

# Talking Drama



# Talking Drama

Edited by

Judith Roof

**CAMBRIDGE  
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**P U B L I S H I N G**

Talking Drama, Edited by Judith Roof

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## INTRODUCTION

### TALKING DRAMA

The essays in this collection ask what the relation is between drama and its critics. In so far as we conceive of drama and theatre as arising from and providing some sense of social ritual and comment, drama is itself a critical genre, showing up the foibles and problems of human existence as well as the general hubris and errors of society. In different eras and cultures, drama has served as a coded commentary on government (Shakespeare, Racine), satire of class pretensions (Molière, Sheridan), revealer of social hypocrisies (Ibsen, Shaw, Ionesco), explicit political critique (Brecht, Shepard, Pinter, Churchill), and a persistent questioning of the meaning of existence (O'Neill, Beckett). Although its social force and cultural position have changed, and although other media such as cinema, television, and the internet have provided additional outlets for performance, the live theatre, as several contributors insist, still functions as a viable and influential vector of social and political critique.

As the essays in the first section of this collection show, drama is both critical and self-critical. Most plays offer some form of social, moral, topical, historical, or even personal critique. Like any fictional representation, drama presents events with multiple meanings and interpretations. It can, thus, critique contemporary political abuses by recourse, for example, to a historical situation, make a general statement about class or gender issues through the illustration of a single family, travesty social conventions through comic characters, and present a satirical view of almost anything.

Drama's criticism, is however, expressed alongside its self-criticism. Using such metatheatrical gambits as plays within plays, characters who watch other characters, characters feigning roles and personalities, and even the overt inclusion of characters who are critics, plays are inevitably self-reflective, commenting both on themselves and on the art of theatre generally. Following an Oedipal pattern, the coming-to-knowledge trajectory of many plays constitutes a corrective act of self-criticism. The overt theatricality of many other plays and performances supplies an inherent comment on theatre's mediums.

Like other literary genres, though unlike them in the unfixedity of its manifestations, drama can offer social, political, and existential critiques because it is, as Craig Owens notes, “bracketed,” presenting recognizable characters, relations, plots, and emotions that are yet not quite of the everyday world. Situating itself as fiction, no matter how realistic the staging, gives drama license to comment on current events; fiction is the privilege of the genre and one borrowed by film and television satire. As a potentially public display, drama is communal; and its comment becomes the nexus of an extended commentary by its audience as a part of the performance situation itself. The economic forms of drama’s presentation provide conventional shorthands for character types and situations so that although a play’s critique is topical within its contemporaneous context, it also speaks beyond its age. In this way drama is both a creature of history and transhistorical. Present-day viewers can still enjoy a play by Sophocles or Shakespeare and understand some of its critique without knowing much about the original conditions of its writing and production. Drama exceeds its context. Its commentary on life and the theatre itself extends beyond its immediate circumstances.

While plays themselves offer social, political, and aesthetic commentary, drama also spurs additional, more anacritic modes of criticism. Even as dramatic texts are self-critical, other kinds of critics take on the plays, their performances, and the ideas and issues plays present. Just as plays produce the seeds of their own critique, so they also spur critique of their aesthetics, the artistry of their performance, and the ideas and conflicts they illustrate. Critics who review play performances are as much an intrinsic part of theatrical events as the audience and the plays themselves. Public review is so necessary to drama that plays address reviewers in a constant conversation about what might constitute good theatre. And drama critics can often make or break plays. Critics, as Jamie Andrews, Daniel Walker, and Ann C. Hall show in their essays, can shape the reception of performances and influence the reputations of playwrights. They also, as Ann Hall argues, can abet the introduction of unfamiliar forms and material. The criticism of reviewers is descriptive and evaluative; it is attached to plays and performances as their public corollary and as the outline for their discussion.

This public form of review criticism exists alongside academic criticism, which, in taking dramatic texts and performances as the objects of interpretation, asks an entirely different set of questions for a different audience. But even this audience, as Craig Owens notes, is not a unified entity, but is instead split across academic departments, fields and disciplines, each of which asks its own questions within its own, often

contested sets of assumptions. Literary scholars may interpret plays in relation to themselves and with attention to their aesthetic operations. Critics more interested in authors' careers may try to locate specific works within a playwright's developmental or thematic trajectory. Theatre historians may read plays in relation to the facts of their productions or in the environment of contemporaneous plays. New Historicist critics may ask how the larger conditions of a play's cultural context help create the play's concerns and aesthetics or account for its appearance in the form it may take. Critics adopting particularly thematic or political approaches may examine drama's gender, race, class, ethnic, religious, philosophical, ethical, and sexual representations. Scholars of performance studies may consider the ritual aspects of a performance, its contexts, and its communal functions.

All of these approaches share a similar dilemma. As Owens points out, there is no single object of study. Do academic critics focus on a dramatic text, a single performance, a potential performance, a theory of drama? Is the study of drama and theatre about texts, methods, performances, theatrical apparatus, theatrical effects, the culture surrounding and engendering theatres, or all of these? Where is the text in performance art or at a Happening or in guerilla theatre? How does one account for the evanescent character of a single performance or the feedback phenomena that may occur in one performance and not another? Should the study of drama be focused on its long tradition from the Greeks to the present or should it focus on its series of innovations? Is theatre always about the old or about the present or both at the same time, even in revivals of works from other centuries?

Drama in its various guises as theatre, play text, performance, and history addresses all of these questions; and drama critics elicit all of these methods. Criticism may be evaluative or analytical, interpretive or historicist; but most important, drama elicits an attention, a participation and engagement in the communal activity it hosts. The idea that drama contains these many contradictions makes any single answer impossible. At the same time, any universal approach—any posing of questions about drama that endeavors to produce a complete, wholistic, masterful account—may miss the point, as drama is never finished. The issue may be not that criticism's job is to account wholly for drama, but that theatre never stops raising questions that critics can never stop answering as an intrinsic part of theatre itself.

The question of the critic and drama arises at this point in time for several, linked reasons. First, in competition with many other media forms, live theatre is losing its audience. This is not a new phenomenon,

but rather a long decline exacerbated by the appearance of yet more performance outlets on the internet, available and cheap digital technologies, and free modes of distribution. Second, the general public, at least in the United States, has increasingly less background in the traditions of western literature, which might at another time in history impelled some to seek out and enjoy theatre.<sup>1</sup> Less dramatic literature is taught in secondary schools and universities, as fewer teachers are prepared for the special challenges of teaching dramatic texts. Although live theatre is widely available in many urban areas through community theatre groups and visiting troupes, audiences need to have some knowledge about cultural traditions and innovations (or some thesbian ambition themselves) as an incitement to theatre-going. Third, it is expensive to attend professional productions in their regular venues. Finally, the kinds of sophisticated critical reasoning many innovative plays require make them seem to be more work than pleasure for untrained audiences. Thought can be a painful thing.

Understanding critical activity as generated within and by plays as an intrinsic part of their text and experience also suggests that criticism itself is less a secondary than a central activity in theatre. Just as the processes of interpreting, designing, directing, and performing in a play all require the kinds of analytical activities inherent to criticism, so does the discussion and opinion a production incites belong to a play's experience. Plays and theatre productions never exist in isolation. Instead, as Lance Norman, Stephen Watt, and Craig Owens observe, theatre always exists intertextually--within a long tradition of previous productions, criticism, and other comparable plays. Thus, the critical activity inherent to theatre and drama is inseparable from theatre's process as an inevitably intertextual, historical, innovative, and present event. Because any theatre production occurs in the present even if the play and its productions have history of other contexts, criticism, too, negotiates this present with the past, where neither one can offer any species of totalizing account.

The essays in this collection explore two broad facets of critical activity in and around drama and the theatre. The first section, "The Critic in Play" explores the ways in which drama is self-critical and serves as a mode of cultural critique. The second section, "The Play of Critics," considers both what might constitute a contemporary critical method for drama/theatre and the ways theatre critics have influenced and continue to figure as intrinsic parts of theatre's culture. The collection ends with a conversation among the contributors focusing on the fault lines that become apparent in the essays: the problem of innovation, the loss of

interest in drama, and a question about the relations among history, memory, and theatre.

Katherine H. Burkman's "Godot As Critic" begins the collection with a consideration of the multiply mirroring critic/play relationships in Samuel Beckett's three major plays, *Waiting for Godot*, *Endgame*, and *Happy Days*. As she describes it in the critics' conversation in Chapter 11, "the characters in the plays are the critic/interpreters of their own play and of the life it reflects. Metatheatrical becomes metacritical and the playwright becomes his own critic, also critical of his or her critics that he or she has created." Showing the ways the plays' characters are simultaneously actors and critics, players and living the experiences of the plays, Burkman suggests that criticism is as intrinsic to the Beckettian stage as metaphysics or the nitty-gritty of existence. The characters, she points out, shift in and out of a critical mode, gauging the quality of everything from the tint of the evening light to the merits of the chronicle one tells to the actions of a burrowing partner. The plays also push the audience to become critics themselves as well as objects of the plays' criticism. In the end, Beckett's plays not only "hold the mirror up to nature," the plays have "human nature hold a mirror up to the plays" (12). We are all, the plays imply, critics, players, and audience to one another.

My paper, "Everybody's a Critic," also examines the ways criticism is intrinsic to a theatre defined as a perpetually open intersubjective relationship. Deploying Michel Serres' notion of the parasite as figuring the ways intersubjective relations "are always open to yet another subject." (23), this paper looks at how such explicitly metatheatrical plays as *Hamlet*, *The Rehearsal*, *The Critic*, *The Real Inspector Hound*, and *Catastrophe* demonstrate the many ways plays accomplish their own critique, a process which extends outward from frame to theatrical frame to include the audience. The idea that plays contain their own critique also suggests that modes of criticism that ignore the play itself in favor of context or performance facts sidestep the character of the theatre as primarily a site of engagement. Critics, thus, must be parasites and give into plays before they try to circumscribe them.

Lance Norman's essay envisions theatre as always constituting its own critic, where theatricality itself resides in a confrontation with memory. Focusing on Henrik Ibsen's *Hedda Gabler*, "The Ghost of Hedda's Brain and the Aesthetics of Metatheatrical Haunting," deploys the figure of "ghosting" as a theatrical mechanism that confronts both history and memory, making plays intrinsically parts of an always-extending intertextuality with themselves and with the history of western theatre. "The present," Norman notes, "attempts to critique past dramatic

structures but more often than not ends up replicating their forms, thereby becoming victim of its own critique" (42). Each play and performance simultaneously represses, confronts, and critiques what it carries from the past, in the process leaving traces of its own contribution. Contrasting stage theatricality with more performative genres such as Allan Kaprow's "Happenings," Norman suggests that the critical traces left by plays are essential to what theatre is. No matter how many times a play is rewritten or redesigned, it can never obliterate the traces of ghosted memories, which come to function as a sustained criticism which is the essence of the theatrical. In the end, Norman concludes, theatre is a "web of intertextuality" encompassing performances past and potential (41).

Terry Hartnett's essay, "Cowboy Consensus or How We Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the War on Terror: Sam Shepard's *Kicking a Dead Horse*," looks at the ways Sam Shepard's elaborate critique of Bush's post-9/11 policies in *Kicking a Dead Horse* constitutes sophisticated political, cultural, and ideological commentary. Mapping the derivation of the American myth of the west, Hartnett suggests that Shepard's plays *True West* and *Kicking a Dead Horse* both deploy an enlarged version of the west in their presentation of the myth's and the protagonists' anachronistic uselessness. Showing how Shepard elicits the mythos of the American west to comment on George W. Bush's adoption of the same mythos as both cover and justification of his war policies, Hartnett anatomizes precisely how Shepard's play simultaneously produces a critique of a specific figure and his policies, re-envisions of the myth of the American West, and then reconsiders the ways the myth is deployed as an apology and justification for the imaginary rights of an imaginary America. A dead horse itself, the myth of the west cannot bear up to the dramas of transgression it licenses.

The next section, "The Play of Critics," begins with two papers that examine the assumptions and methods of drama criticism in the academy. Stephen Watt's reconsideration of the practices of academic critics, "The Poverty of Dramatic Criticism: A Note on Method," asks why dramatic criticism has not lived up to its task and maps a different scope of investigation as its potential revivification. Showing the ways the performances of many plays are imbricated in the social, political, and economic circumstances of their times, Watt calls for an "architectural" mode of dramatic criticism that would work to understand how plays in performance function within the multiple and overlapping economies within which they exist. Following ideas about the definitive necessity of social and historical context from Karl Popper, Franco Moretti, and Marvin Carlson, Watt adumbrates the elements of a more holistic,

systemic critical practice. Asking how a play performance operates within its multiple contexts, Watt explains, makes clear again the specific contribution of staged drama as both a political intervention and a cultural experience, an understanding that decreases the imaginary gap between theatre and performance studies.

In "The Eyes Have It: 'Ocular Proof' and the Practice of Criticism," Craig Owens critiques cultural materialist criticism's attempt to make fact out of the fictions of the theatre. Interrogating the materialists' critical evasion of theatre's various texts as a way to fix a theatre which refuses to stay in one place, Owens examines cultural materialist and New Historicists' investments in visuality and facticity in the face of theatre's intractability--its status as an unreliable, unfixable phenomenon that "enacts the limitations of its own genre as the essence of its own genre" (108-09). Counterposing a notion of genre studies whose questions focus on representation, Owens shows the ways a materialist attention to the environment and culture in which dramatic works were written and presented avoid the dramatic and theatrical altogether, collapsing the pretenses of the stage into the affirmable facts of an imagined set of historical conditions. Owens suggests that the fruitful distinction of these divergent critical assumptions lies in the kinds of questions that each approach may pose. Genre studies is interested in the aesthetic phenomena of theatre and drama; cultural materialism attends the larger culture it perceives as a continuum and from which "the fictional, the historical, or the metaphorical" status of the stage is not bracketed. In relation to the reassuring imaginary of the material, drama and theatre are girded by specific cultural facts that side-step their aesthetic practice, responding perhaps to questions about the role and place of the theatre, but avoiding questions about how theatrical representations themselves might operate.

The final three papers all examine the role of theatre critics, especially their influence on the reception and characterization of plays, their ability to usher in the new, and the disappearance of venues for critical activity. Daniel R. Walker's account of playwrights as critics in turn-of-the-century Spain, "Gone to the Bulls: The Discourse of Discontent in Early Twentieth-Century Spanish Theatre," traces the paradoxical history of a not-so-successful era of theatrical production that eventually led to the revivification of the Spanish stage. Following the commentary of Benito Pérez Galdós, Miguel de Unamuno, and Jacinto Benavente on the questionable success of Nobel prize-winner José Echegaray, Walker's essay demonstrates how persistent critique of the Spanish theatre's formulaic redundancies eventually led to a regeneration of the theatre,

even though those playwright/critics could never themselves write the kinds of plays they could foresee.

Analyzing the complex effects of Paris critics' reception of Harold Pinter's first play staged there--*The Caretaker*--Jamie Andrews' essay, "'The Bougeoisie is Puking Up Pinter: Digesting Pinter in Paris,'" documents the ways French critics were led to see Pinter's play as derivative of Beckett's work. Keying off of pre-production discussions that had, as Andrews shows, already often elicited the figure of Beckett, critics of the production assumed Pinter's imitation. And, it was difficult for Pinter to shed the connection with Beckett once it had been made, despite the very different qualities of his work, a link that compelled critics to underestimate and misread Pinter's work. Only with the Paris production of *The Collection* and *The Lover* starring Delphine Seyrig and Jean Rochefort in 1965 was Pinter able to salvage his reputation, ironically through a critical estimation of his work as Boulevard theatre.

Ann Hall's essay, "Criticizing the Void: Theatre Criticism and the Changing Nature of Theatre in the Twenty-first Century" examines the effects of disappearing newspaper and magazines in favor of an increasingly accessible, but often anti-intellectual internet and blogosphere. The recent reduction in the number of critics as well as the growing notion that anyone's opinion counts produces a crisis in criticism that makes evident the crucial tasks critics used to perform. Recalling a time when critics needed credentials and educated taste was valued, Hall notes the very necessary relationship between discerning professional critics and the theatre--indeed the essays in the first half of this volume would certainly argue that these are inseparable. The gradual disappearance of devoted critics, places for the publication of their work, and the increased anti-intellectualism of a false notion of democracy as the mere airing of uninformed opinions endangers the health of theatre as an institution dependent upon intelligent criticism, even as the theatre is one of the only public sites where trenchant criticism is still daringly practiced.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> The 2008 National Endowment for the Humanities Report, "Reading on the Rise," states that more adults are reading "literature," representing a recent upturn in American literacy. The footnotes to the report, however, define "literature" as mysteries, thrillers, romance, and science fiction, and do not mention reading in dramatic literature. "Reading on the Rise: A New Chapter in American Literacy" <http://www.arts.gov/research/ReadingonRise.pdf>



**PART I:**  
**THE CRITIC IN PLAY**



## CHAPTER ONE

### GODOT AS CRITIC

KATHERINE H. BURKMAN

What is our life? A play of passion  
Our mirth the music of division.  
Our mother's wombs the tiring-houses be,  
Where we are dressed for this short comedy.  
Heaven the judicious sharp spectator is,  
That sits and marks still who doth act amiss.  
Our graves that hide us from the setting sun  
Are like drawn curtains when the play is done.  
Thus march we, playing, to our latest rest,  
Only we die in earnest, that's no jest.  
—Sir Walter Raleigh, "What is Our Life"

Like Shakespeare's Jaques, for whom "All the world's a stage, and all its men and women merely players," Sir Walter Raleigh equates our life with "A play of passion," in which the only sure reality is death. In Raleigh's view of life as theatre, God is critic "That sits and marks still who doth act amiss." For Samuel Beckett, however, that God/Godot figure may or may not be marking the actions of his characters. Absent judge, absent critic. The characters in his three full-length dramas, *Waiting for Godot*, *Endgame*, and *Happy Days*, often refer to themselves in a meta-theatrical way as if they are on life's stage, and to a large extent they must turn critical questions in on themselves.

#### *Waiting for Godot*

The point is that the characters in *Godot* (1954) are not merely critical of each other. They are critical of each other as performers on a stage, and they are critical of Godot himself, the critic who provides no presence, no answers. "That's how it is on this bitch of an earth" (25b), Pozzo comments after trying to explain or "perform" how twilight gives way to sudden night, death "that's no jest." Perhaps that is an important

contribution of Beckett's major works, their ability to take up the critical questions of drama, bounce them around amidst some of the characters and then throw them at the audience, who is stuck with them. Perhaps we must thank him for inviting us into his world and allowing us to see what we can make of it--both inside the theatre and out.

There is a difference, of course, between judging theatre, which often happens in newspaper reviews, and theatre criticism, which enters the realm of the theoretical, often assessing the relationship between life and the art that Aristotle says imitates it. In Beckett's plays the characters do criticize each other and the nature of life on earth, but in the midst of all the metatheatrics of the plays, life and art within the play begin to mirror each other. Beckett does not just "hold the mirror up to nature," in his plays, but he also has human nature hold a mirror up to the plays. In other words, since the characters act as critics of the lives they lead but are also leading those lives, that existence offers another level of knowledge about the nature of theatre.

The critic enters *Waiting for Godot* as the newspaper or magazine variety that judges and is hated by Didi and Gogo, the tramps who are waiting for Godot. When Didi and Gogo try to pass the time, or make the time pass (the action of the play),<sup>1</sup> they decide to call each other names. The exchange escalates until Estragon (Gogo) wins the battle with the following: Estragon: (with finality) Critic!" (48b).

Despite their steadfastness in waiting for the mysterious Godot, they run for cover when they think he is coming and have very ambivalent feelings about Pozzo, thinking he may even be Godot. And Pozzo is nothing if not critical. He is critical of his slave, Lucky, who has apparently declined so much that his master is taking him to the fair to get rid of him. "The truth is, you can't drive such creatures away. The best thing would be to kill them" (21b). At first Didi and Gogo are horrified at Pozzo's brutal treatment of Lucky, to whom he is tied with a rope, but when Pozzo weeps over the difficulties he has with his slave, they switch sides and begin to berate Lucky. Estragon even wonders if he might take his place: "Estragon: Does he want someone to take his place or not?" (23a). Clearly, there are advantages to being at the end of a real rope, rather than at the end of an imaginary one where they wait for Godot. With a "real" rope, one at least gets the bones.

While Pozzo thinks of himself as a kind of God, far above the likes of Didi and Gogo, the tramps finally consider him as a kind of actor in a poor entertainment.

VLADIMIR: Worse than the pantomime.

ESTRAGON: The Circus

VLADIMIR: The music hall

ESTRAGON: The Circus. (23b)

They continue the metaphor of life as a stage when Vladimir exits the deserted landscape to relieve himself.

VLADIMIR: I'll be back.

*He hastens towards the wings.*

ESTRAGON: End of the corridor to the right.

VLADIMIR: Save my seat. (23b)<sup>2</sup>

Even the twilight is, according to Vladimir, "nearing the end of its repertory." The tramps comment on the evening with a judgmental critic's eye.

VLADIMIR: Charming evening we're having.

ESTRAGON: Unforgettable.

VLADIMIR: And it's not over.

ESTRAGON: Apparently not.

VLADIMIR: It's only beginning.

ESTRAGON: It's awful (23a-b).

In Act 1, Pozzo's attempts to educate the tramps fail. They respond to his explanation/performance of twilight with little interest, but they are initially kind about their response. When Pozzo asks them if they noticed that he "weakened a little toward the end," Estragon responds, "I thought it was intentional" (25b), as if he were giving an actor the benefit of the doubt. When Pozzo makes Lucky perform his "think" speech, the tramps are progressively more and more horrified, no doubt taking in its message of the end of civilization and perhaps the world. As in Sir Walter Raleigh's poem, the only reality which asserts itself in the midst of all the "playing" is death, the end of the day, the end of the earth. Even as Pozzo and Lucky offer their entertainments, Gogo's insight is that "Nothing happens, nobody comes, nobody goes, it's awful." (27b). To him life is a charade. However, nothing does happen in the play and Didi gains further access to Gogo's insight as the play progresses.<sup>3</sup>

Of course Didi and Gogo as critics of Pozzo and Lucky's performances are themselves criticized by Pozzo and attacked by Lucky. Pozzo recognizes them as the "same species" as himself, "made in God's image," (15b), but the idea sends him into peals of laughter. Perhaps this remark is the key to the God/Godot roles that the characters must take on themselves in the absence of the God/Godot who is absent from the stage. And from

the audience. Made in that critic's image, the four characters must do the best they can to become their own critics, and they do a good job of it.

In the second act of the play, Pozzo now blind, like Oedipus or the blind prophet Tiresias, has gained insight. "They give birth astride of a grave, the light gleams an instant, then it's night once more" (57b). When Vladimir responds to Pozzo's insight, he first thinks he cannot, like Pozzo and Lucky, go "on," since he knows that "we have time to grow old. The air is full of our cries"(58a-58b), but he changes his mind. And although the two couples go on in somewhat different ways, Pozzo and Lucky wandering like Io, Didi and Gogo waiting, like Prometheus with some form of desperate faith, the four are linked as doubles, not only Didi and Gogo as doubles of each other opposed to Pozzo and Lucky as doubles of each other, but each couple a double of the other.<sup>4</sup> Hence, as they act as critics of each other's performances, they are truly self-critical as well, critics not only of a world where nothing happens, but aware of the tenuousness of that existence in the light of falling night and death.

Still, they do not leave the stage. "They also serve who only stand and wait."<sup>5</sup> It seems that even when Godot's messengers make appearances, one in act I, his brother (or is he the same?) in act II, they only alarm the tramps who ask them about their master. Learning that Godot has a long, white beard, Didi is horrified at this Sunday-school version of God, but insists on his own existence. "Tell him . . . (he hesitates). . . tell him you saw me and that . . . (he hesitates). . . that you saw me"(59). Not only have the tramps given critical judgments on what they see of life as a play, but Didi now also asserts his existence in the face of life as a bad play. He has learned from his criticisms and his human nature asserts itself, turning the boring evening and endless playing into a tragic assertion of self. When the tramps decide to leave at play's end, but do not move, their routine is informed with Vladimir's crisis of faith and decision to go on. Beckett holds the final tableau with its informed human suffering up to the play itself so that nature and art inform each other.

### *Endgame*

Hamm establishes himself as critic at the outset of *Endgame* (1956) even before he works on and criticizes the chronicle that he composes throughout the drama. First he establishes himself as an actor on life's stage:

HAMM: Me—  
(*He yawns*)  
—to play. (2)

Like the tramps, Hamm is tired of or bored with his life/drama from the outset. Clov, on the other hand, who takes care of the disabled Hamm who can't walk, is amused by his own dramatic antics. As he does a vaudeville routine in which he looks out each window, forgetting the ladder each time and having to retrieve it, he gives a "Brief laugh" after each look. If in *Godot* there is "nothing to be done," in *Endgame* there is also nothing to be seen. Its characters may well be the last living people on earth.

Again as in *Godot*, efforts to separate or to go someplace are undone, since there is no place to go and Clov, at least, is dependent on Hamm for food. Clov's action is, nevertheless, to leave Hamm. Despite the constant sense that they are not getting anywhere, that time, as Pozzo suggested in "*Godot has stopped—Hamm: Yesterday! What does that mean? Yesterday!*" (43), Clov insists that "something is taking its course" (13), and Hamm admits, "we're getting on" (14). There is even a remnant of Godot/God involved as Hamm orders his father and Clov to join him in prayer. But they give up Godot/God more easily (though not completely) than the tramps are able to. When none of the three get a response from God, Hamm complains, "The bastard! He doesn't exist!" but Clov keeps the possibility alive with his response, "Not yet" (55).

Hamm's parents, critics as well of the slow decline of life's drama, are in ash cans, from which they emerge to note life's further diminishment. "Why this farce, day after day?" (14), Nell asks. Like Clov, she is trying to leave, to sink into the ashcan, but she can't seem to separate. Although Nell finds that "Nothing is funnier than unhappiness" (18), she is no longer able to laugh at life or life's jokes. She is not able to laugh when Nagg tries his old joke out on her, in which a tailor takes three months to make a pair of trousers, and the punch line is a criticism of God. Speaking to his outraged customer, the tailor says:

But my dear Sir, my dear Sir, look—  
*(disdainful gesture, disgustedly)*  
 —at the world—  
*(Pause)*  
 and look  
*(Loving gesture, proudly)*  
 —at my TROUSERS! (22-23)

When Clov, still in metatheatrical mode, turns his telescope on the audience and says, "I see . . . a multitude . . . in transports . . . of joy" (29), he pauses to laugh with Hamm at the idea that anybody in the audience

might be enjoying their antics, but they both decide not to laugh. What Clov is able to laugh at is Hamm's question about meaning something:

HAMM: We're not beginning to. . . to. . . mean something?

CLOV: Mean something! You and I, mean something!

(Brief laugh)

Ah that's a good one! (32-33)

Here Beckett all but invites us to find the meaning in the play that Hamm senses and Clov rejects. Several "outside" critics consider Beckett's own favorite play as lesser in value than *Godot*, partly because the central character Hamm is cruel to Clov, who is also cruel at times to his master, hence garnering little sympathy. Others find the play too despairing.<sup>6</sup> While it is true that the couples are reversed in *Endgame*, the master/slave relationship front and center while the more loving relationship between Hamm's parents is secondary, Hamm's role as artist as well as critic gives the play a depth that those critics miss. Nor do I find the play, despite its teetering on the edge of despair, to be depressing or finally despairing.<sup>7</sup>

Hamm is always working on meaning. His *Chronicle*, which purports to be his own story, has a father seeking help for his dying son. In the *Chronicle*, we don't know if Hamm takes the son in, since he indicates when he says he put the father "before his responsibilities" (83) that one should not save a child to live on a dying planet merely to help one out in one's dying. Clov, logically the child, has nevertheless been taken in, so life and art do not here coincide. Hamm corrects himself as he continues his tale or praises a phrase—"nicely put, that" (51). And he is even open to new "complications." When Clov spots a young boy out of one of the windows, Hamm remarks, "Not an underplot, I trust" (78).

Since we know that Hamm has taken the *Chronicle's* boy in and desires above all else to have his love, Hamm's finishing of his *Chronicle* at play's end is remarkably moving. Calling upon father and son (Clov) and receiving no responses, he continues to discard his few possessions, including the whistle he uses to summon Clov, and accepts his end. Only the handkerchief with which he stanches blood and tears remain. During the tragic moment in which he accepts death with stoicism, Hamm ends his *Chronicle*, his art—"Since that's the way we're playing it" (84) and is not undermined by Clov's silent presence which simply leavens the tragedy with irony. As in all true tragedy, there is a sense of new life, both within Hamm himself as artist completing his work and possibly in the life that Clov sighted at last out the window. Beckett integrates Hamm as critic



with Hamm as artist. Like Didi, Hamm asserts a self in the face of death, a self the play has not mirrored, but one that holds the mirror up to the play.

### *Happy Days*

In Beckett's third full-length drama, *Happy Days* (1961), Winnie, who is buried in a mound of earth up to her waist, has many roles. She is a critic, and as the other characters we have discussed, a performer, and she is something of a director as well. "Begin your day, Winnie" (8) she orders. Later she tells her husband Willie, who lives behind the mound in a hole, how to navigate, directing him in his limited movements. She can't, however, always follow her directives: "And now? (*Pause.*) Sing. (*Pause.*) Sing your song, Winnie. (*Pause.*) No?" (48). She had opened the first act with a prayer, but at its end when she instructs herself to "Pray your old prayer, Winnie" (48), we do not know if she is able to do that either since the act ends with a "Long pause"(48). In the second act she confesses that try though she may, she cannot ignore the bell that regulates her day and night (54).

Like the characters in *Godot* and *Endgame*, Winnie is also an actor. She can not bear the thought of not being heard or seen. She tries to lean back as far as possible so that Willie can see her, but she fails. In the second act, when Willie only responds toward the end, she thinks he is dead "like all the others," but she imagines he is still there listening.

Winnie tells the tale in each act of the couple who pass by and gaze at her, Mr. and Mrs. Shower or Cooker (rain and food), and despite her criticism of them, their responses to her and each other provide a stimulus for her to arrive at her "story." Very much like many in the audience at a Beckett play, Mr. Cooker or Shower wonders what such a display means:

What's she doing? He says--what's the idea? he says--stuck up to her diddies in the bleeding ground--coarse fellow. . . And you, she says, what's the idea of you, she says, what are you meant to mean? (42-43)

Winnie finds Mrs. Shower or Cooker as coarse as her husband, but she looks up from filing her nails to recall the woman's response. Mrs. Shower/Cooker suggests that being free to walk "dragging me up and down this fornicating wilderness" (43), has no more meaning than Winnie buried in the ground. Her husband, realist that he is, can't imagine why somebody doesn't dig her out, since she is of no "use" like that, and Winnie concludes that as they depart "hand in hand" that they must have been "man and-wife" (41), no doubt because of their battle. While Beckett sets up the "coarse" couple as a Hamlet-like memory drama, a mirror for

Winnie in which she sees herself from their point of view, she herself provides a dramatic mirror for Mrs. Shower/Cooker, who sees her own plight in Winnie's situation. As with the waiting and wandering contrast in *Godot*, Aeschylus's *Prometheus Bound* comes to mind, so that suffering consists of either being bound as Prometheus or forced to continue on as Io, bitten by a gadfly.

Beckett has described Winnie as "unaware," but she seems to be all too aware and is constantly repressing her grief. A few words from Willie, and there are very few, are what stimulate her to her insistence that this is "or will have been another happy day! (*Pause.*) After all. (*Pause.*) So Far." (47-48). The "so far" indicates how difficult it is for Winnie to actually win, to hold onto any happiness. Nor is she thrilled when the long awaited visit from her husband takes place near the end of the drama—"Well this is an unexpected pleasure! (61).

Indeed, Winnie is nothing if not critical of her mostly silent husband, whether it be of his picking his nose, his lack of communication—"I worship you Winnie be mine and then nothing from that day forth only titbits from Reynolds' News" (62)—or his need of a hand—"You were always in dire need of a hand, Willie" (63). Although Willie's silences even when Winnie has called for help may seem cruel, one may better grasp his passive-aggressive behavior in light of Winnie's hostility toward him. He is easily defeated, as he falls down the mound he is climbing to get to her when she says he always needed a hand.

Like any actress, Winnie feels she must be heard and seen. "That is what I find so wonderful," she says in Act 11, still being heard. She may be in a wilderness, but she can only bear her life if she is seen and heard. Sounds help her through her day. To comment on the life of the play, she draws on quotations or misquotations from everyone from Shakespeare to Thomas Gray, and is aware that she is "losing her classics," though not entirely

But like Hamm, Winnie is artist as well as critic. Hamm has his Chronicle and Winnie has her story. There is always my story when all else fails. Her tale is of a younger self, whose sexual curiosity as she descends the stairs to examine "dolly" is interrupted by a mouse running up her leg, an image of rape. Her calls for help are answered "too late." The screams that Winnie emits at the climax of her story are those she has stored up during the entire drama. She is not screaming just over the violation of self; if that were so one could read the play on a realistic level as the story of a woman hiding in the earth because of this early trauma. She is screaming rather over life's condition, life as a wilderness with little

relief, much loss, and further descent into the earth--life in which time has lost its "old style" and become uncertain and arbitrary.

Is it her telling of her story or is it Willie's visit that releases song in Winnie, a poignant/ironical performance in which she plays the "merry widow," a song of mutual love. "Every touch of fingers/ Tells me what I know,/ Says for you,/ It's true, it's true,/You love me so!"(64). And what is in the long look between husband and wife on which the play ends? What is contained in its final "*Long pause*"?

Although Winnie may not be looking upon death with the tragic awareness that Hamm gains as artist, or the astounding faith with which the tramps prepare to keep on waiting, she may well be coming to a tragic moment of awareness in that stare. She has always taken pains to understand Willie's withholding nature, realizing that even when he does not reply to her calls for help, he may just have a larger need to remain in peace. Her silence may well be the critic/artist's insight that their plight is beyond words. As a kind of Demeter figure, out of touch with her younger, Persephone side, Winnie, who connects with that self in her screams, may see herself in her pig-like husband (the fertility goddess was originally a pig herself), both doing the best they can in the Eliotic wasteland in which they live. If there is any validity to this theory, then once again the character/critic in this play not only holds the mirror up to nature, but nature asserts itself and holds up the artist's insight as transformative. Willie and Winnie may well see themselves in each other. Nature holds the mirror up to the play.

When Hamlet ceases his playacting, no longer pretending to be mad, no longer seeking a way to survive the ills of his world, no longer longing to end his life, he comments to his friend Horatio, who would have him refuse the duel with Laertes. "If it be now [death], 'tis not to come; if it be not to come, it will be now, yet it will come. The readiness is all" (V,ii, ll. 220-222). Didi and Gogo, Hamm, and Winnie are those rare critics who have criticized their own performances with insight but who also come to a moment of tragic acceptance of death. At the endings of each play, the characters who are left are no longer critics; nor are they, in Jaques' terms, "merely players." They are ready.

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## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Francis Fergusson in his seminal book, *The Idea of Theater*, attempts to define theatre, not only as Aristotle defined tragedy, as an imitation of an action, but also in terms of Stanislavsky's directive to actors to find an action to play. While the tramps may spend their time waiting for Godot, they seek to make time pass as they wait, a possible way of looking at their "action."

<sup>2</sup> Simon Callow dwells on the play's metatheatrics: "But perhaps the dream is just the dream of theatre. Beckett's play is as conscious of its own theatricality as any by Brecht, by Pirandello, or—the--comparison is inevitable and apt---Shakespeare. Theatrical imagery pervades the play. Vladimir, shocked at Pozzo's treatment of Lucky, accuses him of chucking him away "like a...like a banana skin", to be stepped on, no doubt; when Pozzo delivers one of his lectures, he sprays his throat like an opera singer or a boulevard star; Vladimir and Estragon play-act to fill the void, doing old routines with hats; Vladimir takes on the role of Lucky, putting on his hat and walking up and down like a mannequin; when Estragon is terrified of being beaten up, Vladimir pushes him towards the auditorium: 'There! Not a soul in sight! Off you go.' Estragon recoils in horror, dreading the idea of becoming part of the audience, a fate worse than death."

<sup>3</sup> My book, *The Arrival of Godot: Ritual Patterns in Modern Drama* for a discussion of how nothing does *happen* in the play (pp. 33-53)

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<sup>4</sup> See Martin Esslin's *The Theater of the Absurd* for a discussion of the doubling in *Godot*, p. 67.

<sup>5</sup> John Milton: Sonnet XIX: On His Blindness

When I consider how my light is spent  
 Ere half my days in this dark world and wide,  
 And that one talent which is death to hide  
 Lodg'd with me useless, though my soul more bent  
 To serve therewith my Maker, and present  
 My true account, lest he returning chide,  
 "Doth God exact day-labour, light denied?"  
 I fondly ask. But Patience, to prevent  
 That murmur, soon replies: "God doth not need  
 Either man's work or his own gifts: who best  
 Bear his mild yoke, they serve him best. His state  
 Is kingly; thousands at his bidding speed  
 And post o'er land and ocean without rest:  
 They also serve who only stand and wait.

<sup>6</sup> See Jane E. Gatewood's "Memory and Its Devices in *Endgame*," "With its existential shifts, bleak turns on the function of memory and history, and its skepticism regarding the import of both, *Endgame* anticipates the loss of the subject and the culmination of history evident in later works of postmodernism. But while such turns give a nod to emerging postmodernist tendencies, they effect a modernist despair, leaving plays such as *Endgame* at a literary-historical crossroads similar to that at which we find many of Beckett's characters" (64). On the contrary, it seems to me that Hamm gains a sense of self at play's end and is not in despair.

<sup>7</sup> See Russell Smith's "*Endgame*'s Reminders," in which he makes a distinction between melancholy and mourning and finds that Hamm's achievement at play's end of turning melancholy into mourning gives him tragic insight and stature. (111)

