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A shakespeare-i örökség „hatodik kora”: Samuel Beckett és A játszma vége

“The Sixth Age” of the Shakespearean Heritage: Samuel Beckett’s Endgame

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1. Introduction

One cannot give an exhaustive analysis of Samuel Beckett's 1956 play, *Endgame* without, at least briefly, discussing Beckett's choice of the title. Even though the present paper does not venture so far as to exhaustively dissect the play, the discussion of the title offers to be a good starting point as in its paradoxical nature it exemplifies a central problem in the play: the question of divisibility.

Giving the title *Endgame* to his translation of the original French version of the play, Beckett borrowed a word from the chess-players' vocabulary, which immediately offers an interpretation of the play as the last stage of a chess game.¹ However, when applying such a term metaphorically to a stage of life as *Endgame* does, some questions that do not seem relevant in a chess game also arise. Most prominently, where to position such an endgame in time? It is clear that it must either precede the end or end in it, but where should it begin? Is it the agony before dying, is it the last day, the last few months, the last decade or is it the whole life? The problem stems from the paradox within the compound "endgame". While "game" suggests a process with a temporal dimension, "end" refers to a point in time when such a process is terminated. As a point, the end *per definitionem* lacks dimensions and only functions as a turning point where something previously existent changes into no-longer-existent. However, people tend to perceive it either as the (presumably long) stage that comes after existence or as a stage that immediately precedes non-existence, that is, the last moment in the string of moments that constitute existence. But given that, they end up classifying the

¹ Beckett himself was a devoted chess-player, but it is only the English translation of the title that makes the connection between the play and chess explicit; the original title was *Fin de Partie*, which may refer to the final stage of several other games too. However, it is possible that Beckett had the chess game in mind originally as well: his use of the colours black and white and his economically focused hint to Ernst Schroeder playing Hamm in the Schiller Theatre production of the play ("He's a king in this chess match lost-from-the-start." as quoted by Knowlson 104) seem to support the idea.

end as a very final stage again, which can be divided into even smaller units, and this stage will still lead up to a point of termination. Beckett's *Endgame* does not explicitly lead to any point of termination, therefore it must be viewed as an account on a stage somewhere before the end.

It is not always easy to identify the last phase in one's life. One only knows the certainty of its coming, but, besides that, every moment carries the potential of becoming the last: a stroke, a bullet or an atomic bomb can put end to man's life any time. Therefore, the last phase can be nominated the last only when the turning point, death has already been positioned on the same scale of time. This often happens in retrospect, but this "often" is far from being "always". The reason for this lies within life's likeness to a scenario or a theatre play.²

Such a scenario of life is given by Shakespeare in Jaques's famous monologue from *As You Like It*:

All the world's a stage,
 And all the men and women merely players:
 They have their exits and their entrances;
 And one man in his time plays many parts,
 His acts being seven ages. (52)

² The origin of this simile is actually its reverse. Erika Fischer-Lichte, when defining theatre as a liminal place, refers to Helmuth Plessner's definition of *conditio humana*, in accordance with which she says "the fundamental conditions of theatre are to be found in the *conditio humana*, which theatre also symbolises at the same time" (Fischer-Lichte 2). All citations from Fischer-Lichte's *History of European Drama and Theatre* are taken from the English edition of the book, except for one reference made to the Hungarian translation, which is indicated in the text.

Shakespeare's seven ages of man speech draws an image about a life we know as maximal in length.³ The closer one is to reaching the maximal lifespan, the better will he see the future, since the chance of dying increases day by day.

Taken life's semblance to a play, one may not only become a better diviner by ageing but also a better dramatist. For "beginning, middle, and end" (Aristotle 30) are main dramaturgical concepts as well, and one can answer with Hamm with increasing certainty:

CLOV: Do you see how it goes on.

HAMM: More or less.

CLOV: Will it not soon be the end?

HAMM: I'm afraid, it will. (41)

The characters of *Endgame* have already reached an older age, and their limited means and potency to commit suicide put them into a naturally late stage of life with a relatively high probability of dying rather sooner than later. According to Shakespeare's categorisation, Hamm can be considered to be between the sixth and seventh ages, probably closer to the sixth since his parents, Nagg and Nell are the prototypical examples of the seventh age, asking for pap in "second childishness ..., / Sans teeth, sans eyes, sans taste, sans everything" (Shakespeare, *As You Like It* 53).

The sixth age shifts

Into the lean and slipper'd pantaloon,

With spectacles on nose and pouch on side,

³ Referring to the 69-year-old Krapp preparing for death, John Calder considers it probable that Beckett regarded the "biblical average" of 70 years as such a symbolic maximum. See Calder 120-121.

His youthful hose, well sav'd, a world too wide
 For his shrunk shank; and his big manly voice,
 Turning again toward childish treble, pipes
 And whistles in his sound. (53)

This Shakespearean characterisation fits the Beckettian man especially well because it introduces a parallel between ageing and shrinking, which is also applicable to *Endgame* for Beckett's man is shrinking as well. More than that, at the beginning of the play Clov is so short that he needs a ladder to look out of the window. He also tends to forget the ladder and always has to go back for it when he crosses to the other window, which suggests that it has not always been so. This suggestion is supported by the fact that the time in which he realises that he has forgotten the steps gets shorter, which also signifies a learning process. Similarly, Hamm's surprised question "Why? Have you shrunk?" (24) supports the same idea.

The shrinking of man as an indicator of the life-to-death transition in *Endgame* is a well-applicable metaphor, because while it can model the way 'something', that is life, gradually becomes 'nothing', it can also be considered akin with the effort with which man tries to identify and consequently understand the atomic, indivisible moment of change that sends him to "[t]he undiscovered country, from whose bourn / No traveller returns" (Shakespeare, *Hamlet* 87).

The characters of *Endgame* are obsessed with parameters in their attempt to define the world around them and locate its boundaries both in time and space. They hope to understand better the anatomy of existence in order to gain autonomy over it. Ironically, this desired autonomy could only take form as a self-destructive force in a world devoid of the transcendental. In his attempt, the man of the sixth age becomes an artist, a creator, working towards perfection in turning the 'something' of existence into the 'nothing' of death.

The present paper aims to discuss how man's position in the world leads to the definition of his situation as a theatrical one, acting from which he becomes akin with an artist striving to understand the nature of the perfect masterpiece that he attempts to create: end.

2. Moments for nothing

As a theatre play concerned with such dramaturgical concepts as beginning, middle and ending, *Endgame* operates a double dramaturgy. Performed on stage, the play has to begin when the curtain opens and end when the curtain falls. At the same time, its plot depicts only a phase of life while the beginning and the end fall outside of its scope: the beginning is positioned before the beginning of the play and the end is positioned after the end of the play. Since the anatomy of life is perceived through dramaturgical terms, *Endgame*, more pointedly than plays in general, necessarily becomes a play within another play, a smaller episode within a bigger story.

This part-to-whole proportional relation is thematised in the play with references to the Sorites paradox.⁴ Both of these allusions are uttered at dramaturgically important points in the play. The first one ("Grain upon grain, one by one, and one day, suddenly, there's a heap, a little heap, the impossible heap." [12]) is the second sentence of the first utterance of the play, and, as such, it assigns the paradox a thematic focus. The second ("Moment upon moment, pattering down, like the millet grains of...[*he hesitates*]...that old Greek, and all life long wait for that to mount up to a life." [45]) is positioned at the end of Hamm's first "last soliloquy" (49), at which point the play could end as it ends after Hamm's second "last soliloquy". This

⁴ Relying on the text of the play, it would be more precise to say that there is a reference to the Sorites paradox and there is a reference to the grain of millet paradox of Zeno. However, the two paradoxes problematise the same question and the difference between the two is irrelevant to the point that is to be made here, hence the arbitrary decision to use the Sorites paradox for demonstrating the problematic nature of a part-to-whole relationship.

structural positioning of the references to the paradox supports the idea that the problem the paradox exemplifies is an important thematic focus in the play. This is what James Knowlson suggests too, relying on Beckett's notes prepared for the productions of *Endgame* staged by the playwright himself. Knowlson writes "[t]he slow, inexorable yet unending 'grain upon grain' theme of time dominated both Beckett's 1967 Schiller Theatre and 1980 San Quentin productions of *Endgame*. [...] And Beckett's production notes focused on the way in which this theme was articulated throughout the play" (142).

According to the Sorites paradox, removing one grain from a heap won't affect the 'heapness' of the heap, no matter how many times this procedure is repeated. The claim that one grain will not make a difference leads to the conclusion that even one grain (or less) should be considered a heap. Also, given the same premise, the argument that a pile of grains will never become a heap could be similarly supported. This problematises the detectability of change, for there is a change: one pile of grain is already a heap while another is not.

Hamm faces a problem of the same nature regarding his life: he finds himself old, blind, unable to move, painful all the time, but he perceives his being in a continuous present, as if it has always been so. One cannot say with certainty that it has not, but it is worth mentioning nevertheless that at the same time, Hamm prophesises the same fate for Clov, who is not yet in such a miserable state: "One day you'll be blind, like me. You'll be sitting there, a speck in the void, in the dark, for ever, like me" (28). The contrast of "one day" and "for ever" is significant. The present reality seems to be the only reality, it is comparable to a "standstill" (29), and yet nothing remains the same. As Hamm puts it: "But we breathe, we change! We lose our hair, our teeth! Our bloom! Our ideals!" (16)

While much of what changes in the life of an individual may seem insignificant enough to add to the effect of continuity of a present tense, there is a change that concerns man much more: the end. It is in the light of this mysterious moment that all the previous

changes of life start to seem important for the characters. They want to define the end, but they can only approach it from the known segments of the world. Their obsession with accuracy, punctuality, parameters and numbers stems from this attitude. For instance, Hamm tries to determine the dividing line between life and death in terms of the amount of food that is “just enough to keep” (14) Clov alive.

Good timing becomes essentially important for the characters. Hamm’s recurring question “Is it not time for my pain-killer?” expresses his obsession with punctuality. He asks this question six times throughout the play, and the importance of timing can be the best understood from Clov’s answer to Hamm’s third enquiry:

HAMM: Time enough. [*Clov halts.*] Give me my pain-killer.

CLOV: It’s too soon. [*Pause.*] It’s too soon on top of your tonic, it wouldn’t act. (23)

Since physical pain appears to be a symptom of existence in *Endgame*, Hamm’s enquiry about the pain-killer can be taken as an enquiry about the timing of death, when not just all the pain but everything is “killed”. Clov’s answer makes it apparent that good timing is essential indeed, because the end has a fixed place in a dramaturgical structure where it “acts” best, and compared to which one is either too early or too late with the enthusiasm to end. Similar is the problem with Clov’s seeds that have not yet sprouted. According to Hamm, perhaps they are still on time, but Clov believes “they would have sprouted” (17) if they were going to, and he makes the conclusion that “[t]hey’ll never sprout” (17).

Accompanying the shrinking of *Endgame*’s characters, the sign of change in this world appears to be loss. Many objects have disappeared, Hamm has lost his sight and Nagg and Nell have lost their limbs in a tandem crash in the Ardennes. The chain of these losses

project a future state in which everything has been lost, and this is foreshadowed by Clov's mathematical account of the outside world as well: "Zero...[*he looks*]...zero...[*he looks*]...and zero" (25). This loss is mirrored by the incompleteness of the dog in the play. This dog lacks its ribbon, a leg and is unable to stand, like Hamm. Altogether, it is a sexless toy that Hamm and Clov can toss around the way they like. Clov says the reason for the dog's incompleteness is that "he isn't finished" (30).

However, there is a contrast between two kinds of incompleteness, which is crucial to the understanding of the main paradox of the play, the aim of reaching 'nothing' by creation. The dog is incomplete because it is not yet finished, while the characters of the play are incomplete as a result of loss. Their shrinking goes from completeness to disappearance, which is accompanied by a pain like that of the rat that Clov kills only half. To put an end to incompleteness one has to add what is missing to the dog and take away all that is remaining from man. Consequently, incompleteness can be perceived both as the absence of a missing part and as the presence of a redundant part.

The relationship between the two is paradoxical only on the surface. As two sides of the same coin, absence and presence are connected, present (and absent) at the same time. This is worded by Hamm as "the bigger a man is the fuller he is [*Pause. Gloomily.*] And the emptier" (12). This connection between fullness and emptiness can be understood within the framework of Beckett's understanding of time as a "constant process of decantation [...] from the vessel containing the fluid of future time ... to the vessel containing the fluid of past time" (qtd. in Calder 112). This time, as Calder puts it, "flows backwards" (123) from the vessel of the future containing the time that is "in store for us" (113) to the vessel of the past which is only available as a target of nostalgia, not as a resource. As time flows, one vessel gets empty while the other gets full.

This model of time determines two states of absoluteness: the two extremes of the decantation process. One is when the vessel of future is full and the vessel of past is empty, the other is when the vessel of past is full and the vessel of future is empty. This absoluteness is a shared quality between the two extremes, and it is this common trait that makes both extremes inviting (and frightening) for the man painful with incompleteness. Rónán McDonald points out Hamm's ambiguous feelings towards the withering away of things, saying "[t]ogether with the nostalgia for the lost world, there is satisfaction that all is falling apart" (46). This is how time in *Endgame* becomes the "double-headed monster of damnation and salvation" (qtd. in Calder 111).

For the Beckettian man of the sixth age, these two extremes of absoluteness are two destinations of the escape from the absurdity of life which Camus calls the leap (308). According to Camus the absurd can be defined as a contradiction in the coexistence of world and man (305): as Beckett's instruction to Ernst Schroeder, which has been quoted previously, suggests it, Hamm and the others are playing a game that they want to win but what they cannot win.⁵ This is what Hamm refers to when he says "[o]ld endgame lost of old, play and lose and have done with losing" (51). This proves that Hamm knows that he has to lose the game, but he refrains from choosing Camus's 'absurd freedom'⁶ as a behaviour. Instead, he tries to take the leap to find absolution in either extreme of the absolute.

One such absolute comes to the characters in the form of nostalgia for a long lost paradise. Hamm visits such a place in his dreams and daydreams (Balotă 444), where there is

⁵ This is the game Jan Kott describes as a chess game against an electronic brain, which is lost by man "rightfully, according to the rules of the game [...] but without the chance of winning" (157). All references to Kott are based on the Hungarian edition of *Shakespeare Our Contemporary*. The translation I use above is my own.

⁶ Albert Camus develops his notion of 'absurd freedom' in his essay *The Myth of Sisyphus*. According to him, the authentic behaviour of man facing the absurd is the continuous revolt against the absurd, embodied in the quantitative pursuit of experience.

nature around him, he can see and move around and he is “happy as a king” (38): “If I could sleep I might make love. I’d go into the woods. My eyes would see...the sky, the earth. I’d run, run they wouldn’t catch me” (19). This is a place of love and unity, where men and women, as halves of an androgyne body, are not yet separable like in Aristophanes’s speech in Plato’s *Symposium* (59-60). The loss of this edenic unity is depicted in Nagg and Nell’s tandem crash in the Ardennes, which fractured the unity between man and woman and mutilated the living bodies to set off the unstoppable shrinking that was to come.

As a significant change in man’s conditions, it is self-evident that the parameters of the tandem crash will be relevant for the characters; however, the locus of the accident is important in another respect as well. The crash could have happened anywhere and the parameters of any other place could have been given, but the fact that it happened in the Ardennes adds to the effect of the play insofar as it opens a whole new level of interpretation, which puts the play in the broader context of dramatic tradition. It is not by chance that both Fischer-Lichte’s and Nicolae Balotă’s Hungarian translators take the Ardennes for the Forest of Arden (Fischer-Lichte trans. 657; Balotă 441). Here, Beckett turns to Shakespeare’s *As You Like It* by alluding to both the myth of the androgyne and the Forest of Arden. Kott, discussing androgyny in his essay “Shakespeare’s Bitter Arcadia” calls attention to the possibility androgyny opens for Shakespeare’s characters in *As You Like It*: as in the case of Rosalind, who plays Ganymede playing Rosalind, it allows one to be oneself and someone else at the same time (319–320), which will become important later, in Hamm’s construction of the actor’s identity. Kott also points out that the Forest of Arden in Shakespeare’s play becomes an illusory idyllic destination of escape (326–327), for, just like in Beckett’s play, there is a need to run away, but there is no real escape (329). There could be if Hamm managed to stay asleep, but he is either woken up or wakes up by himself, and the illusion fades away. Hamm is aware of the illusory nature of his longing for the return to this lost

Arcadia; in his chronicle, he downgrades this desire to mere imagination: “But what in God’s name do you imagine? That the earth will awake in spring? That the rivers and seas will run with fish again? That there’s manna in heaven still for imbeciles like you?” (37) All these memories of ‘yesterday’ and ‘once’ are in harsh contrast with the continuous present of ‘for ever’, and seem so distant that even the meaning of the word “yesterday” is questioned:

HAMM: Yesterday! What does that mean? Yesterday!

CLOV: [*Violently*] That means that bloody awful day, long ago, before this bloody awful day. I use the words you taught me. If they don’t mean anything any more, teach me others. Or let me be silent. (32)

Here, Clov borrows Caliban’s words retorting Prospero (“You taught me language; and my profit on’t / Is, I know how to curse.” [Shakespeare, *The Tempest* 26]), with whose words Hamm follows Nagg’s last appearance in the play: “Our revels now are ended” (39). This is a good-bye both to the parents, who are the only direct link to the lost Arcadia, and to the last Shakespearean Arcadia-image (Kott 323), the magical island of Prospero.

Clov’s utterance, quoted above, also points at the other extreme absolute: the silence of death. This end is the complete loss of everything: sound, motion, light, temperature, life. Similarly to Hamm’s dreams, it is a construction of “order” (as Clov implies when he is about “to clear everything away” [39]), albeit, of another kind. It is ‘nothing’ all shrinking points to and this is the ‘nothing’ that is about to come once. The only problem is that it seems so distant as the imaginary Arcadia of the past.

However, the length of the continuous present becomes relativised in the play, which enables the shrinking of this continuity to the extent that the beginning and the end of it seem to coincide. First of all, the time of *Endgame* is also the duration of the stage play, and as such

becomes relative. Even when considering the plays that conform to the law of unity of time on stage, one can find several examples when the actual time depicted is longer than the duration of the show, therefore a theatrical production very often condenses plot time into stage time. Moreover, as if it was the movement of the enlarged eyelids of the audience, the opening and fall of the curtain can be considered to frame a period between two blinks of the eye. Here the characters have their personal curtains as well, the most prominent of which is Hamm's handkerchief, which, as Fischer-Lichte points out, functions as a curtain when Hamm raises it from his face at the beginning of the play and lowers it at the end (331). A similar thing happens in another Beckett-play, *Breath*, which is both referenced and acted out in *Endgame*.⁷ In the case of this play, it is not blinking but an inhalation and an exhalation which frame the play, which, altogether, is usually no longer than a minute. Making *Breath* a play within the play also helps to perceive the time of *Endgame* to be relative. So does the reversal of the first and the last utterances too: the first word of the play, "finished" and the last word, "remain" suggest the opposite of what they do (i.e. opening and closing the play) and thus they make a circular reading of the play possible (McDonald 45–46).

The shrinking of the continuous present time of *Endgame* can also be perceived on a less dimensional level. When Hamm says "[t]he end is in the beginning" (45), he means that the end can be told with complete certainty at the beginning because it is encoded in it. This also suggests that 'something' and 'nothing' are linked in a duality because it is through 'something' that one can reach 'nothing': it is through the continuous negation of the existing world that non-existence can be constructed. As in the seventh age in Jaques's monologue,

⁷ The reference to *Breath* can be found in the short passage that has been already quoted in relation to change: "But we breathe, we change! We lose our hair, our teeth! Our bloom! Our ideals!" (16)

one has to put “sans” before everything.⁸ Since it is underlyingly present in everything from the beginning, ‘nothing’ can be considered the essence of everything, which, as a talent, has to be developed until it is fully realised. As such, it will gradually become the only reality.

In this respect, as the full realisation of the essence of things, ‘nothing’ should be considered the peak of artistic expression, the perfect masterpiece, a real challenge for an artist “rotten with perfection” (Burke 16). In *Endgame*, the picture hanging with its face to the wall may be considered such a masterpiece, since it can be considered an empty picture, making ‘nothing’ present, visible. As it captures the essence of the world, it can also be regarded as an empty mirror held “up to nature” (Shakespeare, *Hamlet* 91).

So when Hamm decides to put an end to everything, he attempts no less than becoming a creator, the constructor of the peak of perfection: ‘nothing’. However, to see how he proceeds, first some light must be shed on his position in the world which he hopes to influence.

3. Me – to play

The central character, Hamm is literally central in the play: as the man of Mirandola, he is placed “at the world’s center” (Mirandola 225); but his perception of it is very limited. This limitedness stems from his physical impairment, the near-defunct, disfunctioning body, which makes him unlike Mirandola’s man, unable to glance around and “observe whatever is in the world” (Mirandola 225). Together with his blindness, his inability to move severely restricts his perception of the world. In a world passive like his, he has to initiate contact with his surroundings in order to perceive them. If one looks at an object, that object will reflect

⁸ Jan Kott, who approached Shakespeare’s *King Lear* from the Beckettian point of view, describes the end of Shakespeare’s play as an empty stage after a complete vivisection (177), which is the same image to a world that has been completely negated.

back light to the eye. If he moves, he will feel the world moving under him, and soon an object, like a wall, will make him change direction or stop. Such interactions and responses would make Hamm more aware of the world he is part of and, consequently, the boundaries it sets for him. The recognition of the world as the recognition of 'not-me' would also help him to perceive the 'me', that is his own self. It would, but it does not. The impaired Hamm is not able to define the boundary between the world and himself, and he, consequently, does not have knowledge about his own self. This way, impairment leads one to doubt his own existence.

In this respect, Hamm's position in the world becomes an ironic one. He is in the centre, but cannot function as a centre, since a centre can only exist in relation to the whole it is the centre of. As long as Hamm cannot move from his central position and thus initiate a relationship with the rest of the world, he will fail to function as a centre. His situation is similar to Lear's in Shakespeare's tragedy, who keeps the title of the king but loses his power and his retinue (Kott 193). For Hamm is sitting on a throne too, his armchair on castors resembles one (Kott 182), with the wheels signifying all the potency going with such a position, and yet, like Lear, Hamm is left no-one (no "nightman" [22]) to rule above. All he desires in order to become a king is a dependant's imploring look, be that Clov's, the toy dog's or the man's in his chronicle.⁹ Here is where the Other enters.

However, this Other, having two different functions, can serve two different purposes, one of them being the extension and completion of the mutilated 'me'. In this sense, Clov serves as a complementary character, an *alter ego* to Hamm: he can see and he can move (but

⁹ Although it is not made explicit by the play, scholars tend to take the narrator of Hamm's chronicle to be Hamm himself. The way the man looks at the narrator may be considered a link between the narrator and Hamm, who wishes the dog was "standing there, imploring" (31) him and to whom, according to the stage directions, Clov once turns "[i]mploringly" (49). However, the sentence in question goes "I can see him still, down on his knees, his hands flat on the ground, glaring at me with his mad eyes, in defiance of my wishes" (37), leaving the connection only implicit.

he cannot sit down). Having these abilities, Clov becomes a mediator between Hamm and the world. As Hamm's eye, he reports on the view from the windows, for example whether it is light outside or how the waves look like. He also clears up Hamm's delusions regarding the colour of the dog or whether Hamm feels sunshine on his face or whether he is right in the centre of the room. The presence of such delusions and uncertainties of Hamm are indicative of the deceptive nature of his perceptions less loosely related to seeing or moving (like sensing space or temperature). However, Clov's answers may be just as deceptive, and it is down to Hamm to trust or question them.¹⁰ As Hamm's legs, Clov moves Hamm around his "kingdom" (22), from centre to edge and then back to centre. Moving Hamm up against the wall, Clov helps him to determine his limitations not just in the physical sense. For these walls are much like Camus's 'absurd walls': beyond them is the incomprehensible, irrational death that one will never know as long as he "was never there" (47). At the wall, Hamm does not only reach the boundary of his physical world, but also the boundary of his knowledge. Having knocked on the wall, he curiously puts his ear on the boundary of the known world, until, frightened by the "unreasonable silence of the world" (Camus 303), he retreats. He realises that he has been locked up in the known world, about the size of a room, which, at the same time, appears to him as a reality inside his mind.¹¹ Thus Clov, as a complementary character, helps Hamm towards the creation of a solipsistic world.

Clov's other function is in the construction of Hamm's identity from without. He has separated from Hamm, and has a fixed place in the world in relation to Hamm, next to his armchair. He has his own needs, and because of his incompleteness, he is obliged to Hamm

¹⁰ Beckett made Clov deceive Hamm three times in the San Quentin Drama Workshop production of the play, which he directed in 1980: Clov did not actually move the armchair when Hamm felt a bit out of centre, he did not actually open the window once when he was asked to, and he did not actually go to the wall when he was asked to. See Knowlson 142.

¹¹ According to Fischer-Lichte, this solipsism may be the reason why "the interior ... has often been interpreted as an image of the inside of a skull" (330).

just as Hamm is obliged to him (Beckett 51). In order to make Hamm help him, he casts the imploring look at Hamm, and thus he makes him his king. In contrast with what has been previously said, Hamm is no longer a subject experiencing the perception with the help of Clov: he becomes the object of Clov's perception, which is necessary for his existence, for just as the objects around him are constituted within his mind, he has to be constituted within another subject's mind (Fischer-Lichte 331). As Fischer-Lichte points out, in the absence of the Other, the self divides itself into subject and object (331): he leaves his central position in order to fill the previously empty centre, and the centre will start functioning as centre because at the same time he also stays there. This self-multiplication is what Hamm refers to in his soliloquy ("Then babble, babble, words, like the solitary child who turns himself into children, two, three, so as to be together, and whisper together, in the dark." [45]) and this is what Hamm's self-objectification ("But for me [*gesture towards himself*] no father. But for Hamm [*gesture towards surroundings*] no home." [29–30]) continuous self-narrations serve.

Seeing, as a way of perception, is of great importance indeed, however, as already hinted at by the preceding excerpts taken from the play, due to Hamm's blindness, the most prominent sense in *Endgame* becomes hearing. Although, craving the imploring look, there is nothing that Hamm desires more than to be heard. This is supported by the curse of the revengeful Nagg, who threatens Hamm with the loss of all his auditors: "I hope the day will come when you'll really need to have me listen to you, and need to hear my voice, any voice" (38).

Standing at the wall, Hamm hears the silence of death. Since he is blind, it is silence that becomes the object of his fears and meanwhile—his desires. Perceiving life through such dramaturgical concepts as beginning, middle, ending, turning points and, the audible construct, dialogue, he finds the absolute 'nothing' in Hamlet's silence that follows the perfectly acted death scene. His need for the gaze of the Other defines his position as an

actor's, and this perfectly acted death scene becomes the aim that, as a desperate, perfectionist artist, he wants to construct.

4. The prolonged creative effort

Having investigated the temporal and spatial boundaries of life, Hamm has got an idea about the border he is about to cross. Taking up the role of an artist, he attempts to gain control in shaping his life (and death). In the creation of the perfect 'nothing', his attempts can be summarised as the sum of two different approaches, the quantitative and the qualitative, according to which he tries to reach perfection in shaping form and shaping content.

Man's obsession with timing has shown him the importance of the role good dramaturgy plays in the construction of a dramatic whole. He realises that it is only through the complete exploitation of form that a play can end. A play on show in a theatre cannot end until the actors have played everything that was there to play. It cannot be over until there still are utterances to be made, words to be said. Silence can come only when there are no more words to say because all of them have been, as Hamm puts it, "drained" (41). This realisation prompts the artist to quantitatively exploit life in order to reach the point where there remains nothing more to use up. At such a point, the vessel of life must become empty. Perfection, after all, suggests a state which cannot be improved any more, because there is nothing more that can be done to make it even better.

Such a vision of the end tells the perfectionist dramatist that he has to finish his story in the first place. *Endgame* exhibits some cases of unfinished creative processes, out of which the completion of the dog and the extermination of the rat has already been mentioned. Most of the characters are also storytellers, out of whom Nagg and Hamm are the most prominent. Nagg tells the story of a tailor, who, up to the punch line, does not finish perfecting a pair of trousers. The imperfection of the trousers in the story reflects the imperfection of the world,

which, in contrast, is claimed to be finished. Three times throughout the play, Hamm attempts to tell the story that he calls his “chronicle” (40), but he never finishes it. At the first time, telling the chronicle to Nagg, Hamm stops to note “I’ll soon have finished with this story” (37). Then he does not finish the story, but realises the necessity to “bring in other characters” (37) if he does not want the story to wear itself out. At this point, the story fades into his own unfinished life, which might explain why he is not yet able to end it: he blows his whistle and brings Clov onto stage as if it was an “underplot” (49) beginning, like with the appearance of the child outside, near the end of the stage play. The second time, when Hamm tries to tell his story to Clov, there is an additional detail, but the story does not progress any further than previously, and Hamm simply announces “That’s all. I stopped there” (41). His third attempt, in his last soliloquy, is cut short similarly: “Well, there we are, there I am, that’s enough” (52).

Hamm is more careful when he is trying to shape the story of his life into a dramatic form. At the beginning of the play he removes his personal curtain, properly introduces himself as an actor and, preparing himself for speech, clears his throat. The spectator could easily take him for the actor playing Hamm. It is also evident that he has a clear idea about the way to end a story much before he tries to end it in his last soliloquy. As a primarily oral, storyteller character, he chooses Hamlet’s last line to end up with, which is only followed by the words relating to the lowering of the personal curtain: “Since that’s the way we’re playing it...[*he unfolds handkerchief*]...let’s play it that way...[*he unfolds*]...and speak no more about it...[*he finishes unfolding*] speak no more” (52). It is evident from this utterance that he is aware of theatrical conventions and he is intentionally conforming to one (Fischer-Lichte 331). The same phenomenon is apparent from Hamm’s introductory fumbling with words at the beginning of his first attempt at telling the chronicle: it seems as if the actor playing Hamm dropped the role to ask for his cue, and, trying to find it, he reminds himself of

prominent utterances that may serve as orientation points for him. First he quotes the very first utterance of the play then he foreshadows a last one: “Where was I? [*Pause. Gloomily.*] It’s finished, we’re finished. [*Pause.*] Nearly finished. [*Pause.*] There’ll be no more speech” (35).

Hamm has the scheme of the whole play in his head, and, accordingly, he makes remarks on the progress they make towards the end. His most frequent remark is “[w]e’re getting on” (15; 18; 30; 44), which he always utters after Clov has left the room. This sentence changes to “[w]e’re coming” (52) near the end of the play and to “[t]ime enough” (22; 23) when Clov only goes to the door. Such remarks create an effect of progress, just like the variation of answers to the recurring utterances “I’ll leave you.” (Clov) and “Is it not time for my pain-killer?” (Hamm) does. Stemming from the changing intensity in these reactions, they constitute the backbone of the progressive line of the double dramaturgy in the play. Thus, there is a distinctive dramatic structure constructed within the play with a beginning, a conflict, the intensifying tension, a climax and an ending. Beckett the playwright knew this and so did his characters.

After the climax, when Clov hits Hamm and tells him there is no pain-killer left, the verbal avalanche wishing the end came intensifies: Hamm and Clov mutually assert each other that they have come to the end. The vocabulary of theatre appears immediately, accumulating in a shorter section of dialogue. After Clov’s imploring initiative, “Let’s stop playing!” (49), both characters are eager to assert that, as actors, they are in control of the situation. Are they? They have played everything, they believe, but have they played well enough?

Good dramaturgy is just one component of a good performance, and the men of the sixth age have to realise that perfection of the content, quality, is just as important. In fact, the two are generally inseparable, especially when talking about the theatre, which deals with

such complex concepts like genre. The question of genre in *Endgame* is a topic whose discussion would lead far beyond the aims of the present paper, but it is sufficient to demonstrate the interrelatedness of form and content. For there is a tendency in *Endgame* not to name the state the characters are subjected to. Hamm deliberately calls it “this thing” (13), but Nell and Clov both name it “farce” (18; 26). If they accept it to be a farce, it means that the play they make has to comply with all the formal and content-related expectations of a fastidious spectator expecting a farce.

Endgame has an air of a rehearsal, and much of it is due to perfectionism of the qualitative nature. This is most apparent in cases where the actors are doing variations on a more-or-less fixed dramaturgical unit. Such units are the storytelling panels for instance. Especially in the case of Nagg’s story about the tailor, but also for Hamm’s chronicle, the mastery of expression becomes a central aim. This is apparent from the commentary with which the characters accompany their storytelling. They continuously drop the role of the storyteller and evaluate their performance. Hamm, for instance, invents descriptive panels for his chronicle and stops after each one to evaluate his artistic achievement. His art is more of a writer’s or a scenario writer’s (Knowlson 121), while Nagg, as an actor, is not pleased with his performance of the anecdote at all. He says he tells “this story worse and worse” (21), and the situation is further complicated since he tries to make Nell laugh at an anecdote that she heard many times. If he wants to provoke a reaction, it is not enough for Nagg to repeat a once successful performance: he has to get better and better to compensate for what he loses as Nell gets more and more bored with the story.

Whether Nagg manages to make Nell laugh with his acting is an important question for its symbolic implications. If Nagg succeeds, he proves an effective actor, who provokes real reactions with a fictional, unreal tool, that is, a made-up story. This question becomes

especially important, when there are lives on stake. For Nagg claims no less than that his artistic performance nearly caused his and Nell's death:

NAGG: The first time I thought you'd die.

...

You were in such fits that we capsized. By rights we should have drowned.

NELL: It was because I felt happy.

NAGG: [*Indignant.*] It was not, it was not, it was my story and nothing else.

(21)

This is the kind of artistic effect Hamm aims at, only in a different situation. He knows as much about death as his walls let him know: he knows its parameters, that it is accompanied by silence and stillness. However, to die, it is not enough for him to mime death. Death, as an unknown state beyond the walls, needs the actor's complete transformation. Theatre, which is the world of pretence and lying (in the sense that it makes the audience believe fictional things to be real and true), has to reach the peak of artistic expression, the complete exploitation of itself, where death, acted out, becomes real.

5. Conclusion (Will this never finish?)

One cannot end a paper leaving too many questions open. Not even in the case of *Endgame*, which, while it closes one line of dramaturgy, leaves the other open by creating a situation that resembles the one at the beginning of the play. There is an air of uncertainty: has Hamm managed to commit the artistic suicide or is he just pretending? Having seen the attempt of the Beckettian man to create his own absence, one should answer, or at least pose the question whether he has succeeded.

When Hamm attempts to create the perfectly acted death scene, he works against a main criterion that differentiates theatre from life: the gap between fictional and actual reality. Theatre is a world of *as ifs*: the actors act as if they died and as the result of an instinctive, unwritten consensus, the spectators suspend their disbelief and take the fake death of the actor to be the real death of the character. By the audience, unless it is a performance utilising Brecht's *V-effekt*, the actor is never perceived on stage as an actor; it is always the character that the spectators see, and, consequently, it is always the character and never the actor who can die on stage. Even if the actor dropped dead on stage, the spectators would take that to be part of the theatrical illusion as the Player's account on such a case in Tom Stoppard's *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* exemplifies. Meanwhile they would immediately remember that it is the actor's body they see, and they would not worry for his life. This indicates another peculiarity of the theatre: the audience can switch back and forth between disbelief and the suspension of it: they can see both the living actor and the dead character on stage at the same time. Hamm, who relies on the glance of the Other in order to be constituted as a character who introduces himself as an actor, may seem to die, but this death will always be attributed to the character he plays as an actor and never to him as the actor. In this case it is significant that what Hamm the actor actually attempts is turning himself into his character to be able to die on stage. However, he will necessarily fail because there is no actual gap between Hamm the actor and Hamm the character, which would be the basic criterion to distinguish theatre from life.

Jan Kott claims that the word "Shakespearean" used when talking about Beckett's works may be taken to refer to Beckett's reworking of the Shakespearean concept of *Theatrum Mundi* (152). For Shakespeare, the world was a stage in the sense that he realised that all they perceive as life can be put on a stage as big as the world, because there is a dramaturgical skeleton inside the body of the world, which makes it similar to a play.

However, for Beckett, the world has shrunk, the body has disappeared, and it is only the skeleton that remained: the world is a stage not because the stage has grown to global size but because the globe has shrunk to fit this small room. For Beckett's man only this theatrical skeleton of the world is left: his character appears in this stage-world as an actor who tries to understand and influence the play he has to play and ends up as an actor who will necessarily fail until the theatrical situation obtains.

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