

HÉLÈNE LECOSSOIS

Samuel Beckett, Matéi Visniec: From one *Godot* to the last

Matéi Visniec is a Romanian playwright, who left his native country in 1987 for political reasons. He has lived in Paris ever since. Not only has he decided to stay in France, after the collapse of the communist regime in Romania, but he has also chosen to write in French. *Le dernier Godot* is one of the last plays he wrote in Romanian, just a few weeks before he left for France.¹

Matéi Visniec first got acquainted with Beckett when he was fifteen or sixteen, thanks to one of his teachers, who gave him a copy of *Secolul XX*, one of the best Romanian literary journals, in which a translation of *En attendant Godot* had been published. In an interview he gave in 1996, Matéi Visniec states that he discovered Beckett after reading writers such as Dostoievski, Kafka and Jarry, but he recalls that he immediately perceived Beckett's dramatic writing would be of special importance for him. Reading *En attendant Godot* was like a revelation. This play, that many deemed abstruse, he found incredibly clear. He even goes as far as to say that it helped him find his own identity and to understand "the essence of human nature as no book on general or social psychology had been able to" (Visniec 1996: 48, my translation). Beckett had become for him more than a master. He saw him as a *character* and he felt that, when he reread *En attendant Godot*, he missed Beckett's presence amongst the characters of the play. Beckett was thus a great source of inspiration for him when he started writing plays himself. When Dan

¹ As there is as yet no English translation of the play, I will refer to Gabrielle Ionesco's French translation.

Haulica, the director of *Secolul XX*, decided to publish an issue of the journal entirely dedicated to Beckett, he naturally turned to Matéi Visniec and asked him to submit an article. At that moment Visniec realised it was high time for him to part with his “master”. He did so in his own way by writing, not an article, but a short play in which a character named Beckett meets another character: Godot. *Le dernier Godot* was thus written both as a tribute and as a farewell to Beckett.

Le dernier Godot overtly claims its intertextual connection with Beckett’s play. Its very title and the names of the characters are incitements, to say the least, to view the play with *En attendant Godot* in mind. The setting and the situation the characters are plunged in are also highly reminiscent of the Beckettian dramatic universe: a skinny man, Godot, sits on the pavement with his feet in the gutter, near a dustbin. Another skinny man, Beckett, soon bumps into him as he is being thrown out of a theatre. The link between Beckett’s and Visniec’s plays is obvious enough; the precise nature of that link, however, is difficult to define. Should Visniec’s play be seen as a sequence to Beckett’s, as a pastiche or as an ingenious post-modern work playing with someone else’s famous structure? One may think of the structural device used by this other East-European born playwright, Tom Stoppard, in *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*. The question at the origin of Stoppard’s play is: what could two minor characters of *Hamlet* do when not on stage? In that respect, the play may be regarded, in Gérard Genette’s words, as a paraleptic continuation of *Hamlet*. Visniec’s choice of composition is different, however. Indeed, he chose to place at the heart of his play, not two minor characters, but the two figures that are notoriously absent from the stage of *En attendant Godot*, that is to say Godot and Beckett himself. By doing so, Visniec mixes categories and transforms into characters the non-fictional person of the author and what was in Beckett’s work a mere name. By calling into question the status of the character and that of the author, he shakes the very foundation of theatre as a genre. And indeed the characters of *Le dernier Godot* claim that theatre has just been killed so that the play first appears as an elegy, a lament for the death of theatre.

***Le dernier Godot* as an elegy, a lament for the death of theatre**

A sense of closure, or rather of an impending end, is indeed present, from the beginning, with the word “dernier” in the very title of the play

and with the crepuscular light one imagines the stage bathed in, as the “action” takes place at dusk. What is more, the town in which the characters live seems to gradually empty itself of its inhabitants:

Beckett: Il y a deux heures, je suis allé boire une bière sur la terrasse. A ton avis, il y en avait combien ?
Godot: Combien?
Beckett: Trois.
Godot: Qu'ils aillent se faire foutre. Je voulais dire trois et je ne sais pas pourquoi je me suis tu.
Beckett: Essaie de monter dans un bus. Tu deviens carrément fou. Je suis venu ici en bus. Combien de gens crois-tu qu'il y avait dans le bus?
Godot: [*Triumphant.*] Trois!
Beckett: Il n'y avait que moi et le chauffeur.
Godot: C'est clair. Tout dégringole. (Visniec 1996: 34-5)²

No explanation is given for the dwindling number of people in public places. The two characters seem to be amongst the last survivors in this ghostly town and Godot clearly voices a sense of entropy when he states: “tout dégringole”. We are presented with a universe going to waste: the place is said to stink like a sewer; the characters have their feet in the gutter and stand or sit amidst the rubbish of an overturned dustbin, which makes it tempting to see them as yet other pieces of rubbish and as metaphors for the human condition or for the degeneration of humanity. Godot, whom some early critics of Beckett’s play saw as God, is presented in Visniec’s as a real boozier, who smokes the butts he finds in the refuse of the theatre. In a very Beckettian way, with all the grim humour it entails, Visniec debunks all the metaphysical expectations one may have had concerning Godot. Our lofty aspirations, our hopes of a possible sublimation of the human condition by art are also debunked very crudely. As Beckett, the character, informs us, the nearby playhouse will soon be turned into a warehouse for sauerkraut containers.

² “Beckett: Two hours ago I went and had a beer. How many, do you think, were there?
Godot: How many?
Beckett: Three.
Godot: Fuck them. I wanted to say three, then I didn’t say anything. I don’t know why.
Beckett: Try and get on a bus. It drives you crazy. I came here by bus. How many people were in the bus, do you think?
Godot: [*Triumphant.*] Three!
Beckett: There were only me and the driver.
Godot: No doubt about that. Everything’s going to the dogs.” [My translation.]

The sense of an impending end is both reinforced and contradicted by the fact that the play starts, interestingly enough, *after* the last performance of *En attendant Godot* and *after* the closing down of the playhouse. Beginning and ending tend to merge. The question of the end remains problematic. When Beckett looks through the manuscript pages of *En attendant Godot*, he is unable to find the end: “Où est la fin?”, he asks, to which Godot replies: “Mon vieux, ceux-là ne méritent pas de fin” (Visniec 1996: 40).³ In Godot’s rejoinder, the end is implicitly presented as a reward for the worthy. The referent of the demonstrative pronoun “ceux-là” is open to interpretation; it may refer to the characters of *En attendant Godot*, the actors, the spectators of the play, the rest of humanity... whose penance for being what they are would thus be perpetual endlessness. And indeed Visniec refuses us the comfort of an end: the end is problematic, not only on a thematic plane but on a formal and structural plane as well. *Le dernier Godot* has a circular structure with the last scene echoing the first: it opens with Godot asking Beckett: “Ils t’ont frappé?”, and ends with Beckett saying: “Demande-moi s’ils m’ont cassé la gueule”.⁴ This mirror effect is reinforced by the fact that this last scene is also the first scene of a play-within-the-play, as people, coming from nowhere, gather around Beckett and Godot, sit down and watch them:

Godot: [*Regardant effrayé autour d’eux la foule qui s’est assise dans la rue.*] Mon Dieu, qu’est-ce que je dois dire?

Beckett: Demande-moi s’ils m’ont cassé la gueule... Pendant ce temps j’enlève ma chaussure et je la regarde. Après, tu me demandes ce que je fais là.

[*Il ôte sa chaussure.*]

Godot: [*D’une voix décidée.*] Qu’est-ce que tu fais?

Beckett: Je me déchausse. Ça t’est jamais arrivé? (Visniec 1996: 46)⁵

³ “Beckett: Where is the end? / Godot: Old chap, those lot, they don’t deserve an end.” [My translation.]

⁴ “Godot: Did they beat you?”; “Beckett: Ask me if they smashed my face in?” [My translation.]

⁵ “Godot: [*Frightened look at the people who have gathered around them and are sitting in the street*] God, what shall I say?”

Beckett: Ask me if they smashed my face in... Meantime, I’ll take off my boot and look at it. Then you ask me what I am doing.

[*Takes off his boot.*]

Godot: [*Resolutely*] What are you doing?

Beckett: Taking off my boot. Did that never happen to you?” [My translation.]

Before this scene, the characters were just about to give up. Beckett had finally agreed to give in to Godot's desire to see the end of *En attendant Godot* revised and was willing to grant him at least a short appearance on stage. But Godot had answered: "Ah quoi bon? Le théâtre est mort" (*Ibidem*: 40).⁶ Theatre dies hard, however. Its proclaimed death is immediately followed by its spontaneous rebirth, as the characters engage in the play-within-the-play. The end of *Le dernier Godot* echoes, as has already been mentioned, its beginning but it also points to another beginning – that of *En attendant Godot*. Beckett's words are the exact same as Estragon's: "Je me déchausse, ça ne t'est jamais arrivé, à toi?" (Beckett 1952: 11).

Visniec's play engages in an endless dialogue with Beckett's. The link between the two plays is of the same nature as the one that unites the hypo-text and the hyper-text, in Genette's terminology. It is one that invites a constant oscillation between one text and the other and thus ultimately refuses the closure of the text. Visniec does not merely repeat the beginning of *En attendant Godot*, he rewrites it. The slight variations to be found in his rewriting are signs of the advent of a new creation. In the play within Visniec's play, the beginning of *En attendant Godot* is condensed, the question that Vladimir puts to Estragon in standard French – "Et on ne t'a pas battu?" – is replaced by the colloquial "demande-moi s'ils m'ont cassé la gueule".⁷ The movement of condensation and the shift in register are, in a way, Visniec's tribute to the Beckettian poetics of the less and of the worst.

Visniec chose not to end his play on Godot asserting that theatre is dead, but to celebrate the endless capacity of the theatre to rise from its ashes. There will always be new performances of the old plays, rewritings of the old texts. There will always be performances outside the official playhouses. Even though the doors of the nearest playhouse are closed, a new acting area is born. The passers-by gathering around Beckett and Godot have changed the pavement into a new stage and the staging of a dialogue by the characters is in itself an act of theatre.

⁶ "Godot: What's the point? Theatre is dead." [My translation.]

⁷ See note 5.

Aesthetic response to the death of theatre

Matéi Visniec raises the question of the capacity of the corpse of theatre to sprout and bloom again once it has been re-planted, to borrow T. S. Eliot's metaphor. In that respect, as in many others, he echoes Samuel Beckett's formal concerns. Beckett's plays present us with the components of theatre after their death and Beckett very often indulges in a dramaturgical post-mortem. Adorno saw that "post-mortem" as one of the essential features of *Fin de partie*:

The dramatic constituents put in a posthumous appearance. Exposition, complication, plot, peripetia and catastrophe return in decomposed form as participants in an examination of the dramaturgical corpse. Representing the catastrophe, for instance, is the announcement that there are no more painkillers. (Adorno 1991: 260)

Le dernier Godot is faithful to the Beckettian dramaturgical concerns. It too is a play of the after – after the waiting: Godot is not to be waited for any longer. Right from the start, he is here, on stage. Godot's arrival is precisely the peripetia that Beckett excludes from the structure of *En attendant Godot*. In Visniec's play, however, the presence of Godot does not fundamentally disrupt the course of things – the characters are still unable to leave the stage, trapped by their absolute need to speak and to be perceived.⁸ The old questions remain unanswered and the search for proofs of one's existence continues. If anything, the presence of Godot renders things even more complicated, as he goes as far as to call into question the existence of Beckett himself, as in the following exchange, for example. Godot has just realised that he has already seen Beckett in the theatre: both go there every night and the previous night, they were the only two spectators left in the auditorium:

Godot: J'avais pigé que c'était toi. Dès que je t'ai vu, j'ai pigé. Et qu'est-ce que tu foutais?

Beckett: C'est moi qui l'ai écrit.

Godot: Quoi?

Beckett: Ce truc. Je l'ai écrit.

⁸ "Godot: Je t'ai dit, je n'ai besoin que d'une minute, d'un mot pour être moi-même" (Visniec 1996: 29); "Godot: I told you, I only need one minute. I only need to say one word to be myself" [My translation].

Godot: C'est pas vrai! C'est toi qui l'as écrit?
 Beckett: Moi.
 Godot: C'est-à-dire, c'est toi l'auteur?
 Beckett: Moi. C'est moi.
 Godot: Formidable! Donc tu existes!
 Beckett: J'existe. Bien sûr que j'existe. Qui t'as mis dans la tête que je n'existais pas?
 Godot: A vrai dire, j'avais compris depuis longtemps que tu existais. Ça fait bien quelques années que je me suis demandé si tu existais vraiment. Je me disais: existe-t-il ou n'existe-t-il pas? Il y avait des jours où il me semblait que tu ne pouvais pas exister. (Visniec 1996: 21-22)⁹

Visniec imitates Beckett's use of stichomythia. Stichomythia was used in classical tragedy at the climax of the action to reflect an extreme dramatic tension. The dramatic tension has here been replaced, as is very often the case in Beckett's drama too, by a discussion of theatre itself. Indeed the status of the author and that of his writing are questioned. The work of art is subjected to a depreciating opinion and disparagingly referred to as a "truc", a nondescript thing. Godot takes up the same idea a little later when he asks Beckett: "c'est une façon d'écrire, ça?" (Visniec 1996: 25).¹⁰ This negative retrospective judgement fits in perfectly with the constant reflexion on and questioning of the act of writing one finds in Beckett's work.

Visniec's choice of naming one of the characters after his "master" may be yet another hint at the work of the aforementioned master: indeed Beckett himself had tried his hand at fictionalizing one of his mentors, Descartes, in *Whoroscope*. In both instances the mode of presence of the author-character is problematic. In Visniec's play, Beckett is present as a

⁹ "Godot: I knew long ago that it was you. As soon as I saw you, I got it. What the hell were you doing?"

Beckett: I wrote it.

Godot: What?

Beckett: That thing. I wrote it.

Godot: You don't say! Did you really write it?

Beckett: I did.

Godot: You mean, you're the author?

Beckett: I am. Yes. I am.

Godot: Great! So you exist!

Beckett: I do. Of course, I do. Who got it into your head that I didn't exist?

Godot: To tell you the truth, I had understood long ago that you existed. For a good few years, I've wondered if you really existed. I thought: does he exist or doesn't he? Some days, it seemed you could not exist." [My translation.]

¹⁰ "Is this a way to write?" [My translation.]

character, as an author and his work is under discussion. Yet his presence seems to be hesitant, as is testified by the replies he makes to Godot: “Moi. C’est moi”; “J’existe. Bien sûr que j’existe”. The repetitions to be found in his answers sound like desperate and somewhat uncertain attempts to assert his existence, all the more so as they verge on tautology – “Moi. C’est moi.” The triumphant Cartesian “I think therefore I am”, which Beckett had parodied many times,¹¹ has here given way to a rather hesitant and stammering “I write therefore I am”.

In Visniec’s play, Beckett is at the same time overtly present and absent, and all the more so as Visniec blurs the limit between fiction and reality as early as the dedication: the play is dedicated, not to a real person, as one would have expected, but to the two characters of the play. Beckett and Godot are thus put on the same dubious plane of existence. As a character, Beckett is the alter ego of Godot – they look alike, wear the same clothes, etc.; he has therefore as little true substance as Godot. He is no more than a mask, just like the one Godot finds in the rubbish of the theatre, a persona, a part with no real depth as long as a comedian has not lent him his voice and body. He epitomizes the paradoxical presence-absence of any persona, which Godot thus sums up in these questions, implicitly referring to *the* character par excellence: “Comment est-il possible de flotter comme ça à l’infini? Être et ne pas être en même temps?”¹² As a writer, Beckett’s presence is also wavering, as is highlighted by Godot’s interrogations concerning his existence. The writer, the author is the one who is absent from his texts. As Michel Foucault reminds us in “Qu’est-ce qu’un auteur?”, writing has to do with the sacrifice and erasure of the life of the author (Foucault 2004: 294).

The individual characteristics of the writing subject may be gradually erased, but the name of the author resists this erasure. The name Visniec chooses for his character is not just any proper name. It is over-determined as it carries with it numerous connotations and calls to mind various pieces of information. The spectators of *Le dernier Godot* watch the play with some knowledge of the biography of Samuel Beckett and of his literary and theatrical work. The name “Beckett” is more than a mere indication, it works as a description (*Ibidem*: 299). It opens a

¹¹ One may think, for example, of *Endgame*: “Clov: He’s crying. / Hamm: Then he is living” (Beckett 1986: 123).

¹² “How can one float like this ad infinitum? To be and not to be at the same time?” [My translation.]

multitude of possible intertextual readings and interpretations. It also gives an identifiable historical context to the story of Visniec's play.

The playwright's response to History

As a rule, Beckett's drama is not very often perceived as having been profoundly marked by the historical circumstances in which it was written. Vladimir and Estragon have, more often than not, been perceived as metaphysical tramps, as avatars of Everyman in a nondescript place and time. Beckett does write about the metaphysical absurdity of the human condition, yet he also writes about the historical events that he was given to witness. His dramatic writing bears the stigmata of these troubled times and his theatre is irremediably anchored in a specific time and place. He wrote *En attendant Godot*, having in mind the time he spent in pure waiting when he was in the south of France during the war, and the human being he stages is the man of the post-Auschwitz period.¹³ The spectators are implicitly referred to the accounts given by the survivors of the concentration camps, as the "dead voices" refuse to stay silent and "make a noise like wings", as Vladimir remarks (Beckett 1986: 58). Estragon reminds us that "billions others" have been killed and he and Vladimir cannot help wondering about the corpses:

Vladimir: D'où viennent tous ces cadavres?
Estragon: Ces ossements.
Vladimir: Voilà.
Estragon: Evidemment.
Vladimir: On a dû penser un peu.
Estragon: Tout à fait au commencement.
Vladimir: Un charnier, un charnier.
Estragon: Il n'y a qu'à ne pas regarder.
Vladimir: Ça tire l'œil. (Beckett 1952: 90)¹⁴

¹³ See Elisabeth Angel-Perez, *Voyages au bout du possible. Les théâtres du traumatisme de Samuel Beckett à Sarah Kane*. Paris: Klincksieck, 2006.

¹⁴“Vladimir: Where are all these corpses from?
Estragon: These skeletons.
Vladimir: Tell me that.
Estragon: True.
Vladimir: We must have thought a little.
Estragon: At the very beginning.
Vladimir: A charnel-house! A charnel house!
Estragon: You don't have to look.
Vladimir: You can't help looking.” (Beckett 1986: 60)

The horror of the concentration and extermination camps cannot be ignored. Beckett places it at the heart of his dramatic text but also at the heart of the scenic images he gives birth to. The image of the legless Nagg and Nell contained in their dustbins is probably one of the most striking in this respect. Theodor Adorno sees these dustbins as the very emblems of the post-Auschwitz culture: “The natural connection between the living has now become organic garbage. The Nazis have irrevocably overthrown the taboo on old age. Beckett’s trashcans are emblems of the culture rebuilt after Auschwitz” (Adorno 1991: 266-7).

It is precisely this emblem that Matéi Visniec chose for his tribute to Beckett. It is an emblem that recurs in his dramatic writing as is testified by the title of another of his plays: *Théâtre décomposé ou l’homme-poubelle*. The theatre that is dying and going to waste that Visniec presents us with in *Le dernier Godot* is the theatre as it existed under the totalitarian regime in Romania. Strict rules had to be respected – and in a way this is what Godot denounces implicitly when he says to Beckett: “Pourquoi tu ne regardes pas un peu autour de toi, pour voir comment on *doit* écrire?” (Visniec 1996: 25).¹⁵ Respecting the injunctions of the political power meant one’s play would not be censored. After Ceausescu’s visit to China and North Korea in 1971, an end was put to the slight movement of liberation that had been felt at the end of the 1960s and oppression and censorship were reinforced. Yet Romanian actors and writers developed a mode of acting and writing which relied on polysemy (Popescu 2000: 19), so that they could reach the audience despite political or ideological barriers. Absurdist literature and theatre, which the authorities were too blind to see as a potential threat and therefore did not censor, denounced the propaganda of the totalitarian regime and the atrocities experienced by the people of the former Soviet block. The anguish of the individual faced with an alienating society may be heard in Godot’s question and in the answer provided by Beckett: “Godot: Ils t’ont frappé? / Beckett: Non, ils m’ont plutôt sali” (Visniec 1996: 15-16).¹⁶ The characters are persecuted by an anonymous and hostile “ils”. Violence, in all its forms, physical and psychological, is everywhere. One is reminded of the poetics of fear Ionesco presents us with in *Rhinoceros*, of course. In that context, Godot’s wish to enter the stage at the end of *En attendant Godot* and to say “no” may be seen as an act of resistance:

¹⁵ “Godot: Why don’t you look around to see how one *should* write?” [My translation.]

¹⁶ “Godot: Did they beat you? / Beckett: No. They messed me up, rather.” [My translation.]

Godot: Une seule minute m'aurait suffi... Même une seule seconde... J'aurais pu dire moi aussi un mot... N'importe quel mot... Par exemple, j'aurais pu dire NON... J'aurais pu sortir simplement à la fin, et m'approchant de l'avant-scène, j'aurais dit NON... (Visniec 1996: 26-27)¹⁷

No! was the title of the essay Ionesco wrote in 1934 to undermine the foundation of literary criticism. He first published a text in which he fiercely criticised three Romanian literary figures, and a few days later he published another text that praised the same writers. To show the equivalence of these opposed opinions, he published the two texts together under one title: *No!* Ionesco's *No* may be regarded as an aesthetic quest for new means of expression that refused the old logic. Visniec's "no" has an aesthetic dimension too, as he too celebrates, just like Beckett, the identity of contraries, as he too searches for a new mode of expression. But it also has a very strong political dimension. These are his words: "Lire Beckett, à l'époque, c'était comme respirer une alternative à l'idéologie officielle. C'était comme plonger dans la liberté même de dire NON" (Visniec 1996: 48).¹⁸

Visniec's play echoes Beckett's in many respects. But, just as the nymph Echo in Ovid's transcription of the myth, Visniec does not merely repeat Beckett's words; he *chooses* the elements he repeats in an attempt to find his own voice, in order to question, in his own way, the status and the role of theatre and the playwright's aesthetic and political response to History.

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¹⁷ "Godot: I only needed one minute... One second even... I too could have said a word... Any word... For example, I could have said NO... I could have just come on stage at the end and moved to the front. And I would have said NO." [My translation]

¹⁸ "To read Beckett at that time was like breathing an alternative to the official ideology. It was like plunging into the very freedom to say NO." [My translation]

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