Pozzo and Lucky, who may well have been devised by Vladimir and Estragon to shorten their day; and there is no reason to suppose that it does not go for Vladimir and Estragon themselves. The difference between what is supposed to be 'real' and 'imagined' in the fictional world of the play is dissolved, once the status of the boy(s) starts to shift. 'Outer' and 'mental' space tend to collapse and become indistinguishable.⁷

This is of course all the more plausible since the couples in the play can easily be seen as 'pseudo-couples': not two characters, as they appear to be on stage, but one. It has much less often been noted that the play suggests that all characters can be considered as 'imagined', and are in such a view ambivalently stripped of their status as separate persons in the fictional world. One of the hints in the text pointing towards this ontological insecurity is a frequently quoted passage. At the end of the play, Estragon falls asleep and Vladimir says:

Was I sleeping, while the others suffered? Am I sleeping now? Tomorrow, when I wake, or think I do, what shall I say of today? That with Estragon my friend, at this place until the fall of night, I waited for Godot? That Pozzo passed, with his carrier, and that he spoke to us? Probably. But in all that what truth will there be?

[...]

At me too someone is looking, of me too someone is saying, he is sleeping, he knows nothing, let him sleep on. (*Pause.*) I can't go on! (*Pause.*) What have I said?

([...] Enter boy right.)

2006, 84–85⁸

7 Since in such a situation there is no difference between external reality and perceived reality, ontology and epistemology tend to conflate too. Kant used the concept of the 'thing-in-itself', that is beyond the grasp of human knowledge; in Beckett, there is no systematic philosophy of being or knowledge, but his aesthetics tends in my view to erase the difference between epistemological and ontological doubt.

8 I quote the text of *Waiting for Godot* from the 2006 edition of *The Complete Dramatic Works*. In the quotations in this article, there are only minor differences between this text and the 1986 edition of *The Complete Dramatic Works* as well as the 1993 *Theatrical Notebooks* edition.

Often, the critical comments on this quotation underline the metatheatrical dimension of the play: the spotlighting of aspects of the conditions of stage plays. In this view, the looming awareness of Vladimir that he is being looked at by someone who seems to be on another level of reality is considered as an allusion—a precise one, this time—to the audience (States 110, Kenner 37). The passage is also sometimes seen as a critical moment in Vladimir's half-consciousness of the futility of waiting (Metman 51). The ontological doubts which mark this moment are indeed inconclusive as to what exactly is happening, as so often in the play. It is clear, on the other hand, that Vladimir is referring to another level of reality, and that on this other plane, he and presumably all the characters (Pozzo and his 'carrier') are being watched. His first suggestion is that he himself is dreaming everything which happens—in this case the action of the play would be a projection of his mind, a mental image of what he dreams. Vladimir's suggestion may also mean that someone else is looking at him. Although perhaps he presumes that he is being watched asleep, it seems more likely, or at the least possible, that he conjectures that he is 'asleep' at the very moment he is talking, and that the onlooker he refers to watches the action of the play, which he still assumes to be a 'dream'. In both cases, there is thus a derealization of the action: the events of the play and all the characters appear to be conjured up, whether by Vladimir or by an unnamed onlooker. This may be the reason for which Beckett preferred the characters and set to look "all very spectral" (*Letters II*, 448) and called Didi and Gogo "2 wraiths" (Van Hulle/Verhulst 111).

Even if we have probed what can be inferred from the text itself only, a provisional conclusion is ineluctable and can be rather basic. Whether he is considered as an envoy of Godot or not, the figure of the messenger in *Waiting for Godot* inevitably gives rise to a vision of the action of the play as an 'image' perceived by a processing consciousness,⁹ a world imagined by an onlooker. True, in the play this idea is subdued, suggested rather than presented as an explicitly stated option, and moreover the situation stays inconclusive since there are other ways to conceive of the action of the play. Nevertheless, it is clear that the relation between outer and inner reality was on Beckett's mind in the same period. Writing about the relation between the 'object' and the 'artist' in March 1949, shortly after having finished *Waiting for Godot*, Beckett states in a letter to Georges Duthuit: "[C]e qu'on appelle le dehors et le dedans ne font qu'un" (*Letters II*, 136, "what are called outside and inside are one and the same"

9 In a stimulating essay, States uses 'processing consciousness' in a different sense, and he moreover asserts that it is missing in *Waiting for Godot* (11).

140). No wonder then that in *Waiting for Godot* also, reader and spectator are led to doubt about the status of the fictional world.

We have already noted that the idea of an imagining consciousness traverses *Mercier and Camier*. It is also, of course, present in the later prose especially; perhaps the text most conspicuously founded on this premise is *Company*. “Devised deviser devising it all for company. In the same figment dark as his figments” (443), as the text of this prose fiction has it. Whether it is Vladimir whom, in *Waiting for Godot*, we take to be this “unnamable”, as *Company* also calls the deviser, or some Godot, or an unnamed entity, the ‘deviser devising it all’ is an apt description of the suggestion in the play that the action in its entirety takes place in the mind of an onlooker.

The ‘unnamable’ in *Company* cannot but evoke the last novel of the trilogy during which Beckett interrupted his writing of prose fiction and composed *Waiting for Godot*. The play was indeed written after Beckett had finished writing *Malone meurt*, and just before he started working on *L’Innommable*, from October 1948 to January 1949. In the latter text, often seen as the pinnacle in the development of Beckett’s art, and at the same time as a *nec plus ultra* which made it difficult for him to continue writing prose fiction, the characters of the preceding novels are presented as imagined, invented, made up by the narrating voice of *The Unnamable*. In the beginning of the text, the narrator has stated that “Malone is there” (even if “Perhaps it is Molloy, wearing Malone’s hat” ...); he then adds: “I believe they are all here, at least from Murphy on, I believe we are all here” (286–287). Somewhat later, however, the unnamable will state: “All these Murphys, Molloys and Malones do not fool me. They have made me waste my time, suffer for nothing, speak of them when, in order to stop speaking, I should have spoken of me and me alone” (297). All the characters mentioned in the novel are in fact represented as potential projections of the narrating unnamable. There is thus a clear homology between the representation of the fictional worlds in *The Unnamable*, and most of the prose fiction from the trilogy onwards, on the one hand, and *Waiting for Godot*, as well as much of the theatre, on the other, in that the worlds are presented as potentially conjured up by a consciousness that is in the last resort out of reach, unknowable, ‘unnamable’.

One of the main differences is that in the later prose, it is often the ‘deviser’ who is central, whereas in the theatre, the devised world is shown on stage and the deviser is not always present and clear, even if in the later theatre this difference tends to disappear. To put it crudely, the Unnamable posits himself as the centre from which emanate the characters in the eponymous novel and in previous novels, whereas *Waiting for Godot* suggests, rather unobtrusively, that the characters of the play are emanations of an unspecified imagining

centre. As a consequence, it is possible to say that the Unnamable is for the most part *confronting* conditions which the story presents as major and seemingly inescapable premises of the world that the character inhabits, or is forced to inhabit. How these can be defined is open to interpretation, and there are at least several issues at stake: the impossibility of language to coincide with the situation it refers to; the rift between the conditions that the Unnamable is experiencing and the ideas the character holds about what existence might be or might have been; the gap between what the Unnamable knows and experiences and what others seem or pretend to know and experience. However dystopian these conditions are, it is clear the Unnamable is in part trying to grasp them, to deal with them, to present these as far as possible, and is commenting on them—and thus facing them more or less directly most of the time.

In *Waiting for Godot*, the situation appears fundamentally different. The characters in the text seem to be *evading* a confrontation with the conditions that nonetheless emerge in the play as major and seemingly inevitable conditions of the world they inhabit—or are forced to inhabit. They are, basically, primarily trying not to be confronted with what seems to be emerging as the premises of the world in which they live—reluctantly. In view of this difference between the prose fiction and the theatrical works, it is relatively easy to construe an opposition in which the ‘novels’ present a more basic, direct confrontation with what would appear to be the tenets of the Beckettian world than the theatre—or at least very markedly, than Beckett’s first performed play. *Happy Days* and *Play* (two stage plays written after Beckett had finished the original French text of the novel *How It Is*) would both seem to fit this marked opposition, even if in *Play*, the characters are to a large extent narrators of their stories. Truth versus untruth, authenticity versus unauthentic attitudes: this may seem a too stark way of putting the opposition, and one can find a host of counterexamples, but there is some ground to the contrast; and this may be one of the major reasons having prompted critics and the author alike to give precedence to Beckett’s narrative fiction. The contrast seems to bolster the idea that the theatre is in a way less essential than the prose fiction.¹⁰

However, it is important to distinguish between the presentation of the (fictional) universes the characters live in, and the effects of these presentations on the audience. There is no reason to suppose that it is impossible to defend

10 Drama may moreover have appeared secondary to Beckett and critics alike because theatre is presumed to be a social art: it is most often predominantly focused on interaction between characters in dialogue, and it is mostly made for performance in group settings. Beckett’s (early) conception of art as “excavatory, immersive, a contraction of the spirit, a descent” (1965, 65) seems to contrast with the presumed social orientation of theatre.

the position according to which the Unnamable is indeed engaged in a more direct encounter with the seemingly problematic world than the characters of *Waiting for Godot*; and Beckett seems (mostly) to have adhered to this view.¹¹ At the same time, there is also no reason to suppose that the effect on the audience of this direct encounter is more forceful than the evasive attitudes of the characters of the stage play. I do not wish to suggest that the evasive, skirting encounter in the theatre has proved *more* effective and explains the rather immediate and huge success of Beckett's first play; but I do wish to underline that the effect of a fictive world on the reader or spectator does not depend on the question whether the attitude of the protagonist(s) appears to be presented as a straight or on the contrary as an indirect way of dealing with the problems of the fictional worlds of the novel or the play. It is perhaps too facile to give other literary examples here, but since in the case of Beckett few critics have overtly contested the idea that evasive attitudes can be as effective in fictive worlds as direct confrontations, it may be useful to briefly mention just a few widely known cases of major, canonical works in the novel and theatre. Emma Bovary evades the axioms of the world she has to live in, and is mainly presented in the novel as someone who has based her too great expectations on false novels; her negative case has become one of the best known exemplars of the genre of the novel. King Oedipus—not a dreamer, but still a character who clings to his illusions—prefers not to see the truth about the catastrophic situation he has been manoeuvred in, until the end of the play, and chooses unseeing eyes once he knows the world he lives in. His tragedy has become one of the best known examples of the genre—just as Shakespeare's story of the mistaken, (self-)deceived, destitute King Lear, to which Jan Kott long ago compared Beckett's *Endgame*.

Vladimir and Estragon's mostly unseeing and deluded eyes, of which it is hard to say whether they are inevitably unseeing and (self-)deluded, and which paradoxically seem at times to be less sightless than they appear to be, can be viewed as reflecting the faces of some of the best-known characters of literature and theatre. A play often presented as a radical break with theatrical and literary traditions can also be regarded as firmly rooted in the history of fiction—and as a text that is on a par with the prose fiction.

There is another reason why Beckett's theatre, in as far as it can be conceived of as the projection of an imagining consciousness, is anchored in the history of fiction—and in this case of playwriting. There may indeed, in just a few

11 Steven Connor however presents *The Unnamable* and one of the later stage plays as homologous: "The monologue *Not I*, for example, may be seen as another attempt to dramatize the obstinate abstention from being that characterises the novel [The Unnamable]" (xxiii).

respects, be 'nothing really new' in *Waiting for Godot*—which doesn't mean in this case that it is less valuable than Beckett's (contemporaneous) prose, but that the play draws on a theatrical tradition which was developing since the beginning of the 20th century. In Ireland, when Yeats was transforming the tradition in theatre by using elements from Japanese Noh drama, and was purifying the stage by removing painted scenery and a multitude of props, while reintroducing verse, he also presented the action on stage as a vision. *At the Hawk's well* is probably Yeats' most often discussed play in relation to Beckett. It starts with one of the musicians saying:

I call to the eye of the mind
 A well long choked up and dry
 And boughs long stripped by the wind,
 And I call to the mind's eye
 Pallor of an ivory face,
 Its lofty dissolute air,
 A man climbing up to a place
 The salt sea wind has swept bare

4

"I call to the eye of the mind" is a clause Beckett would use in *Happy Days* (164)—in part as an accolade, in part derisively, in my view, since Winnie uses it to introduce a specific, sordid event from her former daily life, and not a lofty symbolic tale about a live-giving or life-taking well. But the fact that Beckett recirculated Yeats' opening line in a peculiar fashion should not hide that the stage as a vision of the 'mind's eye' typifies to a certain extent both Yeats' later drama and Beckett's theatre.

There are at the same time important differences in their use of the stage as the projection of a mind. Yeats designates the stage explicitly and from the start as a vision of the 'mind's eye', whereas in Beckett's plays this is mostly an implicit take, which the reader or spectator has to infer from the fictional world. Moreover, in Yeats, the characterisation of the stage as a mental space takes place on another level than that of the fictional world (in *At The Hawk's Well*, the musician is a performer who does not represent a character of the plot), whereas in Beckett there is in many cases no such reliable and stable entity able to parse mental and outer reality.

Another example of the 'interiority' of the stage—although for Beckett it is preferable to speak of the impossibility to distinguish between inner and outer reality—is August Strindberg.¹² Fifteen years before the premiere of

12 Strindberg has often been evoked in relation to Beckett—mostly *The Ghost Sonata*

At the Hawk's well, Strindberg wrote *A Dream Play*, which premiered in Stockholm in 1907. The play is an example of Strindberg's turn away from naturalistic drama. In the 'Reminder' to *A Dream Play*, Strindberg writes:

The characters split, double, multiply, evaporate, condense, disperse and converge. But one consciousness holds sway over them all, that of the dreamer; for him there are no secrets, no incongruities, no scruples and no law. He neither acquits nor condemns, but merely relates, and just as a dream is more often painful than happy, so a tone of melancholy and pity for all mortal beings runs through this uncertain tale.

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Here, again, the stage is turned into a mental space in which the spectator witnesses what the dreamer 'relates', as Strindberg has it. And here again, *Waiting for Godot* modifies the device that Strindberg calls the 'dream play'. In *A Dream Play*, two among the play's many characters are aware of the dreamlike quality of the action, and mention it explicitly. Strindberg sends the daughter of a god on earth to know human life and its pains, and she is cognizant of the phantasmagorical nature of the action—and also able to leave the world humans are living in. The 'Poet', who matches the daughter most closely, is also acutely aware of the—painful, nightmarish—dream. Even if these two characters partake in the fictional world, and are not external to it as the musicians in Yeats' *At The Hawk's Well* are, the description of the events of the play as a vision, the projection of a mind (whether this is the Poet's or not) is quite explicit in the text of the play—as the title of Strindberg's play also shows. This is not the case in *Waiting for Godot* (but does happen in some of Beckett's short later plays). It is clear, nevertheless, that Beckett's first performed play can be seen as 'a dream play' as defined in the quoted passage from Strindberg's reminder, including its lament-like tone. The text of Beckett's play indeed suggests that there might be 'one consciousness'; and it seems moreover permeated with melancholy and compassion for all living creatures.

In order to grasp the connections between *Waiting for Godot* and the prose fiction, whether or not in the context of a supposed hierarchy of the genres, it will not suffice to discuss just one single aspect of the play and the novels, as I tried to do in detail here. I have concentrated on this one topic because it

(already in the 1966 edition of *Waiting for Godot*, cxxvii). Duckworth does not mention that Beckett saw *The Ghost Sonata* directed by Roger Blin before inviting Blin to read and direct his early plays (Knowlson 348).

seems to me that other aspects have received more attention, even if this has not often led to a comparison of the theatre and the prose fiction that would allow to counter a presumed author-endorsed genre hierarchy. Metatheatre and metafiction for example have often been discussed in relation to Beckett—albeit not often in relation to each other. Moreover, the aporia of the last sentence of *The Unnamable*—the emblematic “I can’t go on, I’ll go on” (407)—openly echoes not only Vladimir’s “I can’t go on” from his previously quoted soliloquy, but also the end of the play: “Yes, let’s go. (*They do not move*)” (88). Considering these and other topics in detail might permit a more complete comparison between Beckett’s (early) theatre, especially the play that won him fame, and his prose fiction.

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