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Crossing the Borders of Language and Culture: Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*

ABSTRACT

The aim of the paper is to compare four versions of the text of *Waiting for Godot*: the French original, Beckett's own translation into English and two Polish renderings done by Julian Rogoziński and Antoni Libera. The article starts with a short discussion concerning rules governing the translation process and then its evaluation. While working on the transposition of the French original into English, Beckett introduced numerous changes, this being due to his sensitivity to the very quality of each of the languages and specific references characteristic of the two cultures. Antoni Libera, an expert in Beckett's oeuvre, argues that Beckett's translations should be more adequately described as second language versions and that the artist recommended further translations based on his two language versions. Libera himself followed this recommendation while translating Beckett's works into Polish. Upon publication, he provided illuminating notes, shedding light on the differences in Beckett's versions and providing critical insight into the texts. Julian Rogoziński, on the other hand, based his translation of *Waiting for Godot* only on the French original. This accounts for the fact that, at times, his rendering of the text lacks precision and may not even be quite understandable. Rogoziński's version is less satisfactory than that of Libera due to the fact that it was written earlier and by an older man, which at times results in the use of old-fashioned, outdated Polish diction and structures.

ABSTRACT

Hence, a paradox. On the one hand every signature aspires to be seen as the sign of absolute presence, to be untranslatable, while on the other it always reaches out for confirmation, for the other's countersignature. As Derrida puts it, "we must write, we must bring about new events with untranslatable marks—and this is the frantic call, the distress of a signature that is asking for a *yes* from the other, the pleading injunction for a counter-signature. . . ." (Lucy 167)

The aim of the paper is to discuss Samuel Beckett's activity as a self-translator as well as to analyze chosen fragments of two Polish translations of *Waiting for Godot* by Julian Rogoziński and Antoni Libera.

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When Samuel Beckett started writing for the stage, he did so in French and not in his mother tongue. His decision may have been due to the fact that the use of the still to some extent foreign language made him more sensitive to the choice of concrete expressions and structures specific for that language. Later, he translated his works into English. As time passed, more and more often would he write first in English and then become his self-translator. At the beginning of her article entitled "Samuel Beckett's Bilingualism," Ann Beer writes:

"Heavenly father, the creature is bilingual!" . . . exclaimed Belacqua, in Beckett's first collection of stories. The throwaway remark, directed towards a briefly appearing Scottish nurse, seems at first glance unimportant. Yet it stands as a prophetic exclamation about the creature's creator, Beckett himself. It also marks the only time in more than sixty years of publication that the word "bilingual" appears in his writing. The creature was bilingual, like Belacqua, who dreamed in French, and Beckett made them so. Bilingualism does much to distinguish this most distinct of artists. To have two tongues, two modes of speech, two ways of responding to the world, is to be necessarily outside the security of a unified single viewpoint. . . . Far from being a mere curiosity, bilingualism works at the heart of Beckett's aesthetic activity, releasing waves of innovative energy decade after decade. (209)

Some of the critics, though, interpret his decision to write in French as a sign of his break with Ireland and his becoming a part of the new, French reality. Ann Beer argues that the cycling tour to France and the time spent in *École Normale Supérieure* in Paris (1928–30)

were enough to confirm the love-affair with a language that lasted throughout Beckett's life. In both critical and imaginative writing, he seemed to grasp that the "old ego," both "minister of dullness" and "agent of security," . . . could be left behind, and the new ego welcomed,

through the shifts in consciousness and expression that an acquired language made possible. (211)

A similar opinion is voiced by other critics discussed by Morin: “Although writing in French was a natural development for a bilingual writer living in France, Beckett’s turn towards French has been depicted as a ‘contradiction,’ an ‘abandonment,’ a ‘betrayal’ and a form of ‘linguistic denial’” (Janvier 46; Chamberlain 17; McCormack 18; Kiberd 590; qtd. in Morin 55).

Herbert Blau, who often worked with Beckett, asked him about his use of two languages and thus recalls the occasion: “What enlivened and disturbed him most was my remark about the language of his dramas. I said that by writing in French he was evading some part of himself. (Pause.) He said yes, there were a few things about himself he didn’t like, that French had the right ‘weakening’ effect . . .” (qtd. in Bair 516). Referring to the above remarks, Bair states that “Blau was not the only one to comment on Beckett’s evasion of self; Pierre Schneider suggested that writing in French was not so much evasion as an attempt to state his deepest thoughts without actually confronting the inner sphere in which these thoughts were located” (516).

Whenever Beckett prepared the second language version, he paid meticulous attention to detail, introducing deletions, additions and changes, modelling the text according to the altered language and cultural tradition. Richard Seaver, who translated a number of books from French, recalls meeting Beckett while translating two of his early stories into English. The artist suggested, for instance, changing the word “dressed” into “clothed” because it sounded better and also recommended other modifications:

“In the next sentence,” he said, “you’re literally correct. In French I spelled it out, said ‘travelling expenses’ alright. But maybe we can make it a bit tighter here, just say something like ‘it was to get me going,’ or ‘it was to get started.’ Do you like either of them at all?” On we went, phrase by phrase, Beckett praising my translation as a prelude to shaping it to what he really wanted, reworking here a word, there an entire sentence, chipping away, tightening, shortening, always finding not only *le mot juste* but the *phrase juste* as well, exchanging the ordinary for the poetic, until the prose sang. (105)

The artist employed the same approach while self-translating. Antoni Libera, in his introduction to Beckett’s dramatic works, argues that even though Beckett himself referred to his second language texts as translations yet a more adequate word to use would be a language version. Furthermore, the playwright suggested that any further translations should be based on

his two original texts (Libera, “Wstęp” 6–7). Stan E. Gontarski, the editor of many of Samuel Beckett’s prose and dramatic writings, concedes:

The infinite or impossible or perpetual or incomplete or open text has been characteristic of Beckett’s work since *Watt*. . . . As a self translator, for example, Beckett has taken the creative process a step beyond original publication and transformed his texts, used opportunities of translation to revise, clarify and often simplify his texts, much to the frustration of literary critics who find that the insights drawn about the English texts may not always apply to the French texts, and *vice versa*. Beckett’s texts then exist in multiple versions even before the complications of performance are considered. (134)

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The alterations introduced by the playwright may be already noticed in his first drama, *En attendant Godot*. Written in French and premiered in Théâtre de Babylone in Paris in January 1953, the play was then translated by the playwright into English and successfully produced in England under the title *Waiting for Godot*. Being innovatory both in content and form, a specific use of language being one of its characteristic features, the play astonished readers, audiences and critics alike. Bair writes:

Ultimately, what is so striking about the play, and what must have been particularly arresting to the first French audience, is the language. Beckett was the first postwar playwright to write dialogue in everyday ordinary spoken French. It must have been a surprise for literate audiences to hear characters on the stage saying *merde* and trading insults with each other, things which were never done in the Comédie-Française. The language Beckett used in *Godot* is the language any group of *clochards* sitting on a bench or in a cafe might say to each other. The simplicity of speech is what the French heard in their everyday lives, but never noticed. (388)

Although the use of swearwords astonished the French audience, it caused even more problems with the Lord Chamberlain when the play was prepared for production in England.

[He] took offense at much of the language and insisted on significant changes before he would approve it. Beckett agreed to make some changes—“Fartov” became “Popov” and Mrs Gozzo had “warts” instead of “clap”—but there were several deletions, especially of the hanging-erection and the dropped pants, which were quite unacceptable to him. (Bair 445)¹

¹ The scene with the falling pants was of vital importance for Beckett. When Roger Blin directed the production in Paris, Latour, the actor playing the part of Estragon,

At first it seemed that the English production of the play would not take place as Beckett did not seem to be willing to introduce the required changes:

Samuel Beckett informed Rosset (21 April 1954) that the incriminations were so preposterous that the whole thing was off. Twelve passages were listed for omission, some of which Beckett (reluctantly) agreed to amend, but also passages vital to the play (the opening of Lucky's tirade). (Ackerley and Gontarski 88)

However, when the play was produced in 1955, in Dublin, there was no censorship from the Lord Chamberlain,²

all the offending passages were retained, just as Beckett had written them, causing the critic of the *Irish Evening Herald* to comment that "Some of the grosser crudities, which were omitted or glossed over in London, were included here. They add nothing to the atmosphere, and are merely an attempt to out-Joyce the Joyce of *Ulysses*." (Bair 455)

Transforming the drama into English, while preserving the plainness of the language and its lower class status, Beckett introduced a number of changes reflecting his awareness of the cultural differences between the two countries. The first group of these comprises the altered names of places and other language specific allusions. And so, for instance, while speaking about his pipe in the French version, Pozzo mentions his "Abdullah" (*En attendant* 48), whereas in the English version he refers to his "Kapp and Paterson" (*Waiting* 35). When asked about his name by Pozzo, Estragon in the French answers "Catulle" (*En attendant* 51), whereas in English "Adam" (*Waiting* 51). In Lucky's speech (*En attendant* 59–62 and *Waiting* 42–45) many changes have been introduced and so the names of "Poinçon and Wattman" have become "Puncher and Whattman." It is worth noticing that the Eng-

dropped his trousers only as far as his hips which greatly irritated Beckett. On having learnt about it, he wrote a letter to the director demanding they should fall completely down. He ended the letter with the sentence: "That might seem stupid to you but for me it's capital" (qtd. in Bair 429).

² There was censorship in Ireland, though, under the Act of 16th July 1929, a bill meant to control and suppress "obscene," as it called them yet never precisely defined, publications in Ireland. Beckett strongly criticized the Act in his article "Censorship in the Saorstat," written in 1934 and published, with alterations made by the author, in 1935. The censorship in Ireland was strictly connected with conservatism and matters of Catholic orthodoxy. According to Morin, Beckett's attitude towards censorship "implicated him in ferocious disputes, the most famous of which involved England's Lord Chamberlain, to whom he referred as 'the Lord Chamberpot'" (Harmon 24, qtd. in Morin 43).

lish word “puncher” is an equivalent of “poinçon” (one who hits, beats or strikes), whereas Wattman in English evokes correlation with “what man” or “what’s his name.” As McMillan and Knowlson argue, “there are other associations, too: ‘Wattman,’ for instance, which puns on ‘What,’ as in the name *Watt*, suggesting a questioner or a researcher” (133). In the French original, the notion associated with telling names is further underlined by the fact that it exists if we take into consideration two languages, in English, the hidden connotations are restricted to one language only. The names “Testew and Cunard” (Testew, again telling because it contains the word “test”) have replaced “Testew et Conard,” and the French Academy “de Berne-en-Bresse” has changed into “Essy-in-Possy.” In the two language versions the names of “Fartov” and “Belcher” appear, containing associations connected with the English verbs “to fart” and “to belch,” referring to two instances involving extreme gaseous expulsions. The French place names “Seine Seine-et-Oise Seine-et-Marne Marne-et-Oise” have been replaced by “Fekham Peckham Fulham Clapham” (three of them are districts in London, while the fourth, “Fekham” is a word invented by Beckett by analogy to the sound quality of the other names), the specific sound quality of the original being preserved but extra vulgar associations added. “Voltaire” is changed to “Bishop Berkeley” and “Normandie” gives way to “Connemara,” the western region of Galway in Ireland. Finally, the names of “Steinweg” and “Peterman” (the latter spelled with double “n” in the French version) crown the numerous instances of multi-lingual word play. McMillan and Knowlson point out:

A *peterman* is English underworld slang for a *cracksman*. But these names actually derive from the German and Greek etymological roots for *stone* i.e. literally “Stoneroad” and “Rockman”: “It is all about the world of stones,” commented Beckett on Lucky’s monologue. *Stein* = *Stone* (German); *Peter/petros* = stone (Greek). But the French *péter*, perhaps hardly coincidentally, means *to fart* and “la pétomane,” sounding very much like “Peterman,” was the French music-hall star who used to fart to musical tunes. (136)

The multilingual associations become the basis for the choice of names of the four main characters in the play. The origin of these names is Slavic (Vladimir), French (Estragon), English (Lucky) and Italian (Pozzo), and thus the situation presented in the play acquires a universal meaning: “Waiting is the fate of all mankind,” as Hassan argues (178). Furthermore, the nicknames of the two tramps, Didi and Gogo, symbolically indicate Vladimir being associated with mind and thought (from French *dire*) while Estragon’s physicality is stressed by the original meaning of the verb “go”: after all, it is he who utters the often repeated phrase “Let’s go.”

The question of decoding the identity of Godot has for years bothered the Beckett critics and admirers.³ In the notes to his translation of the drama, Libera argues that the name Godot is a telling one, yet he also maintains that it can only be decoded by a linguist who will notice the English word denoting deity (God) being followed by the French “ot” used in diminutives in that language. At the same time, however, he does not hesitate to indicate the French and English origin of the nicknames Didi and Gogo (“Przypisy” 610).⁴ When asked about the identity of Godot, Beckett answered: “If I knew who Godot was, I would have said so in the play.”⁵ He rejected the religious interpretation, saying: “If Godot were God, I would have called him that”⁶ and “Christianity is mythology with which I am perfectly familiar, and so I use it. But not in this case.”⁷ Bair writes that “When Roger Blin asked him who or what Godot stood for, Beckett replied that it suggested itself to him by the slang word for boot in French, *godillot*, *godasse* because feet play such a prominent role in the play. This is the explanation he has given most often” (382). Knowlson writes that Beckett “told Woodhorpe that he regretted calling the absent character Godot, because of all the theories involving God to which this has given rise” (699, note 166). Yet Beckett admitted on another occasion:

It would be fatuous of me to pretend that I am not aware of the meanings attached to the word “Godot,” and the opinion of many that it means “God.” But you must remember—I wrote the play in French, and if I did have that meaning in my mind, it was somewhere in my unconscious and I was not overtly aware of it. (qtd. in Bair 557)

This remark is interesting, especially, as Vivian Mercier argues, if one remembers that “Beckett has often stressed the strong unconscious impulses that partly control his writing; he has even spoken of being in a ‘trance’ when he writes” (87). Mary Bryden, who has written a book *Samuel Beckett and the Idea of God*, argues in the “Introduction”:

... the hypothesized God who emerges from Beckett’s texts is one who is both cursed for his perverse absence and cursed for his surveillant presence. He is by turns dismissed, satirized, or ignored, but he, and his tortured son, are never definitely discarded. If God is not apprehended

³ For the discussion of a number of different interpretations see: Uchman 1984.

⁴ Libera provides detailed notes to his translation, supplying discussions about the differences between the two language versions as well as interesting critical insights into Beckett’s dramas.

⁵ Samuel Beckett to Alan Schneider and many others (Bair 382).

⁶ Samuel Beckett to Harold Hobson (Bair 382–83).

⁷ Samuel Beckett, November 17, 1971 (Bair 186).

in the here-and-now, there is nevertheless a perceived need, a potential opening, for a salvific function which a Deity could fulfil. (2)

The second group of alterations introduced by Beckett, while transposing the original into the English, is connected with the cultural status of the drama or, to be more specific, with the literary intertextual references which are added in the English version. Whereas the aforementioned alterations are mainly examples of a translation which changes the unfamiliar elements of the source text into those familiar for the target recipient, as defined by Romy Heylen, the following cases may be treated as representative of the third option mentioned by him, which is characterized by a balance between the source and target cultural elements.⁸ In the notes accompanying his translation, Libera points out that there are two additions in the English version: these sentences are absent in the French original. The first of these is the one uttered by Vladimir “Hope deferred maketh the something quick, who said that?” (10). Libera argues that the sentence is an incomplete quotation of Solomon’s parable (“Przypisy” 610). The second intertextual reference is, again, introduced by Vladimir, who, on being asked by Estragon what he is doing, says: “Pale for weariness” and then, answering the uncomprehending Estragon, adds: “Of climbing heaven and gazing on the likes of us” (*Waiting* 52). Libera argues that the source of this exchange is to be found in P. B. Shelley’s poem “To the Moon” (“Przypisy” 618). However, Libera does not notice one more intertextual reference included in the English version. In the second act, after the entrance of Lucky and Pozzo and their falling down, when Pozzo is crying for help, Vladimir utters quite a lengthy monologue:

Let us not waste time in idle discourse! (*Pause. Vehemently.*) Let us do something, while we have the chance! It is not every day that we are needed. Not indeed that we personally are needed. Others would meet the case equally well, if not better. To all mankind they were addressed,

⁸ Similarly, when in 1967 Beckett went to Berlin to direct a production of *Endgame*, knowing German fluently, he collaborated on the German translation. Cronin remarks: “The changes to the German text suggest both a more adequate knowledge of that language and long thought about the text he had written. Thus when Clov says that the world outside is ‘kaput,’ meaning broken or out of order, he was now made to say that it is ‘aus,’ which has the meaning of expended or extinguished. The line ‘Das Spass is zu Ende,’ meaning ‘the fun is over,’ was changed to ‘Die Fest ist jetzt zu Ende,’ which is a deliberate echo of Friedrich Schlegel’s well-known translation of the line from *The Tempest*, ‘Our revels are now ended’” (555–56). The case of the German corrections of the original text makes it quite clear that Beckett paid meticulous attention to detail and also, while crossing language and cultural borders, not only demonstrated his extreme erudition but also skilfully employed intertextual references to evoke the desired associations and make his meaning more explicit.

those cries for help still ringing in our ears! But at this place, at this moment of time, all mankind is us, whether we like it or not. Let us make most of it, before it is too late! Let us represent worthily for once the foul brood to which a cruel fate has consigned us! What do you say? (*Estragon says nothing.*) It is true that when with folded arms we weigh the pros and cons we are no less a credit to our species. The tiger bounds to the help of his congeners without the least reflection, or else he slinks away into the depths of the thickets. But that is not the question. What are we doing here, that's the question. And we are blessed in this, that we happen to know the answer. Yes, in this immense confusion one thing alone is clear. We are waiting for Godot to come— (*Waiting* 79–80)

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In the French version, the passage “Mais la question n'est pas là. Que faisons-nous ici, voilà ce qu'il faut se demander. Nous avons la chance de le savoir” (*En attendant* 112) contains only the negation of Hamlet's question. In the English version, it is followed by a direct quotation from the great tragedy. The Polish renderings of the lines are as follows: Rogoziński: “Ale nie o to chodzi. Trzeba się zastanowić nad tym, co tutaj robimy. Teraz mamy sposobność się dowiedzieć” (106) and Libera: “Ale nie w tym rzecz. Rzecz w tym, co tutaj robimy. I oto mamy szansę dowiedzieć się tego” (*Czekając* 114). Libera preserves the repetition present in the English version, yet it is not the repetition of Hamlet's famous sentence. Both translators, too, accentuate the existence of the chance of getting to know the answer. The English version, however, emphasizes the fact that they are already in the know. Rogoziński based his translation on the French version; Libera, however, stresses that, according to the will of Beckett, he has based his translation on the playwright's two versions (“Wstęp” 9). It is a pity that he has not also noticed the Shakespearean intertextual reference because it adds a lot to the meaning of the speech and it seems unquestionable that, faced with the English version, many readers or viewers of the drama will recognize the quotation coming from the Bard's famous tragedy.

In his soliloquy, Hamlet ponders on the meaning and sense of human existence. Human beings have a choice left: they can either commit suicide or go on living and suffering. Vladimir's question and answer also refer to the same dilemma. For him, however, there is no choice left. The only thing people can do is to wait for Godot to come. Living, then, means waiting. Wallace Fowlie has written that *Waiting for Godot* has given a phrase to the French language: “j'attends Godot,” which means that what is going on now will continue to go on for a great unspecified length of time. As he writes: “J'attends Godot' is really equivalent to saying 'That's what it means to keep living'” (210). Many critics have agreed that waiting as presented in the play is equivalent to living (Cavell 150, Esslin 49, Hinchliffe

150, Mayoux 151). Godot's coming may give an end to this waiting but also to living. The only possibility of finishing waiting is to meet Godot, who may symbolically denote death. Thus Godot, the terminus of waiting, may represent death as the only way out of waiting, the inherent element of life. Obviously it must be stressed that this is only one way of interpreting this complex symbol. McMillan and Knowlson write:

At all productions he [Beckett] insisted that he does not know who Godot is and maintained that the play "strives at all costs to avoid definition." He encouraged the American director Alan Schneider's list of over a hundred suggestions as to who or what Godot might be. From the beginning, his textual revisions worked to delete passages that seemed to limit interpretation and, instead, sought to expand the identity of Godot. (87)

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Vladimir's speech is reminiscent of Hamlet's soliloquy not only on the account of the meaning of human existence but also because of the appearance of two key ideas: life and death. Yet, whereas in Hamlet's speech life is contrasted with death, in Vladimir's life leads to death (which will replace it). There is yet another similarity between these two monologues: Hamlet does not think only about himself but extends the meaning of his soliloquy to all human beings. The same can be said about Vladimir's speech. He implies the universality of meaning directly at its beginning: "all mankind is us." Thus, they are meant not to be individuals only, but they also represent the whole of mankind. Later on, he remarks: "We are not saints, but we have kept our appointment. How many people can boast as much?" and Estragon answers: "Billions" (*Waiting* 80). The destiny of waiting is not their lot only—billions of people have lived their lives, waiting for their death to come. The reference to Hamlet's soliloquy adds to the universal status of the situation depicted and, therefore, it is a pity that it is missing in both Polish translations.

The universal quality of the tramps' situation is also discernible in the variations of the title Beckett contemplated. Dougal McMillan and James Knowlson write:

In both the English and German texts, waiting itself is the subject of the title, with those who wait and one awaited secondary. An abandoned early title for the French original was simply *En attendant* [*Waiting*]. While cooperating with Elmar Tophoven on the first German translation, Beckett considered using as the title *Wir warten auf Godot* [*We're waiting for Godot*], picking up the repeated phrase in the text and universalizing the predicament of the play. But he decided on *Warten auf Godot* in order to retain waiting as the central focus of the title. (87)

The meticulous attention to detail and precision in the use of language which characterize Beckett's original pieces and their rendering in the second language by the playwright are a challenge to those trying to convert them into yet another language. A number of translators have undertaken this task, Antoni Libera undoubtedly being the most successful. He is not only familiar with the great artist's output which finds expression in his numerous critical insights, but he is also sensitive to even the minutest nuances of Beckett's writing, and, being a theatre practitioner, of the need to achieve the stageability necessary for a dramatic text. He has written an article devoted to the problems he encountered while translating just one of Beckett's seemingly simple yet, in reality, very complex sentences: "Birth was the death of him." Being aware of the fact that "language functions not only on the level of semantics and semiotics but also on that of articulation and phonetics," he finally arrived at a satisfactory solution: "Urodził się i to go zgubiło" (Libera, "Jak przetłumaczyć" 29).

Before comparing the two renderings of *Waiting for Godot* in Polish it seems justified to mention a few details concerning the two translators. First of all, Rogoziński was born in 1912, so 37 years before Libera, which may explain his slightly linguistically outdated rendering of the text. Secondly, he translated only from French and thus, unlike Libera, did not use Beckett's two authorial versions. Thirdly, being a translator of literature and not, unlike Libera again, a man of the theatre, he probably was not aware of the concrete demands concerning translating drama. Last but not least, he was a translator of Beckett and not a critical expert of his output.

The first passage to be discussed is interesting for two reasons—the differences introduced by Beckett in the English text and the solutions to the problem provided by the translators. The scene under scrutiny is the one concerning Pozzo's speech about the description of night and the sky and his expectations connected with the appreciation of his performance as a gifted showman. In the French original, Vladimir says "Oh, très bien, tout à fait bien" while Estragon: "(*accent anglais*)—Oh, très bon, très très très bon" (*En attendant* 53). In the English version, Vladimir says "Oh very good, very very good" and Estragon "Oh tray bong, tray tray tray bong" (*Waiting* 38). Whereas in the French version the French words are spoken with an English accent, in the English one the words spoken by Estragon are French, even though their spelling in the published version is English. Harvey has thus commented on the scene: "This is neither an interest in local color nor merely an easy way to get a laugh from the audience. It is rather a means of calling into question the reality of language" (147). Rogoziński closely follows the French version: "VLADIMIR Ależ jak najlepiej, doprawdy jak najlepiej. . . . ESTRAGON *akcentem angielskim* Och! Bardzo dobrze, bardzo, bardzo dobrze" (48). Libera, on the other hand,

tries to achieve the effect of the second, English version by mixing English and German words: “VLADIMIR Ach, bardzo dobrze, bardzo dobrze. . . . ESTRAGON O, wery gut, wery wery gut” (*Czekając* 65). It seems that Beckett would have liked Libera’s version more for, when he directed *Waiting for Godot* in the Schiller-Theater in Berlin in 1975, he preserved the English version, cutting, however, one of Estragon’s three “trays” in succession and having two, instead (*Theatre Notebook* 36). This change, by the way, indicates Beckett’s meticulous attention to detail which found its expression in the alterations introduced in the text during successive productions of the play which he co-directed.

Pozzo’s outburst concerning time, finishing with the sentence: “They give birth astride of a grave, the light gleams an instant, then it’s night once more” (*Waiting* 89) is paraphrased later on by Vladimir: “Astride of a grave and a difficult birth. Down in the hole, lingeringly, the grave-digger puts on the forceps” (*Waiting* 90–91).⁹ Rogoziński translates these two fragments in the following way: “Baby rodzą okrakiem na grobie, słońce świeci tylko chwilę, a potem noc, znów noc” (123) and “Okrakiem na grobie i trudny poród. Rozmarzony grabarz wyciąga ręce z głębi dołu i nakłada okowy” (125). Libera provides another rendering of the text: “One rodzą okrakiem na grobie, światło świeci przez chwilę, a potem znów noc, znów noc.” (*Czekając* 126) and “Okrakiem na grobie i trudny poród. Grabarz z głębi dołu zakłada opieszale kleszcze” (*Czekając* 127). What Rogoziński misses in his translation is that, being equipped with forceps, the gravedigger simultaneously plays the role of a midwife—the birth and death are intrinsically bound, this being a *leitmotif* of Beckett’s entire *oeuvre*.

Ruby Cohn recalls a meeting with Beckett in 1968 when, as she writes,

over a glass of wine in a Paris café, I asked whether he had nothing new for the stage. He answered almost angrily: “New? What could be new? Man is born—vagitus. Then he breathes for a few seconds, before the death rattle intervenes.” I may not be quoting Beckett’s exact words, but I remember “vagitus” because it was a new word for me—Latin for crying or squealing. Pushing aside our wine glasses, Beckett noted on the paper table-cover the timing for his 35-minute play *Breath*. (129)

The play was written in English in 1969 and dispenses altogether with actors and words, being an example of the most minimalistic piece of theatre imaginable, fully justifying Tom Stoppard’s opinions: “Certain people like Beckett and Pinter have re-defined the minima of theatrical

⁹ In the French original: “Elles accouchent à cheval sur une tombe, le jour brille un instant, puis c’est la nuit à nouveau” and “À cheval sur une tombe est une naissance difficile. Du fond du trou, rêveusement, le fossoyeur applique ses fers” (*En attendant* 126 and 128).

experience" (Taylor 27), "The early plays of Beckett are significant for me in that they didn't rely on elaborate theatrical paraphernalia. They redefined minimums, they show us how much can be done with little" (Maves 101) and "But it [*Waiting for Godot*] really redefined the minima of theatrical experience. Up to then you had to have X; suddenly you had X minus one" (Hunter 111). Despite the fact that it has been discussed as a mere joke on Beckett's part (Fletcher 117), it seems this was not the artist's aim, even though it is difficult to treat in a standard way a piece that is so short. Within this limited period of time, roughly equivalent to a single breath (as the title indicates), Beckett telescopes an entire life. The raising and lowering of the curtain establish the temporal limits of the drama, as well as human existence, as Beckett perceives it. The piece is the playwright's comment on man's condition: a stage empty of everything except a little rubbish, a dim light never intensifying to real brightness, a faint birth cry, a single breath in and out, a second cry, then silence. Silence, as a life-time has left no trace in eternity. No matter how long, because of suffering, life may seem to Beckett's characters and people in general, to be measured in terms of eternity as just an instant. Beckett stressed that it is "Important that two cries be identical" ("Breath" 211): the end of the play (and of human life) is the same as the beginning, the short period between the natal and death cries, both of them identical, is a mere "breath," an instant as compared to the eternity of non-existence or the duration of the macrocosm. The end of human life is accompanied by the same attributes of light and sound as the beginning: a circle has been completed.

There are a number of other instances when Rogoziński seems unable to grasp the sense of the original, while Libera manages to do so. It might be supposed, though, that, having access to both the French and English version, the latter was at an advantage. An example of this kind is provided in the scene when Pozzo comments on the constant quantity of the tears of the world:

POZZO. Il ne pleure plus. (*A Estragon.*) Vous l'avez remplacé, en quelque sorte. (*Rêveusement.*) Les larmes du monde sont immuables. Pour chacun qui se met à pleurer, quelque part un autre s'arrête (*En attendant* 44)

POZZO: He's stopped crying. (*To Estragon.*) You have replaced him as it were. (*Lyrically.*) The tears of the world are a constant quantity. For each one who begins to weep, somewhere else another stops. (*Waiting* 33)

POZZO Już nie płacze. (*do Estragona*) Zastąpił go pan w pewnym sensie. (*rozmarza się*) Łzy ludzkie działają niezmiennie. Kiedy ktoś zapłacze, gdzie indziej zawsze ktoś płakać przestanie. (Rogoziński 41)

POZZO Już nie płacze. (*Do Estragona*) W pewnym sensie pan go zastąpił. (*Lirycznie*) Łez na świecie zawsze jest tyle samo. Gdy jeden przestaje płakać, drugi gdzie indziej zaczyna. (Libera, *Czekając* 58)

There seems to be no justification whatsoever for Rogoziński's sentence "Łzy ludzkie działają niezmiennie" because, firstly, no such idea is expressed in Beckett's text and, secondly, such a translation does not render the original idea that there is a balance of happiness and sadness in the world. It is true, however, that "unchanging," "immutable" and "unalterable" are the English equivalents of the French word which Beckett then changed while making his translation into English. In this case, the consulting of Beckett's two language versions is very helpful. There is no reason, either, in the scene when Pozzo is looking for his watch, for Rogoziński to introduce the diminutives contained in this sentence: "Zegareczek dwukopertowy, proszę panów, z sekundnikiem" (Rogoziński 60). Libera finds a much better solution: "Autentyczna cebula, panowie, z sekundnikiem" (Libera, *Czekając* 74).

Apart from the aforementioned drawbacks of Rogoziński's translation, one more should be added. It must be stressed, however, that its shortcomings result less from the translator's inefficiency than from the passage of time and the changes its flow has brought to the Polish language. Rogoziński's sentences like "Rad jestem, że znów cię widzę. Myślałem, żeś odszedł już na dobre" (7), "Zawsześ do tego pierwszy, żeby się zwątpienie" (15) or "No tom sobie znów spoczął" (46) seem old fashioned if not even archaic. Being an experienced translator, however, Rogoziński should have realized that the use of outdated phrases and structures while translating Beckett, whose writing is characterized by simplicity and modernity, is a mistake. The difference in the quality of the two translations has been noticed by those responsible for producing Beckett's plays, and thus the one most often chosen is that of Antoni Libera. A comparison of the four texts makes it quite clear that after Beckett had written the original text in which he brought about "new events with untranslatable marks," he then transposed it into French and gave his counter-signature to the second language version. The two Polish translators of the play later on added their counter-signatures.

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