

Tragicomedy and Tragic Burlesque:
Waiting for Godot and *Rosencrantz and
 Guildenstern are Dead*

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When *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* appeared at the Old Vic theatre in 1967, there was some suspicion that lack of literary value was one reason for the play's success. These doubts are repeated in the revised 1969 edition of John Russell Taylor's standard survey of recent British drama. The view in *The Angry Theatre* is that Stoppard lacks individuality, and that *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* is a pale imitation of the theatre of the absurd, written in "brisk, informal prose", and with a vision of character and life which seems "a very small mouse to emerge from such an imposing mountain".¹ In contrast, *Jumpers* was received with considerable critical approval. *Jumpers* and Osborne's *A Sense of Detachment* and Storey's *Life Class* might seem to be evidence that in the past few years the new British drama has reached maturity as a tradition of dramatic forms and dramatic conventions which exist as a pattern of meaningful relationships between plays and audiences in particular theatres.² *Jumpers* includes a group of philosophical acrobats, and in style and meaning seems to be an improved version of Stoppard's translation of Beckett's theatre of the absurd into the terms of the conversation about the death of tragedy between the Player and Rosencrantz:

Player Why, we grow rusty and you catch us at the very point of decadence—by this time tomorrow we might have forgotten everything we ever knew. That's a thought, isn't it? (*He laughs generously.*) We'd be back where we started—improvising.

Ros. Tumblers, are you?

Player We can give you a tumble if that's your taste, and times being what they are . . .³

- 1 J. Russell Taylor, *The Angry Theatre* (Hill and Wang, 1969), pp. 318-20.
- 2 Tom Stoppard, *Jumpers* (Old Vic Theatre, 1972; Faber, 1973); John Osborne, *A Sense of Detachment* (Royal Court Theatre, 1972; Faber, 1973); David Storey, *Life Class* (Royal Court Theatre, 1974; Jonathan Cape, 1975).
- 3 Tom Stoppard, *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* (Faber, 1967), 15-16.

The view that *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* is a pale imitation of the theatre of the absurd is misleading, and also inadequate as a point of departure for discussion of the developments in British drama since *Look Back in Anger*. *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* translates *Waiting for Godot* into a combination of tragic burlesque and tragicomedy, and has an interesting connection with the pessimism about tragedy and modern drama which forms the basis of George Steiner's *The Death of Tragedy*; at the same time, the terms of Stoppard's imitation of Beckett's theatre of the absurd are relevant to discussion of some of the most interesting plays and directions in British drama in the past few years (imitation of Beckett is one element in *A Sense of Detachment*, and *Life Class*, and Storey's *Home* (1970), as well as *Jumpers*). The following discussion is directed towards *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*, but begins with a selective critical review of *The Death of Tragedy*, and an account of *Waiting for Godot* which stresses some aspects of the dramatic speech of the play, and the element of tragedy in Beckett's tragicomedy.

Criticism of contemporary literature at any time tends to be an extreme version of differences of opinion about value and significance, and its usefulness depends on clarity about points of basic agreement and disagreement. In discussion of recent British drama, clarity about basic issues is made difficult because the plays are forums for ideas about society and the modern mind, and because the most eloquent and authoritative criticism tends to be a response to this aspect of the plays, and general discussion of critical systems of ideas about literature and society. Esslin's *The Theatre of the Absurd* and Steiner's *The Death of Tragedy* seem to me to be examples of this trend in criticism: their value tends to depend on the interposing of philosophical and critical theories between readers and the art of particular plays.⁴ *The Death of Tragedy* combines a theory of tragedy, a history of tragedy from the Renaissance to the present, and a theory of history.

Steiner defines tragedy as a form of drama and a vision of man which descended to the Renaissance from ancient Greece. *The Death of Tragedy* begins with affirmation of the view that tragedy

4 See George Steiner, *The Death of Tragedy* (Faber, 1961), and Martin Esslin, *The Theatre of the Absurd* (1961: Penguin, revised and enlarged edition, 1968). All subsequent page-references are to these editions.

depends on the fact of catastrophe and includes broken life and disaster at the end; Steiner adds that tragic catastrophe is a religious event with a necessity which is not secular—it is irreparable, beyond the limits of human understanding and control, and invokes in the audience a state of terror, as well as an intense recognition of heroic grandeur, and a mysterious fusion of grief and joy.⁵ In the course of *The Death of Tragedy*, Steiner describes further general conditions of tragedy as a form of drama. The fall of the tragic hero is related to his own “moral infirmity or active vice” (p. 222), he is responsible and not excused from responsibility (pp. 128-9); and the paradoxes of tragedy include that the suffering of tragedy is in excess of any guilt in the life of the hero (p. 9), and that the tragic hero reaches fulfilment in death. The audience identifies itself with the tragic hero, but only partially, after some effort, and with a sense of distance and strangeness: the tragic hero is not one of the ordinary men, he is at the heroic and royal, or aristocratic, centre of an hierarchical society, and his fate is public and exemplary and has a special magnitude (pp. 194-5). Steiner stresses that the fall of the hero is understood in a symbolic manner in relation to a cosmos known as a mythology, a traditional imaginative design, which organizes the “imaginative habits and practices” (p. 323) of a civilization; and he argues that meaningful cosmic mythologies (the classic myth and Christianity of the past) are “the essential force behind the conventions of tragedy” (p. 197). With regard to style and the theatre, the argument is that the religious meaning of tragedy is not unconnected to the fact that tragedy is written in verse, and that it is a kind of theatrical performance “normal and central” to the society in which it appears (pp. 238-42).

The definition of the vision of man which Steiner sees as part of the tradition of tragedy is one of the main achievements of *The Death of Tragedy*. Steiner describes the tragic vision of man as saying that human reason and order are limited and vulnerable to “occult, uncontrollable forces” (p. 342), the “otherness” of the world, an inexplicable and irreconcilable bias towards inhumanity and destruction: “necessity is blind and man’s encounter with it shall rob him of his eyes, whether it be in Thebes or in Gaza” (p. 5). As the title suggests, *The Death of Tragedy* asserts that the history of literature since the Renaissance includes the decline and death of tragedy: verse tragedy is now a “noble

5 See especially pp. 8, 10, 133, 164, 194, 243, 291.

phantom" (p. 304), or dead god, irrelevant to the modern spirit. While Steiner traces particular patterns of change, and cause and effect, his argument is organized in relation to a general theory of history and the view that literary criticism is "passionate, private experience seeking to persuade" (p. 351). Steiner's theory of history is a version of a classic contemporary orthodoxy: it assumes that the Renaissance was followed by a major change for the worse in western civilization (the seventeenth century is the "great divide" in this fall). Civilization is seen to exchange a state of religiousness and imagination for the death of the gods and the old mythologies and the possibility of the imminent death of imagination and art. The cause is "rationalism and secular metaphysics" (p. 193), and the rise of a new, modern man whose character is "rational, optimistic, and sentimental", less than heroic, and unable to confront "the abyss and horror of the times" (p. 350). The darkness of the prospect for tragedy is increased by Steiner's view that the tragic vision of man is a form of metaphysical pessimism opposed to the anti-tragic, metaphysical optimism of Christianity and Marxism (p. 324).

As an extreme expression of the idea that criticism is intense and persuasive individual experience, *The Death of Tragedy* creates an image of Steiner as an individual critic who is a representative contemporary mind. The contemporary mind is seen as a state of disinherited consciousness and the modern world as a place of disenchantment, melancholy, nervous frustration, and dry and private anguish: the contemporary mind is assailed by information about war and cruelty which causes a failure of imagination, and art fails in a "void of meaning" (p. 321) without heroic strength to face the abyss of the contemporary world. Steiner's theory of history depends a great deal on the traditional images of the golden age and the fall of man, and on the Romantic and contemporary images of the "abyss" and the "void". The account of recent drama is that Ibsen's later plays are a new form of serious drama suited to the conditions of modern man and his society, and that twentieth-century drama has failed to follow Ibsen's example: most recent attempts to imitate tragedy are failures which seem to be frauds, or travesties. Steiner's main view is that contemporary tragedy is "literary" in a narrow sense, an art of pastiche and uncertain seriousness, dreams and incoherence, and sinister and mocking variations on the myths of the past: modern tragedy seems to be a stale "fancy-dress party" (p. 326), or an "antiquarian charade" (p. 330), or as with Beckett, a

"puppet show" in which the puppets insist on behaving as if they are alive (p. 350).

The Death of Tragedy is written with eloquence and wit, and seems intended to be a form of art as well as literary criticism. Steiner argues with acute awareness of relationships between meaning and method, and between his subject and the pattern of his argument; and he stresses that historical fact is a special kind of fiction. *The Death of Tragedy* is a study in opinion and belief, and a display of anguish and dark wit which assumes the possibility of fits of prejudice and error, and that it will provoke intense disagreement with particular arguments (for example, with the argument that Christianity and Marxism are anti-tragic), and even bad-temper, as well as agreement. Steiner assumes that his arguments are not an exact equation for the history of modern tragedy, and that *The Death of Tragedy* will work at the end as a spur to further inquiry about the possibilities for high tragedy and tragic catastrophe, terror, grief and joy.

In these circumstances, and as there are obvious similarities between *The Death of Tragedy* and *Waiting for Godot*, one of the major disappointments in recent criticism of drama is that *The Death of Tragedy* ends with brief and evocative dismissal of *Waiting for Godot* as a metaphysical puppet show and evidence of the "incapacity of speech or gesture to countenance the abyss and horror of the times" (p. 350). Steiner's recent comments about Beckett are a reversal of his original dismissal and describe Beckett as a great rhetorician and a "major poet" who is the "writer par excellence" of the contemporary world, but Steiner's comments in *Extraterritorial* continue to seem a disappointment. The view of Beckett as representative of linguistic pluralism, or "unhousedness", and of the problem of a "lost centre" of civilization remains a development of the arguments of *The Death of Tragedy*. There is still a disengagement from comment on Beckett's major works, and the details of the texts, and precise explanation of the paradox that Beckett unites terminal art about silence and the death of speech in prose which "literally sings, in a low, penetrating voice, cunning in its cadence" (p. 20).⁶

6 "Interview with George Steiner" *Yale Theatre* 3 (1971), 4-13; and George Steiner, *Extraterritorial* (Faber, 1972). The essay "Survival of the Classic" in Frank Kermodé's *Renaissance Essays* (London, 1971; 1973) is important as a contrast to *The Death of Tragedy*, and at times my argument parallels some points of view in "Survival of the Classic", as well as some of the general assumptions about modern

Beckett describes *Waiting for Godot* as a tragicomedy. His use of the term "tragicomedy" is characteristic of his wit. *Waiting for Godot* is a study of the nature of tragedy, an exercise of wit about the idea that tragedy is dead, and a demonstration of the extremes of art which seem possible in a state of scepticism in which images and ideas such as the golden age and the fall, and survival and destruction, seem to coincide and have equal value. *Waiting for Godot* imitates tragedy and presents an absurd entertainment in which the immediate view is a travesty of tragedy and heroism and classic art. One of Beckett's main devices is that his stage becomes a platform for an absurd and noble game, and a lecture about art and the modern mind. Vladimir and Estragon are two sordid clowns presented as the tragic heroes of contemporary society. They meet each day at twilight on a country road somewhere near the end of civilization and wait for Godot. The conventions of heroic tragedy seem to be exchanged for absurd conversation and nervous clowning, notably on the two occasions (like plays within the play) when Vladimir and Estragon meet Pozzo and his slave, Lucky. Pozzo and Lucky are figures of terror (similar to characters in the horror entertainments of the cinema): in the first act, Lucky presents an insane lecture on the nature of man; in the second act, Pozzo and Lucky appear to be struck blind and deaf, and imitate the fall of man and civilization in a fall on to the stage (an imitation which is Shakespearian as well as absurd). Vladimir and Estragon live in fallen and ruinous circumstances, but as clowns they escape extremes of violence, or seem insensible, and the end of *Waiting for Godot* can seem to be a happy end: as Vladimir and Estragon continue to wait for Godot, from one point of view, they have come to the end of a perfect day.

Waiting for Godot is a continuation of the modern literary tradition which includes Eliot and Joyce. That is, it is useful to consider *Waiting for Godot* as a dramatic version of art which is a stream of consciousness, and ambiguous images, and aims at precision about contradictions, especially about the conditions of the heroic and ordinary life in the present. The relations between Beckett's

drama, and some of the discussion of Beckett in J. L. Styan, *The Dark Comedy: The Development of Modern Comic Tragedy* (Cambridge, 1962; 1968), Raymond Williams, *Modern Tragedy* (Chatto and Windus, 1966), Geoffrey Brereton, *Principles of Tragedy* (Routledge, 1968) and Ruby Cohn, *Currents in Contemporary Drama* (Indiana University Press, 1969).

plays and the plays of Eliot and Yeats are not uninteresting.⁷ In spite of the obvious contrast between Beckett's clowns and Harry, Lord Monchensey, Eliot's *The Family Reunion* is perhaps the main work of an impressive renewal of poetic drama in English before the second world war, and the form and preoccupations of *Waiting for Godot* seem to be influenced by the plays of Eliot and Yeats. There are a number of parallels between *Waiting for Godot* and *The Family Reunion*. As a play about Harry, *The Family Reunion* is as much an essay in tragicomedy as *Waiting for Godot*, and with a similar tension between tragic heroism, the commonplace, and a happy end.

Some particular parallels raise questions about Beckett's awareness of Eliot as a dramatist. The use of conversational refrains and word-games which is so distinctive in *Waiting for Godot* can seem to be a development from the conversational refrains and word-play of *The Family Reunion*, and there are parallels between particular refrains and main themes in the two plays. Beckett's waiting for Godot refrain is tied to the idea of a fool's lack of memory and the questions "What was I saying . . . What were you saying when?" (p. 65) and to the refrain "Let's go . . . let's go far away" (pp. 13, 53, 93-4) and develops from "Let's go. We can't. Why not? We're waiting for Godot" to dull boredom and manic anguish, as "What's he waiting for?" (p. 41) leads in the second act to repetition of the original gag (pp. 68, 71, 78, 84) and "What is he waiting for?" (p. 87), and finally, the main gag combined with "What for? To wait for Godot" (p. 93).⁸ There is

7 Martin Esslin, *The Theatre of the Absurd* does not refer to Eliot, and recent criticism tends to disregard the possibility of similarities between the plays of Beckett and Eliot.

8 Samuel Beckett, *Waiting for Godot* (Faber, 1959). All references are to this edition. Beckett's revised English edition of *Waiting for Godot* (Faber, 1965) is a new version of the original English *Waiting for Godot*, and the new version is a new play. The present discussion is about the 1959 *Waiting for Godot*. Beckett has published four plays with this title (two in French, two in English). Esslin's revised and enlarged 1968 edition of *The Theatre of the Absurd* does not refer to the second English *Waiting for Godot*. There is some possibility that the differences between the *Waiting for Godot* plays are not simply the result of the influence of Blin and the interference of the Lord Chamberlain and the difficulties of translation (for the relevant history see John Fletcher and John Spurling, *Beckett: A Study of his Plays* (Eyre Methuen, 1972), pp. 56-7, 120-5), and for relevant discussion see Ruby Cohn, *Samuel Beckett: The Comic Gamut* (Rutgers University Press, 1962), ch. 12 "Samuel Beckett, self-translator".

a precise parallel in *The Family Reunion*, although in terms of indirect clowning: Downing (p. 120) is closest to Vladimir and Estragon as a character. Eliot's design is tied to conversational forgetfulness, and the question "What have I been saying? I think I was saying" (p. 103) in relation to a refrain about "a long journey" (pp. 101, 103) and "You must go" (pp. 103-4) and "why are you going" (p. 105) develops in turn from an earlier conversational refrain about going and waiting for what seems not unlike Godot: "this house *means* to keep us waiting. Waiting? For what? . . . don't go just yet" (pp. 48-9).⁹

Godot is many things, perhaps one aspect of him is a vision of heroic beauty and tragic terror comparable to Harry's seeing of the Eumenides and "the bright angels" (p. 107), and Hamlet's double vision of the terror of the Ghost ("Do you see nothing there?" III.iv.132) and man as "how like an angel" (II.ii.309), although in the terms of Lucky's vision and the absurd nervous disorders of Beckett's: "They're coming there too! . . . Do you not see anything coming? . . . You must have had a vision" (pp. 73-5). *Hamlet* and Shakespearian tragedy seem to be imitated in both *The Family Reunion* and *Waiting for Godot*.¹⁰ One limitation of *The Death of Tragedy* is that it underestimates the continuity of the tragic tradition in both plays, and of the art of Eliot and Beckett, as well as the resources of the contemporary vision common to *The Family Reunion* and *Waiting for Godot*. This reflected in such statements in Eliot as "We have lost our way in the dark" (p. 123), "the other side of despair . . . A stony sanctuary" (p. 107) and in Harry's conversational statement of the vision of contemporary tragedy: "What you have to tell me / Is something that I know already / Or unimportant, or else untrue" (p. 71).

9 T. S. Eliot, *The Family Reunion* (Faber, 1939; 1963).

10 J. Dover Wilson (ed.) *Hamlet* (Cambridge, 1934; 1968). Since the initial comments by Hugh Kenner in *Samuel Beckett: A Critical Study* (University of California Press, 1961; 1968), pp. 63, 156-60, and Jan Kott in *Shakespeare Our Contemporary* (Doubleday, 1964), the relevance of Shakespearian tragedy has become a continuing issue in discussions of Beckett's work. The main emphasis has been that there are similarities between *Endgame* and Shakespeare's plays, and that Beckett insists that pessimism, failure and the impossible are the conditions of his drama—see, for example, the comment about tragedy (p. 300), and the interpretation of Lucky's speech (p. 256) in M. Robinson *The Long Sonata of the Dead* (Hart-Davis, 1969)—with continuing disagreement about whether the pessimism of *Waiting for Godot* and *Endgame* allows for tragedy.

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In *Waiting for Godot*, in the second act, after Pozzo and Lucky have left, Vladimir comments: "That's the idea, let's make a little conversation" (p. 48). The joke stresses that the main terms Beckett uses for his dramatic version of the modern tradition are ambiguous conversation, clowning, and wit about tragedy and comedy in relation to the heroic and the absurd. The country road of *Waiting for Godot* becomes the traditional image of the world as a road, and life as an adventure in which the hero must find the way and complete the journey. At the beginning, Estragon is trying to take off his boot, Vladimir enters and Estragon comments: "Nothing to be done". Vladimir's reply includes: "All my life I've tried to put it from me . . . And I resumed the struggle". The stage directions are an extension of the verbal wit: "*He broods, musing on the struggle*".

The ambiguities of the conversation are philosophical, and similar precise conversational ambiguities extend the meaning of the road and the struggle. Later, Estragon wonders whether they should part: Vladimir replies that he "wouldn't go far", Estragon laments: "that would be too bad, really too bad . . . When you think of the beauty of the way. (*Pause*) And the goodness of the wayfarers . . ." and Vladimir advises Estragon to "calm" himself (p. 16). Estragon's comment is vicious, but it suggests commitment to "the beauty of the way", and works to establish the reality of ideal heroism in the play. The ambiguity depends on momentary authority and elevation in the speech, and a pattern of word-games which use the double meanings and absurd logic of clowns. Pozzo is driving himself "On!" and the road seems long to him. In the same way, when Lucky presents an insane stream of consciousness as an entertainment, his tirade is an ambiguously coherent tragic meditation about "heaven so blue still and calm so calm", "the labours of men", and that "man wastes and pines wastes and pines" and sees visions of ideal beauty "to the nearest decimal good measure round figures stark naked in the stockinged feet in Connemara" and goes "alas alas on".

Vladimir and Estragon see themselves as figures of tragedy and imply that it is obvious that their condition is tragic. Estragon comments: "There's no lack of void" (p. 66) and Vladimir talks about "the night without end of the abyssal depths" (p. 80). Vladimir mimics Hamlet and remembers Hamlet's speech about suicide: "But that is not the question. What are we doing here, *that* is the question" (p. 80). Lucky's tirade is an absurd tragic soliloquy which combines orgasmic ecstasy and tragic anguish

about "the stones so blue so calm alas alas on on the skull the skull the skull the skull in Connemara in spite of the tennis the labours". From this point of view, *Waiting for Godot* seems to be a contrived pattern of variations on the *Hamlet* themes of suicide and the limits of the mind, the skull and death, and the civilized hero, the clown, and the actor.

In contrast, one of the main contradictions is that the view of tragedy is seen in an image of comic travesty. Vladimir's imitation of Hamlet continues: "And we are blessed in this, that we happen to know the answer . . . one thing alone is clear. We are waiting for Godot to come". At other similar moments, Vladimir and Estragon echo oracular speeches from Shakespearian tragedy, and the parallels to Shakespeare support the view that to wait for Godot is a version of the tension between action and inaction, and violent turbulence and static calm, at the climax of *Hamlet* and *King Lear*, but with Vladimir and Estragon the oracular becomes comic bathos and parody. Shakespearian speeches such as Hamlet's "the readiness is all. Since no man of aught he leaves, knows what is't to leave betimes, let be" (V.ii.220-2), are exchanged for maxims (in the manner of Polonius) such as: "Let us make the most of it, before it is too late!" (p. 79) and: "What can't be cured must be endured" (p. 40).

The speech of *Waiting for Godot* has the general characteristic that the ambiguities and word-games depend on a pastiche of mock-heroic inflation and bathos, and on literary burlesque which includes parodic echoes and half-echoes of past literature; and mock-heroic clowning and imitation which merges with literary burlesque are a condition of the speech at moments of positive evocation of heroism and idealism. Vladimir's mimicry of Hamlet is obvious at "But that is not the question. What are we . . .?"; on other occasions of literary imitation in the speech, or what seems to be literary imitation, the reader remains in different states of doubt and absolute certainty (like Hamm in his first speech in *Endgame*: "No doubt. (Pause) No, all is a—(he yawns)—bsolute"): for example, about whether Lucky's vision "so blue still and calm . . . so blue so calm" is intended to imitate George Herbert's "Vertue" (and the sweet day "so cool, so calm, so bright"); and whether the grand "round figures stark naked" in Connemara are intended to suggest Synge's *The Playboy of the Western World* (and in the context of games and puns about "the nearest decimal . . . round figures" and "tennis"); and one of the

most interesting problems about burlesque in *Waiting for Godot* is the possibility that the second English *Waiting for Godot* is intended to be a travesty and burlesque of the first English *Waiting for Godot*.¹¹ Lucky's tirade of articulate gibberish is an extreme example of mock-heroic speech. The more usual mode of the mock-heroic speeches set into the conversation is the manner of Pozzo's speech about the twilight of the gods and civilization in the first act (p. 37), and Vladimir's interrupted speech about the "abyssal depths" in the second act (pp. 79-80).

Beckett presents a number of contradictory explanations for this condition of speech and tragedy as mock-heroic travesty: for example, the world of Vladimir and Estragon is a world of bourgeois vulgarity, security, and trivial entertainment (and they rise to a lyric about "All the dead voices" which is an exercise in dull conversation and entertainment). In contrast, one implication seems to be that as tragedy is a classic form of literature, and concerned with some essential conditions of life, tragedy is obvious and commonplace; and it seems that tragedy in the fiction world of Vladimir and Estragon is essentially a condition of dull and sordid clowning. Lucky's relevant comment is that man "wastes and pines and concurrently simultaneously". Estragon's comment about the void extends this general view:

- 11 There are general parallels between *The Playboy of the Western World* and *Waiting for Godot*. Synge's play might be considered to be the main predecessor of *Waiting for Godot* as an Irish play in a mode of poetic realism intended to challenge conventional opinion about idealism and drama. Lucky's image parallels Christy's visions of a "romping lifetime from this hour to the dawning of the Judgement Day", and "a drift of chosen females, standing in their shifts itself, maybe", and the irony of Old Mahon "naked as an ash-tree in the morn of May" (J. M. Synge, *Plays, Poems and Prose*, Everyman, 1941, 123, 163-7). One difference between the first and second English *Waiting for Godot* is that poeticisms in the first (for example, "when the world was young, in the nineties") become less poetic in the second ("a million years ago, in the nineties", p. 10). Beckett's general interest in parodic literary quotation and allusion in his plays has been established beyond doubt: for example, Vladimir's puzzle about "Hope deferred maketh the something sick, who said that?" (p. 10) refers to Proverbs 13:12 (Rosette Lamonte, "Beckett's Metaphysics of Choiceless Awareness" in Melvin J. Friedman (ed.), *Samuel Beckett Now*, University of Chicago Press, 1970); in *Happy Days*, "Winnie" is a pun, and Winnie's "laughing wild . . . something something laughing wild" refers to Gray's "Ode on a Distant Prospect of Eton College" (Ruby Cohn, "The Laughter of Sad Sam Beckett" in *Samuel Beckett Now*).

Vladimir And where were we yesterday evening according to you?
 Estragon How do I know? In another compartment. There's no
 lack of void. (p. 66)

Each contradictory element of experience in *Waiting for Godot* can be seen as a separate compartment, or thing, and with precision, although the view is that all seem to be present at the same time, and in a state of chaos, and lack of meaning and life, which seems absurd.¹² That "all is always now" (as Eliot says), and that meaning is a state of paradox and *discordia concors* is a traditional account of the mind. *Waiting for Godot* stresses alienation and despair, suggests that sceptical doubt and lack of meaning are final and new, and demonstrates that the survival of classic certainties and traditions is obvious. This general point of view governs Beckett's approach to the speech of the play and the conventions of tragedy and comedy, and it becomes a form of wit which seems arbitrarily clever and vulgarly pessimistic as well as elegant and good-humoured. At the end, it seems that waiting for Godot is an unavoidable "happy end" for a sad and comic travesty which uses clowns as tragic heroes. In contrast, the "happy end" seems to be an arbitrary exercise of wit and meaningful refusal to grant death at a point of tragic terror, with the effect that lack of death in a void seems to be the proper end for a form of serious drama beyond, or below, tragedy, and with the effect that tragedy seems to be achieved in spite of lack of blood, or by means of a noble, or decadent, reversal of traditional death for the tragic hero. Agreement and disagreement about the element of tragedy in Beckett's tragicomedy depends a great deal on the question whether Beckett's language combines heroic eloquence with mock-heroic clowning, and whether the scenes in which Vladimir and Estragon meet Pozzo and Lucky create terror as well as comedy.

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead applies *Waiting for Godot* to *Hamlet* and makes Rosencrantz and Guildenstern the central figures of a literary entertainment which imitates Beckett's tragicomedy. In the light of the image of travesty of tragedy and the references to *Hamlet* and Shakespearian tragedy in *Waiting for Godot*, *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* begins to seem an extraordinary exercise in plagiarism and literary nonsense. In fact, any reader who failed to react to the play in this

12 See note 13.

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way would seem to have missed the point. *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* is a dramatic literary burlesque similar to Fielding's *Tom Thumb (The Tragedy of Tragedies; or, the Life and Death of Tom Thumb the Great)*. *Waiting for Godot* demonstrates that tragedy can accompany a travesty which includes tragic burlesque and at times seems to be a hoax. Stoppard uses *Waiting for Godot* as an occasion for a contemporary tragic burlesque which imitates pantomime, and intimate revue, and seems rather similar to *Alice in Wonderland*.

The beginning of the play mimics the clowning of Vladimir and Estragon, with Vladimir's philosophic ambiguities and Estragon's struggle with his boots turned into Rosencrantz's extraordinary luck with coins, and Guildenstern's articulate philosophic nonsense about six monkeys thrown up in the air. The direction of this as a comic "send-up" of Beckett's theatre of the absurd is supported by an amiable reference to the theatre of the absurd as a literary fashion, and by comic plagiarizing of the "Is that all?" refrain from *Waiting for Godot*. The "Is that all?" refrain in *Waiting for Godot* is an important part of Beckett's poetic word-games which combine the sceptical, confused, belligerent, and bored attitude of Vladimir and Estragon to commonplace things (boots, radishes, turnips, and so on), and philosophic wit about civilization and ideas as dead things, and a pattern of separate things. The dialogue at the beginning of *Waiting for Godot* develops as an absurd variation on the traditional question whether something can come from nothing ("Hope deferred maketh the something sick", as Vladimir remarks), and with manic repetition of the words "it" and "thing" as a condition of life.¹³ This initial pattern leads to the development of the important "Is that all?" refrain: "That's all there is to it" (p. 13), "This is how it is" (p. 17), "Is that all there is?" (p. 19), "Nothing you can do about it", "Like to finish it?" (p. 21), "Is that all?" (pp. 39 and 50), "Is that all there is?" (p. 68). Stoppard's imitation in terms of the monkeys and good luck becomes:

13 Vladimir says that Estragon without him would have become "nothing more than a little heap of bones", "no doubt about it". "And what of it?" Estragon asks. "It's too much for one man," Vladimir replies. Vladimir says they should "have thought of it" much earlier. Estragon's boot is "this bloody thing", and he asks for help because something hurts ("It hurts? . . . it hurts!"). Vladimir insists that he has something worse ("if you had what I have"), and a minor climax is reached as he exclaims: "He wants to know if it hurts! . . . Never neglect the little things of life" (p. 10).

Ros. Eighty-five in a row—beaten the record!

Guil. Don't be absurd.

Ros. Easily!

Guil. (*angrily*) Is that *it*, then? Is that all? (p. 9)

Comic parody and plagiarism are important in each of the main speeches of Stoppard's play, and Stoppard's comic plagiarism includes a variation on Beckett's tragic word-game prose in terms of a word-game with the idea that tragedy is "*high and dry*" (Guildenstern, p. 27; the Player, p. 46). The first moment of high illumination for Rosencrantz and Guildenstern becomes ridiculous imitation of the excesses of speech of Hopkins: "it's all stopping to a death, it's boding to a depth, stepping to a head . . . heading to a dead stop . . . and *high and dry*" (p. 27) recalls *The Wreck of the Deutschland* most of all (and perhaps stanza 32, in particular). This parody of Hopkins is followed by parody of Eliot's *Journey of the Magi* ("Nor did we come all this way for a christening. All *that*—preceded us"—p. 285). Guildenstern's last main speech in the second act is further parody of Eliot ("Autumnal—nothing to do with leaves. It is to do with a certain brownness at the edges of the day"). In the third act Guildenstern's most poetic speech is literary burlesque and nonsensical pastiche: "Out of the void, finally, a sound" begins with Beckett and turns to Hamlet's speeches in which he tells Rosencrantz and Guildenstern they are fools (III.ii.360-74).

One of the sailors has pursed his lips against a woodwind, his fingers and thumb governing, shall we say, the ventages, whereupon, giving it breath, let us say, with his mouth, it, the pipe, discourses, as the saying goes, most elegant music. (p. 81)

These extremes of poetry and plagiarism imitate Beckett's mock-heroic manner but seem closer to the ideal speech of tragedy as it is defined by Fielding as H. Scriblerus Secundus in the comic preface to *Tom Thumb*.

Here I shall only beg one postulatam, viz.: that the greatest perfection of the language of a tragedy is, that it is not to be understood; which granted (as I think it must be), it will necessarily follow that the only way to avoid this is by being too high or too low for the understanding . . . It sufficeth that our author excelleth in both. He is very rarely within sight through the whole play, either rising higher than the eye of your understanding can soar or sinking lower than it careth to stoop.¹⁴

In *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*, the Player defines

14 George H. Nettleton and Arthur E. Case, *British Dramatists from Dryden to Sheridan* (Harrap, 1939), pp. 578-9.

the "repertoire" of the tragedians in a memorable *double entendre*: "we'll stoop to anything if that's your bent" (p. 17). This joke, the Player's commands to Alfred, and Alfred's efforts to change costume, lead Guildenstern to combine the high poetry of a tongueless dwarf and the idea that tragedy is dead:

It could have been a tongueless dwarf standing by the road to point the way . . . I was *prepared*. But it's this, is it? No enigma, no dignity, nothing classical, portentous, only this—a comic pornographer and a rabble of prostitutes . . . (p. 19)

The tongueless dwarf joke image is developed in the second act before the Player's speech about the death of tragedy ("mind your tongue", "*lost for words*", "tongue-tied", "a mute in a monologue" and so on, pp. 44-5) Part of the joke in the first act is that homosexuality is one of the ambiguities in *Waiting for Godot*, and that Estragon's problem about his trousers at the end parallels his problem with his boots at the beginning, and refers back to Vladimir's claim that he has always "*resumed the struggle*" and been willing to try everything. Stoppard's variations on Beckett's wit include the development of Guildenstern's trivial refrain "it's this, is it?" and the comic detail that Alfred "*resumes the struggle*" (p. 19) following Guildenstern's lament about the death of tragedy.

Stoppard's plagiarism is an exercise in fashionable sophistication and brilliance of wit, but it is not altogether pointless: the comedy is directed towards the idea that tragedy is dead, rather than against Beckett; to the extent that there is some point to Stoppard's literary nonsense, it is that to claim that tragedy is dead is absurd.¹⁵ The jokes about Alfred refer to Shakespeare as well as *Waiting for Godot*, and to the *double entendre* Shakespeare gives Hamlet as he welcomes the Players (II.ii.432-3). Furthermore, the scheme of the play as evidence of the death of tragedy depends on borrowing the Player and the tragedians from *Hamlet*,

15 Stoppard's appeal to a sense of fashionable sophistication, and the elements of intimate revue in the play seem obvious in the broad sexual comedy of "If I might make a suggestion . . . Stop being perverse" (p. 54), and "normal perverted desires" (p. 46), and the joke about toes (p. 42). These aspects of the play make some of Stoppard's critics seem too earnest (for example: "Whenever Stoppard . . . meditates on large philosophical issues, his play seems thin, shallow. His idiom is not rich enough to sustain a direct intellectual confrontation with Life and Death"—Normand Berlin, "*Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead: Theater of criticism*", *Modern Drama*, 16 (1973), 269-77).

and referring to the Shakespearian design that Hamlet sees himself in relation to the Players and defines his ruin as that he is like a whore with words (II.ii.589). *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* demonstrates the death of tragedy by murdering Hamlet and transforming *Hamlet* into an absurd play within a play about *Waiting for Godot*. The main evidence is that Shakespeare's speech is much the same as Guildenstern's poetry of the tongueless dwarf: at the end of the play, like Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, tragedy "disappears from view" (p. 91), and is seen never to have existed. The idea and the game about "murdering" Hamlet are explicit in the play and important to the development of the plot as a game with *Hamlet*: at the beginning of the second act, when Rosencrantz insists that Hamlet made fools of them, he repeats: "He murdered us . . . He *murdered* us" (p. 40), and the plot develops as a game about Shakespeare's Rosencrantz and Guildenstern as "smiling accomplices" (p. 59). Stoppard's wit about murder and literary burlesque and art as a game is obvious in *The Real Inspector Hound*, and continued in *Artist Descending a Staircase* and *Jumpers and Travesties* (in which his own play about the real life of Lenin, James Joyce, and Dada becomes a noble travesty of Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest*): it seems useful to recognize that Stoppard's wit about murder and the game of art develops from a game about murdering Hamlet.¹⁶

Of course, in *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* the evidence is unfair and ridiculous (and similar to the attempt to establish the direction of north and south in the second act, p. 41). The pieces of *Hamlet* in *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* are the speech of the public life of the court at Elsinore, and Shakespeare's design includes parallels between the speech of the court and the speech of the play within the play. Stoppard sets these pieces of *Hamlet* into a context of conversation in the manner of the puns, refrains, and absurd logic of *Waiting for Godot*, and long speeches in which parody and imitation of Beckett's mock-heroic speech include jokes about syntax and diction. The game succeeds to the extent that it creates doubt about whether Shakespeare or Stoppard wrote *Hamlet*. At the return to *Hamlet* (III.i.11-31) in the second act, *Hamlet* seems to be a travesty of tragedy. The moment of greatest doubt is at the end of the first

16 Tom Stoppard, *The Real Inspector Hound* (Criterion Theatre, London, 1969; Faber, 1968); *Artist Descending a Staircase and Where are they now?* (BBC Radio 3, 1972; Faber, 1973).

act, when a game of questions and answers about *Hamlet*, in the manner of Beckett, leads to clowning with a Hamlet who ends the first act with the question: "Good lads how do you both?" Hamlet seems to be Yorick or Tony Hancock (and there is a similar moment in Guildenstern's later speech: "Out of the void, finally, a sound . . . A thing like that, it could change the course of events").

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead maintains a balance between the idea that tragedy is dead and the traditional licence of clowning and student entertainment to have no aim beyond nonsense, riot, and cleverness. The audience is reminded that Shakespeare's Hamlet is a student prince and an ideal of youth and civilization; and that *Hamlet* is a tragic meditation about youth and confident idealism in which Ophelia finds that Hamlet, "th' expectancy and rose" (like the young man in Shakespeare's *Sonnets*), becomes an image of beauty and ruin: "that unmatched form and feature of blown youth. / Blasted with ecstasy" (III.i.155, 162-3). Stoppard's *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern* are student clowns, and the jokes are a display of brilliance of intelligence and considerable learning. In the circumstances, the similarities between the title and the themes of the play and *The Death of Tragedy* seem to be more than coincidence, and there are particular parallels between the text and the argument of *The Death of Tragedy*.

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead can seem to be a comic imitation of Steiner's account of tragedy: it agrees with each of the terms of Steiner's view that a contemporary tragedy is a literary entertainment, a stale fancy-dress party, an antiquarian charade, a very private matter, and a puppet show in which the puppets insist on behaving as if they are alive.¹⁷ The general view of tragedy also agrees with Steiner's definition of tragedy as a tradition of dramatic form and a vision of man. Guildenstern is a tragic puppet who finds himself in a wonderland where "the fortuitous and the ordained" are no longer a matter of a "reassuring union", and he begins to think about mystical experience and "mystical encounters of various kinds" (p. 14). Stoppard's

17 One of the Player's best jokes is about the private nature of contemporary tragedy: "Think . . . of the most . . . private . . . secret intimate thing you have ever done secure in the knowledge of its privacy . . . Well, I saw you do it! (Ros. leaps up, dissembling madly . . . catches himself with a giggle in a vacuum and sits down again.)" (p. 45)

comedy involves the device that the play is about how Guildenstern learns that a mystical encounter is a tragedy. Guildenstern has a natural gift for the theory of tragedy although he is a clown who fails to catch the Player's point that the play is about tragedy and that: "Blood is compulsory" (p. 23). Guildenstern's confusion is accompanied by analytic precision about the view that he is in the power of uncontrollable forces which control and guide him: "We have not been . . . picked out . . . simply to be abandoned . . . set loose to find our own way" (p. 14); and he assumes that his encounter will be "high" and "classical" and that tragedy is classical ("one of the Greeks, perhaps? You're familiar with the tragedies of antiquity, are you?"—p. 23).

Guildenstern's difficulties are complicated by a conflation of the classical tradition and Beckett's tragicomedy. His assumption that he is in the power of uncontrollable forces becomes an idea that he is in another world, and that he and Rosencrantz should wait: "Enjoy it. Relax" (p. 29), and *Hamlet* becomes Godot. In the second act, the Player has a fine speech which is a variation on Guildenstern's approach to the death of tragedy and religion and the Player is Guildenstern's mentor for his tragic adventure: "We pledged our identities, secure in the conventions of our trade; that someone would be watching. And then, gradually, no one was" (p. 46). The immediate point is that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern were spirited away into the world of *Hamlet*. The speech is an impressive achievement of poetic prose in the mock-heroic mode of the tongueless dwarf—comic elevation ("heads began to move, wary as lizards, the corpse of unsullied Rosalinda peeped through his fingers") and sad bathos ("first confidently, then hesitantly, then desperately as each patch of turf, each log, every exposed corner in every direction proved uninhabited"). The game continues:

(*Silence. Then Guil. claps solo with slow measured irony.*)

Guil. Brilliantly re-created—if these eyes could weep! . . . Rather strong on metaphor, mind you. No criticism—only a matter of taste.
(p. 46)

In view of the game with the earlier stage direction that Alfred "*resumes the struggle*", the stage direction for Guildenstern seems an obvious ambiguity, and Guildenstern's comment is a joke about the play as a tragic burlesque. The parallels between the play and *The Death of Tragedy*, and the importance of metaphor in Steiner's theories, suggest that Guildenstern's comment might be motivated by knowledge of *The Death of Tragedy*. That there is

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"No criticism", however, is an essential condition of the nonsense art of *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*. The attitude of the play, as Rosencrantz says, is that it demonstrates "the misuse of free speech. To prove that it exists" (p. 43), and as Guildenstern and Rosencrantz agree, that it is "a man talking nonsense not to himself . . . Stark raving sane" (pp. 48-9). The correspondences between the play and *The Death of Tragedy* and *Tom Thumb* are not susceptible to precise identification as intentional displays of wit in relation to particular works. The possibility that the play is intended to reveal itself as a comic variation on *The Death of Tragedy* and *Tom Thumb* is complicated by the obvious emphasis on comedy about *Hamlet* and Beckett, and by the general condition that a literary burlesque is to some extent a hoax (and Stoppard's later short play *After Magritte* is a hoax if an audience is unaware of Magritte's paintings).¹⁸ On the other hand, the explanation for the similarities between *The Death of Tragedy* and *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* is perhaps that Beckett, Eliot, and Shakespearian tragedy are the common background for both Steiner and Stoppard.

The further interest of *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* is that it is a tragic burlesque which works as a serious imitation of *Waiting for Godot* and *Hamlet*. The end is a literary prank, although dead-pan, straight-faced comedy, in the manner of much of the clowning of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern and the Player. Guildenstern meditates on death as a philosophic trick ("absence of presence, nothing more"), Rosencrantz disappears from view, Guildenstern dies, or disappears into the void, or the wings, and the end of *Hamlet* follows and "fades, overtaken by dark and music". The effect is more complex than at the end of *Tom Thumb*, and includes some involvement with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern as authentic and heroic young men who reflect a social world in which it is not certain that tragedy is dead. Stoppard's characters include a view of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern as contemporary Hamlets. The dialogue in which Hamlet suspects that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are villains is what happens between the first and second acts of Stoppard's play (and Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, like Vladimir and Estragon, might seem to be innocent victims of tragic catastrophe). Rosencrantz and Guildenstern become variations on the image of Hamlet as an ideal of youth and civilized intelligence.

18 Tom Stoppard, *After Magritte* (Faber, 1971).

From a critical point of view, what is interesting is that the complexity and realism of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern derive largely from a view of the play as an intelligent version of fashionable comedy, and a translation of the theatre of the absurd in terms of distinctively English experience. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are two pleasant, intelligent, contemporary Englishmen who are actors and two pleasant, young men from fashionable comedy. Rosencrantz is the more obvious example. Rosencrantz is "nice enough to feel a little embarrassed", and feels no surprise about the coins: he is intelligent, and a fool, and a clown, and his normal self-possession is partly the result of amiably eccentric pleasure in his own immediate interests. He is a gentleman, polite, a boy as well as a man, interested in games, and tends to see life in terms of play; and he is clean, and good, although neither entirely innocent, nor without some awareness of the pleasures of decadence, as his reactions to the tragedians reveal. Rosencrantz is a conflation of a comic stage Englishman and Hamlet, and as this condition is not altogether irrelevant to *Hamlet*, and as Rosencrantz appears in a context of wit about the play as a play, and parody of Beckett and Eliot as representative modern minds, he becomes an occasion for an exchange of wit between Stoppard and his audience about a common sense of English identity and common attitudes and assumptions. The concern with distinctively English experience is illustrated most obviously in the third act in jokes about the difference between Europe and England (for example: "England! That's a dead end, I never believed in it anyway"—p. 88). One point of departure for these jokes is that Shakespeare's characters are two young men from the Low Countries who are Englishmen abroad talking about the state of the London theatre; and the jokes are obvious variations on Osborne's versions of existentialism and alienation which comment on ruin and crisis in English society.

Stoppard's changes in the conditions of the theatre of the absurd as a theatre of conversation are also relevant. In *Waiting for Godot*, Estragon's "that's the idea, let's make a little conversation" is balanced by the comment "I suppose we blathered" (p. 66). Stoppard's imitation presents a similar general view of the play and life as talking. "What are we going to say?" (p. 78) Rosencrantz asks, and Guildenstern repeats the question later (p. 88); they decide that Hamlet's problem is that he is "talking to himself", and that their own problem is conversation, and wonder whether "conversation is going to help" (p. 87). Stop-

pard's translation of Beckett stresses the idea of improvisation (as in the Player's comment and the joke about acrobatics which is developed in *Jumpers*). Furthermore, in the first act, when Guildenstern pretends to be Hamlet, Hamlet's situation and his reaction to it are transformed into an exchange of casual conversations about matters of common knowledge: "Now why are you behaving in this extraordinary manner?" "I can't imagine! (Pause). But all that is well known, common property" (p. 36).

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead is an exchange of conversation which is both a social art and a casual chat to pass the time. Its qualities include light humour, casual ease, some brilliance, an exchange of ideas, an image of life, confidence about conventions and common assumptions, and some fooling about. Criticism is a serious business, and it might seem improper to stress that Stoppard's play is a conversation play and a conversation piece not unlike some trivial Victorian and contemporary *objets d'art*. The speech includes occasions of eloquence in a context of trivial nonsense: "by this time tomorrow we may have forgotten everything we ever knew. That's a thought, isn't it?" (p. 15). The element of tragedy in *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* is obviously not equivalent to the tragedy of *Hamlet* or the element of tragedy in *Waiting for Godot*, but the imitation of the theatre of the absurd in Stoppard's play seems relevant to the wit, debate, and complexity of convention and meaning in more recent plays written for theatres in London, and to the general issue that awareness of imitation, and versions of parody, hoax and plagiarism, seems to be relevant to appreciation of contemporary drama. *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* assumes the survival of Noel Coward's "*Red Peppers*" as well as *Hamlet*; in contrast, Pinter's *The Caretaker* seems a less impressive imitation of the theatre of the absurd.¹⁹

19 Noel Coward, *Tonight at 8.30* (Heinemann, 1937). The P. G. Wodehouse adaptation of Molnar's *The Play's the Thing* is also relevant to *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*.