

**Spools, Hats, and Handbags:
Narrative Entropy in the Plays of Samuel Beckett**

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Introduction: Beckett's narrative drama

Writing on the intersection between performance studies and narratology has proved to be more of a feat than I had imagined at the outset of this project. While the texts I will be examining may be used by either camp, they are used toward different ends, spoken of through separate languages. However, Beckett is an author whose works are up for the challenge – and indeed, given his treatment of narrative (both philosophically and formally) he challenges the reader to consider his works in both realms, rather than ranking one above another in the way one ‘should’ interact with his work.

Take, for example, playwrights such as George Bernard Shaw or Eugene O’Neill. While both are important playwrights whose productions made waves in their time, these two unite narrative and drama in such a way that their texts exist more saliently for us today in the literary, narratological world than the dramatic production world. Long, descriptive passages that serve as stage directions could just as easily serve as novelistic passages on image and action, and in this way their plays become more readable than watchable as their dramatic styles recede in time and prominence. What Beckett writes is precisely what he means to be embodied—it is stylistically a text to be performed, rather than rendered or interpreted, as communicated by the utilitarian sparseness of his stage directions.

It is not uncommon for drama and narrative to be posed as oppositional, rather than interconnected forms, a matter which I will here address and put to rest for the purposes of this paper. According to Monika Fludernik in her 1996 text, *Towards a ‘Natural’ Narratology*, “more recent theoreticians have tended to oppose narrative and drama in terms of a dichotomy of the narrative vs. the non-narrative.”¹ That is to say, there has been a conception among narratologists

¹ Monika Fludernik, *Towards a 'natural' Narratology* (London: Routledge, 1996), 349.

that drama is categorically not narrative. In order to consider the narrativity of Beckett's plays, we need then to establish a definition of narrative that carefully considers its application to theater. This is not to say that all drama is necessarily narrative, nor that the category of narrative needs to allow for all dramatic works. Instead, it is to examine whether this opposition is valid, and whether this exploration of narrative in Beckett's plays is a fair niche to explore.

While it is tempting to think that the primary difference between so-called narrative and dramatic texts is the performance itself, Fludernik begins by investigating the primary differences between the two in terms of the lack of a narrator. As she notes in exploring the major complaints against drama as narrative, "Only secondarily do these theories consider drama's non-textual performative aspects as a disqualifying feature."² This should not be taken lightly: the most obvious difference between the page for textual consumption and the page for stage performance is not grounds for the exclusion of dramatic works by traditional narratologists. In fact, the widespread acceptance of film in the field of narrative accepts the multisensory cues delivered through a performed text. The preference for film as more narrative than drama is due to its "relative stability ... (which does not change with each performance)."³ The perception is that the director's control over film takes a far greater grip on a piece than can be had over live performance, in which small pieces will inevitably change with every performance.

The primary discomfort toward drama as narrative, a concern that is mitigated for film by to the controlled gaze of the auteur, is its lack of a perceivable extradiagetic narrator. Yet between the reading of a play and its staging, the narrator becomes covered by an oft-overlooked component: stage directions. This includes, as Fludernik points out, "stage directions that

² Ibid., 350.

³ Ibid.

significantly exceed what is presentable on stage or in a film.”⁴ This inclusion of stage directions in a written text is often as creative and lively as any other bit of dialogue, as Beckett deftly demonstrates.

For most productions, additionally, there are even further mediating forces between what happens onstage and what the audience experiences through the work of a production team. Prescribed actions, expressions, and character elements are the doing of a director; set, costumes, lights, and sound are created by a team of designers. All are unseen and subtle forces mediating the exchange of performance between the actors and the audience. This has less to do with the narrative and non-narrative divide than it does with the seen versus the described: “What is entirely different for the stage and the book as media concerns less the performance factor (though that is certainly relevant) but the visual impact of performances—an aspect of crucial aesthetic import—and the fact of a quasi-iconic representational mode: actors as characters.”⁵ It is not the *narrative*, but the *textual* that is called into question through enactment. The means of communication—or discourse, as narratologists like to say—are different, but not necessarily the story. And in the same way that written narrative may be delivered through stream of consciousness, descriptive language, or dialogue, performed drama may be delivered by a number of means, determined by a source outside the control of the audience.

From a performance studies angle, scholar William Worthen addresses the tension between performed and written works by examining the hierarchies we take for granted when examining drama as both literature and performance. Worthen poses the more general problem of page/stage hierarchy, beginning with a direct invocation of Beckett as a particularly textual example of dramatic writing:

⁴ Ibid., 351.

⁵ Ibid., 353.

The material challenges that Beckett's writing pose to acting have been familiar for some time, but the challenge to our understanding of drama posed by the plays as printed objects, as books, is just coming into view. Is the identity of the drama held in the author's inert inscription or its betrayal into living performance? Beckett's writing, especially his elaborate stage directions, frames a rarefied aesthetic problem ... the friction between writing and enactment that defines modern drama.⁶

It is no accident that Worthen describes this problem as particular to the modern dramatist. In the era of mass-produced, affordable, printed copies of dramatic works, playwrights of the 20th century wrote with the idea of publication and distribution in mind. Likewise, Worthen's description of the written text as "inert" is particularly salient when applied to Beckett, whose plays often feature stagnation over action, repetition over novelty, and an overwhelming saturation of stage directions. The motivation behind problematizing the dramatic text stems from the longstanding notion of text as more reliable, more stable—an individual author's work being replicated without becoming denatured. This stands in contrast to the idea of the unstable performance, a knockoff version of the original text that appears and vanishes, leaving us with the assured written word once more. Worthen deems this the "zombie-theory of drama," in which performance only achieves a half-living version of what we see as a vital whole.⁷ To think in this way is a grave error, of course. The repetitive reliving of a work of drama—assuming, for the moment, that the 'work' itself remains singular and stable even in written form—is what keeps it fresh and alive, its recursion in different forms and productions contributing to, not detracting from its life.

Beckett manages to keep his text intact across the literary and dramatic realms, lifting the written text of his plays off the page and onto the stage without losing any element of his stark directions or allowing room to err from them. As a playwright of the 20th century, he wrote

⁶ William B. Worthen, *Print and the Poetics of Modern Drama* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 3.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 8.

works that may be consumed as text, a term that I here take in a modern sense to mean the typed word on the page, printed and available for replication. Though intended for performance, they are equally available to be read, offering themselves ripe for examination as dramas that wrestle with narrative on both diegetic and extradiegetic levels. The advantage of studying the text of Beckett's work is precisely this unease. While other dramatists work in the mode of realism, a supposedly mimetic form, Beckett consistently rejects the reality of realism entirely, leaving us with characters in bizarre and stagnant situations, more overtly controlled by the strict stage directions and sparse staging. Beckett's plays concern themselves with the narratives constructed by characters that have almost nothing else.

Getting away from the nuances of Fludernik's argument for narrative, I'd like to establish a simple, working definition of what narrative means. This is a hugely broad question, and for the purposes of this paper, I will begin with a suitably basic definition. There are three fundamental aspects to any narrative: 1) that it must be narrated, 2) that it must contain a story, and 3) that the story must be communicated through discourse. Examining many of the foundational narratologists (Fludernik, Prince, Genette, Brooks, Onega, Landa, etc.), Professor Paula Moya compiles a few more broad specifications:

- Narratives (as process, object, or structure) always involve events arranged in time and space via relationships of cause and effect.
- Narratives (as process, act, or structuration) are ubiquitous across cultures and are central to the creation of human meaning.
- Narratives are fundamental to communicative situations.⁸

At first pass, we can happily categorize the three of Beckett's dramas that I will be examining as narrative. Narrated by the stage directions, the characters navigate through a space temporally, as

⁸ This summary generously compiled by Professor Paula Moya for her course on Narrative and Narrative Theory at Stanford University, Fall 2012.

presented through the mode of drama—narration, story, and discourse. It is surely a medium Beckett uses to communicate, using verbal language and action.

Paul Ricoeur, in his seminal text *Time and Narrative* (v. I), points out two more very important aspects of narrative as we understand it today: 1) it must organize events into an intelligible whole, drawing a configuration out of a simple succession of events, and 2) it must conclude in a manner congruent with the story, understandable by the successive episodes. In Beckett, events are connected in a rudimentary, vaudevillian manner of cause and effect, and conclude in a manner appropriate to the story (in *Krapp's Last Tape*, for example, dropping a banana peel on stage and consequently slipping on it). But exiting the level of the episodic event and entering the larger world of Beckett's plays, we are often left short of an identifiable story beyond naming the characters, their plights, and a sequence of events that they perform. In the world of Krapp, we will find, narrative fails at meaning—he has unsuccessfully narrativized his life, and finds himself unmoored among the reeds, lost in time and space.

Ricoeur also motions toward one of the crucial aspects of this thesis: the emergence of the narrative tradition as an evolved and evolving process that has delivered it to a privileged position as the expression of human lives through time. Narrative is flexible in either being able to illustrate the actual concordance of a discordant experience of time (as is the traditional narrative format), or the actual discordance of a concordant experience of time (as demonstrated by many modernist novels). Narrative is, in short the determining factor in how we see ourselves experiencing our time in the world, and Ricoeur claims that narrative is the only way humanity can make sense of time. An enormous part of Beckett's project, as I will show in this thesis, is to expose narrative for constantly falling short of embodying and elevating the human experience.

Here is the crux of Beckett's project—he uses the narrative tradition to chip away at the dramatic tradition, allowing for experiments in time and narrative to alter what it means to be a play. And at the same time, he uses the dramatic tradition—an explicitly durational, live event that necessarily happens *in* time—to chip away at the narrative tradition. In being performed onstage, the characters seem to experience time in exactly the way that we in the audience experience it—and yet, by the same process of unifying the experience in a live performance, the characters call our experience of time into question by their own doubts and plights. The paradox of Beckett's plays is that they must exist in time and space, hence subjected to traditional narrative interpretations (beginning, middle, end), and they are told by a narrator (the stage directions, the written word of the script), yet they challenge the role that narrative plays in the lives of his characters and his viewers. There are far more questions in Beckett than there are answers, which either puts this paper in a laughable position alongside all Beckett scholarship or, as Ricoeur claims, continues the circular dialogue between our experience of time and the narrative structure. Beckett is resistant to both analysis and narrative, and for this reason paradoxically draws analytical, scholarly interest as well as theatrical production and reprinting.

Beginning with the shortest and most minimal of the three plays, *Krapp's Last Tape*, we will enter the exploration of narrative using the concepts of identity and memory to examine the complexity of narrativizing a life, and the effects this has on the character central to the narrative. From there, we will expand to *Happy Days*, a two-person, two-act play that takes place in the near-monologue of a woman devoid of mobility, focusing on the primacy that narrative takes in the dramatic form. Lastly, with the other two plays in mind, we'll explore the concept of narrative entropy as it appears in *Waiting for Godot*, focusing on the effects of narrative in both monologue and dialogue among multiple characters.

In none of the plays is the objective escape. Krapp, Winnie, Didi, and Gogo do not escape their situations and do not make escape their priority. Likewise, Beckett does not attempt an escape from narrative. He works within the dramatic form, structuring his plays in time and space explicitly by virtue of their durational dramatic form, but he never allows us to be comfortable with their status as narrative. In the world of Krapp, narrative fails to deliver the meaning he once sought. Winnie's great anxiety is that she will lose her ability to narrate her situation. Didi and Gogo's great anxieties are that they will lose each another as witnesses to one another's narratives. Beckett resists the balm of narrative that Ricoeur posits in the claim that "We tell stories because in the last analysis human lives need and merit being narrated. [...] The whole history of suffering cries out for vengeance and calls for narrative."⁹ Instead, Beckett illustrates that narrative is no solution to the suffering, but rather creates even more pain and anxiety when we see through the illusion of finality and unity that narrative purportedly offers.

⁹ Paul Ricœur, *Time and Narrative* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), 75.

Krapp's Last Tape: Identity, memory, and narrative

“Be again, be again. (Pause.) All that old misery.” (Krapp's Last Tape 26)

We've established our basic definition of narrative, which in brief summary must contain narration, story and discourse, arranging a series of events into a unified work with a sensible conclusion. The first play we shall examine, perhaps the cleanest execution of unsettling narrative, comes in the form of Beckett's short one-act play, *Krapp's Last Tape*. Focusing on one character, he draws the scope of narrative down to the realm of a single figure while also calling into question the relationship of narrative to identity and self-conception.

To begin, Beckett selects the form of the one-act play—a divergence from the two-act structure of both *Happy Days* and *Waiting for Godot*. This move precludes the possibility of skips in time that are not seen onstage, preserving the play as a single moment in Krapp's life. While we may look for an arc or journey in Krapp's moment onstage, we will not find much in the way of character development or change introduced to the space he occupies. In eighteen pages, Beckett builds and unsettles the narrative form through employment of the one-act, one-man show.

The opening sequence of the text—arguably the most “active” portion of the play, incorporating two full pages of action without dialogue—creates a paradigm for narrative that is atypical in Beckett's stage directions. Imitating the way that Beckett's two-act plays demonstrate entropic decline, his initial directions here parody the subtractive process of the two-act structure.¹⁰ Contrasted with the erratic, fragmented actions of Winnie in *Happy Days*, Krapp's actions here have causal relationships with one another: fumbling for a key leads to unlocking a

¹⁰ Further discussion of entropic decline in Beckett's works will appear in Chapter 3 of this thesis.

drawer, fumbling in the drawer leads to searching in a second drawer, where the objective is revealed upon discovery of a banana. Dropping the banana skin, of course, leads to tripping on the skin and nearly tumbling off the edge of the stage. The vaudevillian consequences of his actions lead him to attempt the objective again, this time with better-informed tactics, tossing the banana peel into the pit instead of dropping it on the ground.

Although textbook-adherent to our standard definition of narrative—character, narrative sequencing, causes and effects all included—Beckett also embeds hints at his own subtractive approach to narrative in this opening sequence. While the passage itself is lengthy, the directions are straightforward and individually isolated to the point that they can be tracked numerically. In the first iteration of the banana search, there are thirty-one actions before he finally bites the banana, paces, and trips on the peel. In the second iteration, seventeen of these motions are repeated verbatim, supplying a repetition that is subtractive, rather than additive or divergent.¹¹ This exact repetition of the words is far more perceivable in the text than in the action onstage, demonstrating that “editing” is the equivalent in writing to what “trying again” is in action, emphasizing Worthen’s claim that text and performance are inextricably and uncomfortably bound in Beckett. Taking into consideration Ricoeur’s theory of narrative defining the human experience through time, this repetitive decline is already embedded in the life narrative of Krapp.

Playing this initial game with narrative paradigm in the stage directions sets up a nullification of Krapp’s self-important narrated tapes before we even hear them. The rest of Beckett’s play features a static conversation between Krapp and a recording of his own voice, thirty years earlier, paring the action down to a few brief shuffles between Krapp’s table and an

¹¹ While the first sequence contains what we could label as steps 1-31 before biting the banana, the second contains steps 1, 2, 7-10, 19, 22-31, where the only difference is in where he tosses the banana, eliminating the comic potential of the banana peel for the second time.

offstage area where he goes to drink in the darkness. In light of this satirically narrative sequence at the outset, the internal, taped narratives that comprise the rest of the play are futile attempts at deeply meaningful narrative. Krapp's recorded life story, once seen by his younger self as potentially cumulative and significant, becomes a collection of descriptive sequences that has little or no meaningful connection to the man we see onstage as the play takes its course.

Krapp and his tapes allow Beckett to explore narrative on two planes: at the level of the play's structure and at the level of the play's diegetic character narratives. We have explored the structural component—Beckett's premise of narrative as established through his opening sequence of stage-directed narration. Now we move into the narratives embedded throughout the play in order to understand how he subsequently dismantles the power that narrative holds over human lives and perception of selfhood. The images and interactions provided by Beckett allow for a simplified exploration of the complex interactions between identity and narrative, lived and told lives. Through producing a work that formally fits under the category of narrative while also emphasizing the dissatisfactions of that very form, Beckett tears through the fallacy of narrative as either balm or explanation.

Krapp is seated throughout the play between being and remaining, held captive in a strong vignette of light where he listens to recordings of his memories on loop. Through the tapes, we are given a picture of a version of Krapp that once poured time and thought into documenting these memories to compile for posterity. They contain pompous and self-important recollections of the year's events, which the current Krapp listens to at will – occasionally skipping through and rewinding to catch different parts. He often cannot recall the reportedly memorable events and occasionally does not understand the very words spoken on the tapes.

The distance between Krapp and the content of his tapes lends itself to a near-complete separation of the recordings and the man listening to them onstage. We are allowed access to Krapp's memories only by his own laborious entrance to the listening process, which requires that he consult a ledger of summaries, withdraw the appropriate tapes from boxes, and finally select and listen to the recordings in order to experience his memories once more. While the events in Krapp's ledger are recorded for their purported significance and the idea that they must live in perpetuity, even the most important of memories are obscure, interrupted by the logistics of interpretation, as demonstrated in this tape's "Equinox, memorable equinox. (*He raises his head, stares blankly front. Puzzled.*) Memorable equinox? (*Pause. He shrugs his shoulders, peers again at ledger, reads.*) Farewell to—(*he turns the page*)—love."¹² The rigorous passage to memory abstracts the recollected experiences more and more fully from Krapp's ownership of them. His memories are no longer internal but are externally narrated by the media of written and spoken word, even the most pivotal of his taped events being interrupted by a page turn.

The consequences of such a relationship with one's own past experiences calls into question the concept of identity. The relationship of identity to narrative is indispensable when considering Ricoeur's proposal that we are only able to conceptualize our position in time by way of narrative. It follows that we, as developing selves over time, are dependent on narrative to solidify our identities as we move through it. What we are given through Beckett's stage directions is a tenuous connection between the man seen onstage and the voice heard through the tapes—arguably classifiable as two characters, given the way they interact and share page space in the dialogue. The distinction between the two characters (we'll call them Krapp and Tape) is furthered as Krapp loses recognition of the events recounted by Tape. Definitions of words are

¹² Samuel Beckett, *Krapp's Last Tape, and Other Dramatic Pieces* (New York: Grove Press, 1960), 13.

forgotten, events once deemed memorable can no longer be recalled – Krapp laughs at the former self that so prized what now seems trivial. Moreover, this is a process of revising selfhood that has clearly taken place before. Tape describes listening to a previous tape, and the linkage of a single man’s multiplied selfhood is extended across three generations:

Hard to believe I was ever that young whelp. The voice! Jesus! And the aspirations! (*Brief laugh in which Krapp joins.*) And the resolutions! (*Brief laugh in which Krapp joins.*) To drink less, in particular. (*Brief laugh of Krapp alone.*)¹³

Here, Krapp listens to a description of an even younger self by Tape, removing himself from the original experience by two degrees. Through laughter, he distances himself even further from the original speaker, the “young whelp,” and then again from Tape. What results is a story told by Tape, regarding a past self-character, listened to by Krapp—the most localized narrative setup possible. The triangulation of character, narrator, and listener is, on one hand, self-contained in Krapp, but rather than unifying the experience it highlights the disunities and discontinuation of any single, coherent self and its narrative.

Nevertheless, Krapp is dependent on Tape’s story to create meaning in the world he presently inhabits. Armed with notes scrawled across an envelope, Krapp has begun to live events in order to perpetuate his own narrative: “Seventeen copies sold, of which eleven at trade price to free circulating libraries beyond the seas. Getting known.”¹⁴ This impulse to narrate has usurped the place of living events for any other reason. And indeed, there used to be a driving reason for Krapp to keep living and narrating—a reason as fallacious to Krapp as it is obscure to us. In a terrifically frustrating and vivid passage, Krapp’s impatience with Tape’s revelations prevents us from learning what this meaning ever was:

¹³ Ibid., 16.

¹⁴ Ibid., 25.

What I suddenly saw then was this, that the belief I had been going on all my life, namely—(*Krapp switches off impatiently, winds tape forward, switches on again*)—great granite rocks the foam flying up in the light of the lighthouse and the wind-gauge spinning like a propeller, clear to me at last that the dark I have always struggled to keep under is in reality my most—(*Krapp curses, switches off, winds tape forward, switches on again*)—unshatterable association until my dissolution of storm and night with the light of the understanding and the fire—(*Krapp curses louder, switches off, winds tape forward, switches on again*)—¹⁵

The meaning found so clearly and profoundly by Tape is disregarded entirely by Krapp in this comic dismissal of what should be the entire purpose of Tape's life. Whatever revelation Tape had is no longer epiphanic, but superfluous. Each time Tape diverges from description to "belief," "reality," and "understanding," Krapp rejects the narrative. The interpretive leaps necessary for reaching a listener, bridging the gap between communicating what is seen and what is understood, are of no interest to Krapp. On the contrary, what grasps his attention most is the subsequent description of floating on a boat with a woman in perpetual, directionless motion. To Krapp, meaning-words are the most meaningless; he is far more focused on the images themselves, privileging a single event over the holistic employment of the larger narrative.

While Krapp lands on the imagery of Tape's narrative, Tape also finds a point of stability and interest through focusing on image and sight in his own narration. In the passage Krapp finally lights on, sun and shadow play in between the characters, Tape and the woman, as the boat floats down the stream. Of all the details that remain for Krapp from the recollection of Tape's farewell to love, the most salient is "The eyes! Like...(*hesitates*)...chrysolite!" referenced repeatedly through Tape's passage and again in Krapp's final tape.^{16 17} The moment that Tape

¹⁵ Ibid., 21.

¹⁶ Ibid., 19.

¹⁷ References to the eyes appear on pp. 16, 19, [22/27], 24, 25, where pp. 22 and 27 contain the same passage by Tape.

feels released from the iron grip of purposeful progress is the moment that image takes over the narrative:

I said again I thought it was hopeless and no good going on, and she agreed, without opening her eyes. (*Pause.*) I asked her to look at me and after a few moments—(*pause*)—after a few moments she did, but the eyes just slits, because of the glare. I bent over her to get them in the shadow and they opened. (*Pause. Low.*) Let me in.¹⁸

The human connection to the woman through her eyes enacts his farewell to love in a serene, erotic silence. In the connection between Tape and the woman, the search for meaning is rendered obsolete. The inertia of the two bodies on the boat is the last recorded detail of the passage from hope to its release, “gently, up and down, and side to side.”¹⁹ No grand gesture, no dénouement, no climax at all, but a gentle, implicit slide from living with a greater purpose to living without.²⁰ Instead of communicating this through a clear causal narrative, Tape conveys this in a single moment, preserved and still uninterpreted by Krapp. While the description itself is, in a sense, still narrative, his fixation on a single event is a demonstration of removing an episode from an overarching story or plot—a surgical excision from narrative, damaging its status as a whole and unified event.

Following this description, Krapp shuts off the tape and finds himself a new spool to record his latest tape, but finds he lacks the narrative panache he once prized. In fact, Krapp’s tape begins with a denunciation of selfhood linked to Tape: “Just been listening to that stupid bastard I took myself for thirty years ago, hard to believe I was ever as bad as that.”²¹ Once Tape is turned off, the image is pushed from his sight again. The memories of Tape do not stick in the mind of Krapp, save for “The eyes she had!” And even that, Krapp lets go. He has, he claims,

¹⁸ Beckett, *Krapp’s Last Tape*, 22.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 23.

²⁰ This is true for both literal and sexual meanings of climax, as the flags in the water “went down, sighing,” (23) rather than experiencing any climactic finale.

²¹ Beckett, *Krapp’s Last Tape*, 24.

nothing to say. He crumples the list of narrative events that he has written on an envelope to include in his last tape, and instead chooses to record his recent, happy aesthetic experience with the word “spool.” He acknowledges the continuation of inertia brought on by the rocking boat, countering it with a recollection of a time or two he left the house to sit “shivering in the park, drowned in dreams and burning to be gone.”²² The attempted poetry of purpose, which Krapp fast-forwarded through, is replaced by stark description without causal linkage to the events around it. In direct opposition to the rigid, causal narrative structure posited in the beginning sequence of stage directions, Krapp delivers a series of images, songs, and interruptions—giving glimpses to his current character, not unified by sequence.

The dissonance among both the narrative and descriptive passages of *Tape* and the hollow recording of recent events by Krapp pose three ways of using words to interact with the surrounding world, all at odds. The initial *Tape* tactic is to narrate a revelation—consecutive, causal links between observation and discovery of significance, leading to a shift in the central character’s perspective—a traditional narrative, in line with the *Bildungsroman*. The second tactic of *Tape* is to release the need for meaning, abandoning the desire for sequencing, pacing, and uncovering of meaning—a switch to the descriptive, imagistic model. And thirty years later, Krapp gives a jaded attempt at narrative, this time without meaning and sequence, but a record of disconnected actions in no clear order, with no causal links. The way that he experiences and creates narrative mirrors the way he interacts with the tapes: sporadic reliving of moments abstracted from his memory through recording. The diegetic obsession held by *Tape* is quietly laid to rest through revisiting his farewell to love, and Krapp is left with a pile of recorded experiences, disconnected from his perception of self and the events that he remembers.

²² *Ibid.*, 25.

The darker component of the configurational narrative form giving way to the descriptive form is that Krapp still remains bound to the narratives he has already composed, as they have consumed his life.²³ The distinction between being and remaining has sorted itself out, as Krapp wanders through his past narratives and imagistic memories, and being has, through recorded narration, been rendered remaining: “Be again, be again. (*Pause.*) All that old misery. (*Pause.*) Once wasn’t enough for you. (*Pause.*) Lie down across her.”²⁴ With that, Krapp discards his current tape and returns to the descriptive passage of his farewell to love. He yearns for the dissolution of narrative while simultaneously recognizing the impossibility of that option, having lived so many years with meticulous narrative as his paradigm for living. There are only two options for Krapp: “Go on with this drivel in the morning. Or leave it at that.”²⁵ He must either continue on the futile track of narrative pursuit—recording and reliving in order to “be again”—or he must embrace the inertia both internally and externally, giving up narrative altogether and turning inward to whatever memories remain, even as they run dry.

Though recorded in order to embody a life still being lived, the narrative tapes suffocate the present and potential life of Krapp. Plagued by the “chance of happiness” that he once perceived and recorded over thirty years earlier, there is neither hope nor purpose to Krapp’s continued existence. And yet, with so many of Beckett’s characters, there is no use to killing oneself either.²⁶ Beckett offers no positive alternative to narrative. Instead, Krapp must “be again” through listening to his tapes, or remain “*motionless staring before him.*”²⁷ The fire in Krapp is gone. Narrative has consumed his life and he must either be in it or remain with its

²³ For more on the configurational and episodic, see Chapter 3 discussion of Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative* (v. I).

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 27.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 26.

²⁶ Although entertainment of suicidal thoughts is not directly addressed in this play, it appears explicitly for Winnie, Didi, and Gogo.

²⁷ Beckett, *Krapp’s Last Tape*, 28.

ghost. The closest he can get to an escape is to occupy the liminal space of the descriptive passage, suspended in a single recorded moment as he is and remains onstage, alone in vignette.

Krapp's interest in description over narration is forced upon the audience as well. What Beckett has done by the end of the play is ultimately to describe Krapp to us, not as a hero with an arc, but as a picture, left in the same place it began, with less hope and less identity than we imagined in the beginning. There was no revelation to be had by Krapp. There was simply a narrative decline into a mass of images, swallowed by the eyes of the audience. In the final silence of the tape, we are invited to identify with Krapp, a motionless observer with no significant object of observation. The narrative that we may have expected coming into the performance is there, in a way, but is also exposed to be meaningless. Krapp doesn't change over the course of the play except to let go of his attachment to narrative. He doesn't enact anything besides a slapstick comedy routine with a banana, the selection of tapes, and a few trips to the bottle. The end is exactly where he began, minus narrative optimism.

The meticulous documentation of Krapp in the opening of the play seems disposable at first read, but is indispensable by the end of the play, both in reading and viewing the piece in performance. This sort of descriptive *dramatis personae* is typical of a work of drama, often skimmed over by a reader or ignored by a director. From costume to face and hair to internal qualities such as ability (or brokenness of ability) to see, hear, and speak, Krapp is given to us as fully as he every will be explicated in the play.²⁸ From outside inwards, Beckett documents what the character is and does, who he is and what his life is like, all in staccato description, rather than narrativized passages.

The stage directions and pictures are not described with respect to sequence or connection, but attempt to make up a picture of the character that is comprised of adjectives and

²⁸ Ibid., 9-10.

nouns, the way we might encounter a person for the first time through a photograph or image. Embedded in the very opening lines of the play is Krapp's fate, on a "*late evening in the future*" in Krapp's den.²⁹ The play could recur eternally, the image of "*White face. Purple nose. Disordered grey hair. Unshaven,*" appearing only as the actor (or described actor) does before us. The opening sequence contains everything there is to know about Krapp, from his poor eyes and ears to his disordered, motley appearance.

By the end of the play, we have bought into and experienced a narrative constructed solely for the purpose of calling its own narrative form into question. Tape's narratives are fast-forwarded and discarded to make room for an image of Krapp, remaining stagnant in the shrinking reaches of his illuminated world. The memories he retains are limited to the eyes of the woman and a few sporadic events, in no particular order, that have occurred in the recent past. The relationship he has with his tapes has dwindled to a curiosity and a desire to live a single, detached image once more; he releases overarching meaning and purpose, story and conclusion. The Krapp we see at the end of the play is the same image we see described at the beginning of the play. Inert, he is an image captivated by images, rather than excavating them for underlying meaning or responding to them in yet another spool.

²⁹ Ibid., 9.

Happy Days: Excavation of narrative anxiety

“There is so little one can do. (Pause.) One does it all.” (Happy Days 22)

Beckett’s approach to drama is conscious of its own status as text to be read and as text to be performed. The anxiety of drama as both text and performance is not ignored by Beckett’s works but is foregrounded in his treatment of each character’s relationship with narrative, objects and one another. In none of his plays is this anxious coexistence of text and performance as salient as in *Happy Days*. Winnie, a middle-aged housewife, occupies an enormous pile of ground onstage, speaking to an overwhelmingly unresponsive husband, Willie. Before her sits a large black bag from which she periodically plucks objects and interacts with them. For the duration of the two-act play (approximately ninety minutes), the actress playing Winnie is unable to move from the mound, immobile from the waist down for the first act and from the neck down for the second act. Under these circumstances of immobility and self-narrative, she explores relationships with the inactive elements of drama—stage directions, objects, and narrative—illustrating an anxious combination of conflict, comfort, and necessity.

In the first act, Winnie establishes what she refers to as her “two lamps,” narration and action. When one fails, she claims, she always has the other, and for the first act the two often overlap.³⁰ Her perpetual monologue is punctuated by pauses, interactions with her large black bag and its contents, and the occasional contribution from her husband, Willie, hidden in a hole behind the mound of dirt for the majority of the play. These actions, detailed in Beckett’s meticulous, concise stage directions, serve not only to control the experience of the actor and the audience, but also of the characters.

³⁰ Samuel Beckett, *Happy Days: A Play In Two Acts* (New York: Grove Press, 1961), 36-37.

Earlier in the discussion of drama as narrative, we established stage direction as a surrogate narrator, and *Happy Days* takes this autonomy to an extreme. The majority of the stage directions throughout *Happy Days* are a repeated mandate of “(Pause),” or “(Pause. Do.),” occasionally paired with an accompanying action via stage direction or description of action in the dialogue. The pauses, functioning on both textual and performance levels, punctuate the reader’s experience of Winnie’s narration. In doing so, they control the actor’s storytelling in a highly prescriptive way, limiting it to the pacing dictated by the stage directions. The tension between Winnie and these very simple stage directions becomes even clearer in the second act, when despite the impossibility of action for Winnie, who is buried up to her neck in the sand, the same reflexive stage direction, “Pause. Do.” appears three more times.

While stage directions are typically assumed to stem from the characters’ motivations and desires, here the stage directions become more domineering than incidental. The compulsive and repetitive motions detailed in the stage directions match the style of Winnie’s own busying nature, but they are not necessarily a manifestation of her character. Even before the impossibility of ‘doing’ anything but speaking or changing facial expressions in the second act, the first act contains a pivotal moment in which stage directions run against the Winnie’s desires. The first arrives in a moment of intense heat, when she puts up her parasol and finds herself unable to put it down:

I am weary, holding it up, and I cannot put it down. (Pause.) I am worse off with it up than with it down, and I cannot put it down. (Pause.) Reason says, Put it down, Winnie, it is not helping you, put the thing down and get on with something else. (Pause.) I cannot. (Pause.) I cannot move. (Pause.) No, something must happen, in the world, take place, some change, I cannot, if I am to move again. (Pause.)³¹

³¹ Ibid.

Although Winnie expresses desire, even desperation, to put down the parasol, she is unable to act on the impulse. She delivers reasons as to why the parasol is better down than up, and yet she remains immobile. “I cannot” becomes the central phrase here, allowing for the idea that “something must happen, in the world, take place, some change, I cannot, if I am to move again.” Her actions have been usurped by the need for an external force to enact change, something she herself is unable to do. She proceeds to call for Willie, asking him to command her to put it down, and when he does not respond, she considers the “wonderful” alternative that speaking provides, followed by the stage direction “*Maximum pause.*” Her inability to move cripples not only her body but her tongue as well, despite her exaltations of its continued capabilities in the absence of action—the argument of the two lamps. In this moment, she indicates the need for a source of direction that transcends character: a need for the stage directions. They are the entity inhibiting her action and subsequently the only force capable of allowing it.

Winnie’s autonomy is called into question a second time when she encounters the revolver beside her handbag as she packs up for the night, yet again giving way to the stage directions as a dominant force in the overarching story of the play. As she tidies up her objects, placing them back into her beloved bag for the next day’s use, she comes across the revolver, Brownie:

I suppose this – might seem strange – this – what shall I say – this what I have said – yes – (*she takes up revolver*) – strange – (*she turns to put revolver in bag*) – were it not – (*about to put revolver in bag she arrests gesture and turns back front*) – were it not – (*she lays down revolver to her right, stops tidying, head up*) – that all seems strange (*Pause.*) Most strange. (*Pause.*) Never any change. (*Pause.*) And more and more strange.³²

³² Ibid. 45.

While speaking of the consistency and strangeness of her world—waking and sleeping, getting out, arranging, and tidying her objects—Winnie has a moment of breakage in both her language and her movement. She does not verbally acknowledge interacting with the gun, let alone leaving the gun out of the bag when all the other objects are returned. In fact, she seems to have lost control of her actions, her motions explicitly being arrested to lay it down to her right. The strangeness she describes in her world is not, as she claims, strange because of its unchanging circumstances (the mound, the unresponsive husband, the bag of props) but for the breaks in routine that she does not understand: the incinerated parasol that appears intact for the top of act two, the gun that she leaves out when all the other objects are replaced, and the immersion even deeper into the mound the next day. These actions, dictated by the stage directions but out of the control of the character, take on a power and autonomy of their own, independent of her narration. Beckett once again foregrounds narrative, setting Winnie and the stage directions at odds and pitting the character as narrator against the stage directions as narrator.

Although her motions can be unpredictable, Winnie does feel in control of her objects. “There is of course the bag,” she exclaims, “(*Turns towards it.*) There will always be the bag. ... Even when you are gone, Willie.”³³ The bag contains the collection of props that Winnie turns to whenever words seem to fail, a quality she explicitly points out.³⁴ The permanence of these objects is a source of comfort to her, but most intriguingly she takes pride in her ownership and power over them. In addressing the bag, Winnie confronts the limitations of stage directions:

Do not overdo the bag, Winnie, make use of it of course, let it help you...along, when stuck, by all means, but cast your mind forward, Winnie, to the time when words must fail – (*she closes eyes, pause, opens eyes*) – and do not overdo the bag.³⁵

³³ Ibid. 27.

³⁴ See page 7 of this chapter for a discussion on the failure of words.

³⁵ Beckett, *Happy Days*, 32.

A play cannot rest on its props and physical aspects alone, a common adage in the theatrical community. Winnie's relationship with the bag is contingent on her using it only when it is necessary, that is, after her words fail. Here, she puts the bag in its place—subordinate to speech. The narrative comes first, and only when that fails is it appropriate to reach into the bag for an alternative.

Winnie's prioritization of narrative leads us into a relationship even more anxious and complex than her relationships with the stage directions and objects. Winnie's style of narrative is repetitive and reflexive, much like her use of the objects. She often uses the same phrases many times over—"That's what I find so wonderful," "in the old style," and "No no," being a few of her favorites—often to recover from thoughts that threaten to shake the world she knows. The phrase "in the old style," for example, follows only after she makes specific mention of time: "May one still speak of time? (*Pause.*) Say it is a long time now, Willie, since I saw you. (*Pause.*) Since I heard you. (*Pause.*) May one? (*Pause.*) One does. (*Smile.*) The old style! (*Smile off.*)"^{36 37} Her reversion back to simple, comforting phrases is a tactic for shying away from complex issues. However, this does not erase the presence of these ideas of mortality, meaninglessness, past, present, and future from her thoughts. Her extended monologue throughout the play is an exploration of her life, questioning her identity and its own narrative alongside it.

Winnie, immobile in her mound, oscillates between talking about her present and past, touching on memories of questionable detail. She recalls a Charlie Hunter after hearing Willie read the name of Carolus Hunter, a first kiss with Mr Johnson, or is it Johnston, or Johnstone, a

³⁶ Ibid., 50.

³⁷ See also *Happy Days*, 22, 33, 44.

more recent encounter with a Shower or a Cooker³⁸—names that become a game of association and invention, memories that resurface with vague ties to the current line of thought. A coherent story about Charlie Hunter in Act I—“I close my eyes [...] and am sitting on his knees again, in the back garden at Borough Green, under the horse-beech. [...] Oh the happy memories!”³⁹—becomes a loose jumble of words in act two: “Ah yes...then...now...beechen green...this...Charlie...kisses...this...all that...deep trouble for the mind.”⁴⁰ Memories seem as clear as the present circumstances in one moment, then a broken garble of disconnected words and images the next. The first kiss with Johnson/Johnston/Johnstone and the horse-beech with Charlie Hunter are conflated in the second iteration of the memory, calling into question the verity of each individual memory as it came before. Even within the bounds of the play, events that the audience witnesses, Winnie cannot remember whether or not she has brushed and combed her hair, an issue that almost launches her into a panic before she concludes that “There is so little one *can* do. (*Pause.*) One does it all.”⁴¹ The routine of her day, a habit so naturalized that it seems the only way to live, is a saving grace to her faltering memory, the second lamp coming on in place of the first.

The ambiguity of memory has further consequences for Winnie when it comes to recalling and establishing memories of her own identity. Though Willie is a largely absent presence, he is the target for much of Winnie’s pondering conversation. Willie offers Winnie the chance of consensus, a second opinion, maybe something more akin to objectivity than she can hope for from herself. In one of the many instances in which she addresses him directly with a question, Winnie asks, “Was I lovable once, Willie? (*Pause.*) Was I ever lovable? (*Pause.*) Do

³⁸ For exact references, see *Happy Days*, 15, 16, 41.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 15-16.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 51.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 22.

not misunderstand my question, I am not asking you if you loved me, we know all about that, I am asking you if you found me lovable – at one stage. (*Pause.*)”⁴² The distinction she begs is nontrivial: her probing of whether she was lovable, a quality internal to herself, rather than loved, a feeling professed by Willie in a former time, expresses her desire to know something of herself. She wishes to know something objective of her qualities and characteristics rather than opinions. Her only companion being Willie, Winnie must either rely upon her own opinion or coax responses from him with great effort and very little result, contributing to an extreme anxiety towards her own narrative.

A recurring fear of Winnie’s is that words will, inevitably, fail, and that she will be left with nothing whatsoever, a fear brought closer after her paralysis in the realm of action as she wakes up to her neck in dirt. She attempts to mitigate this anxiety by continuing to speak to Willie and self-narrate as a mechanism to keep ‘going’ in some capacity. But the talk itself is not enough; Winnie’s theatrical narrative calls for an audience. Willie is the immediate target, but she makes it clear there is no need for him to participate, as long as he bears witness to Winnie’s existence:

Ah yes, if only I could bear to be alone, I mean prattle away with not a soul to hear. (*Pause.*) Not that I flatter myself you hear much, no Willie, God forbid. (*Pause.*) But days too when you answer. (*Pause.*) So that I may say at all times, even when you do not answer and perhaps hear nothing, Something of this is being heard, I am not merely talking to myself, that is in the wilderness, a thing I could never bear to do – for any length of time.^{43 44}

⁴² Ibid., 31.

⁴³ Ibid., 20-21.

⁴⁴ Similar concerns are voiced by Winnie in *Happy Days*, 24 (“Words fail, there are times when even they fail”) and 35 (“Ah yes, so little to say, so little to do, and the fear so great, certain days, of finding oneself ... left, with hours still to run, before the bell for sleep, and nothing more to say, nothing more to do, that the days go by, certain days go by, quite by, the bell goes, and little or nothing said, little or nothing done.”)

The anxiety within this speech is palpable. The days when Willie answers, participating in and validating Winnie's incessant conversation, are her 'happy days.' The rest of the time, Willie serves as both a witness and a topic of conversation, filling a vital role in Winnie's desert landscape. The tenuousness of this situation is not lost on Winnie; if he were to disappear, her role as narrator would have no audience, no witness, and no second opinion. Later in the passage, she entertains the possibility of Willie's death, wondering at what she would do between waking and sleeping. Her go-to answer, "Simply gaze before me with compressed lips," which she then attempts, is a comical moment for the audience to watch, but a terrifying prospect for Winnie to entertain.⁴⁵ If she were to be a mute presence with no witnesses, watching without narrating, unmoving, it is possible that past, present, and future would all be negated—a direct invocation of Ricoeur's ideas from *Time and Narrative*.

Even in the second act, when her actions are limited to facial expressions and speech, Winnie does not give up the effort of narrative. Her prioritization of narrative under these even more extreme circumstances allows Beckett to exercise the idea of narrative without action, exchanging action for variety of tone and voice in stage directions. With her upper body submerged and her neck unable to swivel, Winnie continues to speak and name her objects and surroundings, still verbally interacting with the objects around her.⁴⁶ Unable to reach into the bag, she replaces enumerating its contents with documenting the visible parts of her body. She categorizes the parts of her face that she can see, the bag, (now a blurry item to her left), the parasol, the sky, and the gun.⁴⁷ Since she cannot touch them, she narrates the objects, putting them in their place as she goes. Tone of voice is one of the few stage directions that remain alongside the pauses and glances about the stage. Her voice finds levels of "Low," "Just

⁴⁵ Beckett, *Happy Days*, 21.

⁴⁶ A detail specified in the stage directions at the top of Act II. See *Happy Days* p. 49.

⁴⁷ Beckett, *Happy Days*, 52-53.

audible,” “*Normal voice,*” “*Louder,*” “*Calling,*” “*Mondaine,*” “*Shocked,*” “*Vehement,*” *Mild reproach,*” “*With sudden violence,*” “*With mild irritation,*” and “*With a sigh*” for act two—directions that continue to control her already restrained acting capacities. Her efforts to keep the conversation going and an audience engaged continue in the absence of physical motions, moving from the dual realm of action and narration into a singularly narrative existence.

The theatrical audience, too, plays an acknowledged role in Winnie’s establishment of self and narrative legitimacy. Though she does not break the fourth wall and invite the audience to join the action onstage, she acknowledges a “Strange feeling that someone is looking at me. I am clear, then dim, then gone, then dim again, then clear again, and so on, back and forth, in and out of someone’s eye.”⁴⁸ Her description of the audience’s (perhaps wavering) focus indicates recognition of her status as spectacle. The power dynamics here take a strange dual bent: she describes the audience’s inconstant focus on her while being unable to see them in return. However, by acknowledging and describing the audience, she has an ownership over them that cannot be reciprocated.

This sensibility of connection to a greater audience is repeated in her story of Mr Shower (or is it Mr Cooker?), the traveler with a female companion whom Winnie recalls passing by her mound some time ago, examining her and wondering at her predicament. Through her recollection the man’s line of questioning, the audience is made complicit with his crass and reductive thoughts—“What’s she doing?” “What’s the idea?” “What does it mean?” “What’s it meant to mean?”⁴⁹ These questions, so often asked by theatergoers and critics, act as a mirror for the audience. In response, Winnie slings back a poignant response through the man’s companion, whom she recalls asking in return, “And you, she says, what’s the idea of you, she says, what are

⁴⁸ Ibid., 40.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 42-43.

you meant to mean?”⁵⁰ By narrating the encounter, Winnie exercises power over the event and incorporates larger existential questions into her mundane patter, affecting the audience by near-direct address.

Later in the play, Winnie tells another story, one that is textually demarcated as a narrative, putting her explicitly in the position of narrator. In the second act, as we have touched upon, Winnie’s stage directions become varied in tone rather than action—the most curious of these being the direction of her lines as “*Narrative.*”⁵¹ After awaking further immersed in the ground and taking stock of her surroundings, Winnie turns on the other lamp, narrative: “There is my story of course, when all else fails. (*Pause.*) A life. (*Smile*) A long life. (*Smile off.*)”⁵² However, the story she tells is not the story of her life at all. It is instead the story of a young girl named Mildred, who gets up in the night to undress her doll. The story does not mention Winnie or take place in the first person, and seems not to involve her at all. It is told in a style that is new to Winnie’s narration—a style of stops and starts, of editing:

The sun was not well up when Milly rose, descended the steep...(*pause*)...slipped on her nightgown, descended all alone the steep wooden stairs, backwards on all fours, though she had been forbidden to do so, entered the...(*pause*)...tiptoed down the silent passage, entered the nursery and began to undress Dolly.⁵³

Her editing mid-story takes the tone of corrective addition—Milly did not walk down the stairs before she had a nightgown on; she had to tiptoe through the passage before her illicit activity. The story is fraught with sexual implications, and moreover, allows for a denouement—a mouse running up Milly’s thigh—which gives Winnie, finally, an opportunity to scream.⁵⁴ Without talking directly about herself, Winnie is able to address time, mobility, sex, and fear at a

⁵⁰ Ibid., 43.

⁵¹ Beckett, *Happy Days*, 55, 59.

⁵² Ibid., 54.

⁵³ Ibid., 55.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 59.

distance. The scream is a release which would be too terrifying if emitted in acknowledgement of her own predicament, and is the only time she drops the constant flow of words in favor of a panicked sound. Similarly, she takes a break midway through the story of Mildred to address Willie and recall her previous story of Mr Shower (or Cooker), allowing herself to say “...*With sudden violence.*) Let go of me for Christ sake and drop! (*Pause. Do.*) Drop dead! (*Smile.*) But no. (*Smile broader.*) No no. (*Smile off.*) I watch them recede.”⁵⁵ By narrativizing her anxieties, Winnie is able to express them and then go back to what she sees as her calm and normal life, creating narratives within her own narrative to veil the circumstances.

The portrayal of narrative as an obstruction to confrontation of reality lies at the heart of *Happy Days*. While Ricoeur argues that, “suffering cries out for vengeance and calls for narrative,” Beckett posits narrative as distraction from actual surroundings, preventing Winnie from engaging with her horrifying situation. It is not a curative for suffering, but a passive resignation. Giving over to the control of the stage directions, the loss of mobility, and the likelihood that Willie will reach for the gun and end at least one of their lives, Winnie continues to willfully narrate the story of “another happy day!”⁵⁶

⁵⁵ Ibid., 58.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 64.

Waiting for Godot: To what ends?

“Astride of a grave and a difficult birth.” (Waiting for Godot 81)

The final play up for examination is the longest and perhaps most famous example of Beckett’s work, *Waiting for Godot*. Featuring more characters than the other two plays combined, its narrative structure is already prefaced in its title. Though it has more entrances, exits, props, and pages than either of the other plays, *Waiting for Godot* delivers to us the ultimate Beckettian conclusion about narrative’s relationship with drama, and allows us to better understand the relationships of characters that occupy the same stage. Using distinct passages of dialogue and monologue, contained within a narrative that allows for both, establishes a marked dynamic between narrative grounded in collective acknowledgement versus unanchored monologue, as we will see in the examination of Vladimir and Estragon (fondly nicknamed Didi and Gogo), Pozzo and the near-mute Lucky.

To begin, let us start with the pair of tramps, Didi and Gogo, who seldom appear onstage without one another, and whose constant companionship defines their characters. The pair adopts a “pure relationship,” in which the relationship between two individuals depends only on what each offers within the relationship, rather than factors external to it.⁵⁷ The pure relationship is unique to modern mentality, offering the most objective affirmation: the two stay together, not for feudal protection or financial gain, but rather for a mutual appreciation of one another. In the same way that shared meaning is required for language to function, shared recognition is required to sustain the concept of identity: “A language exists and is maintained within a language community. And this indicates another crucial feature of a self. One is a self only

⁵⁷ Anthony Giddens, *Modernity and Self-Identity: Self and Society In the Late Modern Age* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1991), 88.

among other selves. A self can never be described without reference to those who surround it.”⁵⁸
 To speak of the self is to call it into being, and with the modern self as reflexive rather than conclusive, having a second resource is necessary to confirm and define one’s identity, a phenomenon seen before in Winnie’s desperation for Willie’s acknowledgement in *Happy Days*.

Didi and Gogo prove the necessity of one another’s company by essentially not existing without one another, each appearing onstage contingent on the other’s presence. Beckett establishes quick switches from disagreement to agreement, from philosophizing to concluding, illustrating the quickness with which individuals accept their perceived identity and definitions once backed up by a companion:

ESTRAGON: Funny, the more you eat the worse it gets.
 VLADIMIR: With me it’s just the opposite.
 ESTRAGON: In other words?
 VLADIMIR: I get used to the muck as I go along.
 ESTRAGON: [*after prolonged reflection*] Is that the opposite?
 VLADIMIR: Question of temperament.
 ESTRAGON: Of character.
 VLADIMIR: Nothing you can do about it.
 ESTRAGON: No use struggling.
 VLADIMIR: One is what one is.
 ESTRAGON: No use wriggling.
 VLADIMIR: The essential doesn’t change.
 ESTRAGON: Nothing to be done.⁵⁹

The initial disagreement over the carrot is quickly turned into an agreement on the status quo and the irrationality of struggle. The panic that may have arisen from discussing what “temperament” or “character” actually means, or from directly speaking of whether the self exists, is dismissed by stichomythic platitudes. What might have become a philosophical conversation about life, whether existence gets worse or whether one becomes inured to its despair, is diverted into a series of conclusive, dismissive statements. They return mutually to the comfort of stagnation.

⁵⁸ Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1989), 35.

⁵⁹ Samuel Beckett, *Waiting For Godot* (New York: Grove Press, 2011), 13.

Only through companionship can the tramps get away with avoiding confrontation of their situation, and they remain, for the time being, justified in continuing their narrative unquestioningly.

This form of relational dialogue stands in direct opposition to the fearful ‘thinking’ monologue of Lucky toward the end of the first act—a monologue unhinged from the context of the rest of the play, lying formally marginal in the bounds of the overarching narrative. This is the only such occurrence of a detached monologue from across the three plays. While Krapp and Tape monologue to the recorder, and Winnie monologues to Willie and the dimly perceived audience, Lucky monologues for Didi and Gogo without actually speaking to them. On the page, his monologue is uninterrupted by stage directions, as they appear in the left margin of the play, quite literally running parallel instead of being peppered among the spoken words. This is Krapp’s obsession with ‘spool’ taken to a new extreme, beginning with references never made before and never made since, and comprised mostly of free associations and repetition:

LUCKY: Given the existence as uttered forth in the public works of Puncher and Wattmann of a personal God quaquaquaqua with white beard quaquaquaqua outside time without extension who from the heights of divine apathia divine athambia divine aphasia loves us dearly with some exceptions for reasons unknown but time will tell and [etc.]⁶⁰

The meaning of the words is all but entirely obscure, and the pace of the monologue runs at breakneck speed, continuing for two more full pages with no punctuation. Throughout the monologue, Didi and Gogo go from attempting to listen attentively to protesting bodily against Lucky’s continued thoughts. The language of the stage directions turns to phrases such as “*sufferings increase,*” “*agitated and groaning,*” “*protest violently,*” and “*general outcry.*”⁶¹ The distress of Pozzo, Didi, and Gogo at the whirlwind monologue arises from a fear of non-

⁶⁰ Ibid., 33.

⁶¹ Ibid., 34-35.

relational thought. Lucky's 'thinking' has no anchoring story, no events or episodes, and certainly no conclusion. It has no chance for agreement or disagreement because it makes no coherent claims. The words are simply words, arranged in the semblance of a sensible piece—a non-narrative monologue.

Long after Lucky thinks, toward the end of the second act, both Pozzo and Didi have smaller thought-monologues musing on the role of narrative, both of which deliver the antithesis of a satisfactory, Ricoeur-like answer to the efficacy of narrative. First Pozzo, blind in both eyes and speaking to Didi alone says his piece. Shortly thereafter, Didi speaks to no perceivable audience, his monologue falling on deaf ears as Gogo sleeps. In the first, Pozzo is insistent on the brevity and inconsequence of the time-narrative project, particularly with regard to Lucky, who can no longer think:

POZZO: [*suddenly furious*] Have you not done tormenting me with your accursed time! It's abominable! When! When! One day, is that not enough for you, one day he went dumb, one day I went blind, one day we'll go deaf, one day we were born, one day we shall die, the same day, the same second, is that not enough for you? [*Calmer.*] They give birth astride of a grave, the light gleams an instant, then it's night once more. [*He jerks the rope.*] On!⁶²

He insists that every element of life will deteriorate and vanish, delivering the moment of narrative for an instant—appearing as a gleam of light and then ceasing to exist. This image, evoking strong elements of both *Krapp's Last Tape* and *Happy Days*, condenses Krapp's lifelong narrative project into "the same second" and normalizes the strange submersion of Winnie. In a single image, Pozzo gives a belittling narrative description, sequenced properly but ultimately meaningless. Taking up this line of thought, Didi wonders directly at the status of the immediate narrative—his continued waiting with Gogo for an unseen, unknown man:

VLADIMIR: Was I sleeping, while the others suffered? Am I sleeping now? Tomorrow, when I wake, or think I do, what shall I say of today? That with

⁶² Ibid., 81.

Estragon my friend, at this place, until the fall of night, I waited for Godot? That Pozzo passed, with his carrier, and that he spoke to us? Probably. But in all that what truth will there be?⁶³

Equating the status of his narrative with a dream state, Didi creates himself a spectator role on his own narrative, estranged for a moment, seated with the eyes of an audience member. He names events, but cannot name a story. There has been no dénouement.⁶⁴ He cannot find a truth or a plot beyond the gleam of an image that Pozzo identified.

The lack of unified emplotment is brought to the fore throughout the play, particularly through the use of metatheatrical reference, breaking up the diegetic narrative with overt recognition of the dramatic form. In the midst of the first act, Didi and Gogo have an exchange regarding their encounter with Pozzo and Lucky:

VLADIMIR: Charming evening we're having.

ESTRAGON: Unforgettable.

VLADIMIR: And it's not over.

ESTRAGON: Apparently not.

VLADIMIR: It's only the beginning.

ESTRAGON: It's awful.

VLADIMIR: Worse than the pantomime.

ESTRAGON: The circus.

VLADIMIR: The music-hall.

ESTRAGON: The circus.⁶⁵

Citing these forms of performance, the pair criticizes their very own performance. Transitioning from an exchange of pleasantries, they slide into an agreement over the performance's lackluster vaudevillian qualities. Acting as their own critics, they occupy both audience and character roles, parodying each by mocking the methods of the other. The sneaking suspicion of this duality is confirmed when they go so far as to transfigure the stage into the theater:

VLADIMIR: I'll be back. [*He hastens towards the wings.*]

⁶³ Ibid., 82.

⁶⁴ In fact, Beckett includes a false moment of dénouement on *Godot* 64, in which Didi exclaims that at last, Godot has come, when he has most assuredly not appeared.

⁶⁵ Beckett, *Waiting For Godot*, 26.

ESTRAGON: End of the corridor, on the left.
 VLADIMIR: Keep my seat. [*Exit Vladimir.*]⁶⁶

Didi's exit to the restroom marks the firm divergence from the world inside the play into the world one level outside of the play. Instead of inviting the audience to spectate, comfortably seated and contained separate from them by way the narrative form, the lines are blurred and the players assume the role of audience, calling the audience to question their own relationship with narrative.⁶⁷ Although this works most fundamentally to display the artifice of performance, rather than narrative directly, breaking the boundary between character and audience ruptures the narrative unity and continuity of story and discourse.

The embedded criticisms in *Godot*, then, serve not only as playful criticisms on the work itself, but as criticisms of the life narrative. Folding the characters, audience, play, and life inside out in this way necessitates an acknowledgement of the constructed nature of each—the pains and shortcomings in one becoming reflected on the other. Fourteen pages from the end of the play, Didi gives an assessment of the situation: “We wait. We are bored [*He throws up his hand.*] No, don't protest, we are bored to death, there's no denying it. [...] In an instant all will vanish and we'll be alone once more, in the midst of nothingness! [*He broods.*]⁶⁸ At this point, the object of his criticisms—his own story—begs the audience to adopt it as their own. They too are waiting, perhaps bored, but certainly having felt at some level the futility of the act, and they are told that soon it will all vanish and they will be left in the midst of nothingness. Didi's brooding becomes the audience's opportunity for contemplation of these many narrative levels,

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ It is worth noting, on an extratextual level, that the most famous critical assessment of *Godot*, Vivian Mercier's “nothing happens, twice,” is uncannily similar to one of Gogo's own lines on *Godot* 32: “Nothing happens, nobody comes, nobody goes, it's awful!”—although to Mercier, this was positive praise of Beckett's unprecedented theatrical achievement.

⁶⁸ Beckett, *Waiting For Godot*, 71.

and finally to begin contemplation of a time outside of narrative. If Didi can imagine such a time out of his own narrative, the audience in his place is asked to imagine one as well.

Where does one go from contemplating an alternative to a life lived narratively? One of Ricoeur's few specific demands of narrative is that it must have a sensible conclusion. Conclusion, he claims, is necessary for the creation of a unified whole in narrative: "To understand the story is to understand how and why the successive episodes led to this conclusion, which, far from being foreseeable, must finally be acceptable, as congruent with the episodes brought together by the story."⁶⁹ In all three of these plays, we see distinct non-endings—characters left inert onstage in situations that seem even less clear than when they began. This is clearly seen in the ending of *Krapp's Last Tape*, where Krapp has rejected his latest recording and returned to a recounted memory. In *Happy Days*, Winnie remains rooted in the status quo, refusing to err from her perception of this having been "another happy day."⁷⁰ In the former, a decision is made counter to the beginning of the play—Krapp rejects narrative. In the latter, a decision is made in agreement with Winnie in the beginning of the play—she continues to narrate her own life. While both end in characters gazing speechless, these two endings are still arguably more conclusive than the end we see in this third play.

Waiting for Godot has an infamous 'non-ending' – one that threatens Aristotle and Ricoeur's idea of emplotment on the basis of unity and sequence. In much the same vein as the other two, *Godot* allows for entertainment of deeply philosophical questions mixed with crass, vaudevillian humor. In the final moment of the play, both come together to an inconclusive head. "Why don't we hang ourselves?" Gogo asks, to which the two respond by searching for a rope, fixing on Gogo's belt, and watching his pants fall around his ankles as he removes the cord.

⁶⁹ Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), 67.

⁷⁰ Beckett, *Happy Days*, 64.

They pull it to test its strength and it immediately breaks. In the midst of this question of whether to live or to die, the questions of communication, companionship, trousers, hats, and resignation circulate without conclusion:

ESTRAGON: I can't go on like this.

VLADIMIR: That's what you think.

ESTRAGON: If we parted? That might be better for us.

VLADIMIR: We'll hang ourselves tomorrow *[Pause.]* Unless Godot comes.

ESTRAGON: And if he comes?

VLADIMIR: We'll be saved.

[Vladimir takes off his hat (Lucky's), peers inside it, feels about inside it, shakes it, knocks on the crown, puts it on again.]

ESTRAGON: Well? Shall we go?

VLADIMIR: Pull on your trousers.

ESTRAGON: What?

VLADIMIR: Pull on your trousers.

ESTRAGON: You want me to pull off my trousers?

VLADIMIR: Pull ON your trousers.

ESTRAGON: *[realizing his trousers are down]* True. *[He pulls up his trousers.]*

VLADIMIR: Well? Shall we go?

ESTRAGON: Yes, let's go.

*[They do not move.]*⁷¹

The vaudevillian and existential questions are muddled, and the same degree of import is given to death, pulling up trousers, abandonment, and the perpetually uncomfortable hats. The companionship that allows Didi and Gogo to operate within the same narrative, corroborating one another's existence, is what cripples their ending it. While it may be possible for one of them to kill himself, the logistics for two are overwhelming. They're unable to part and unable to die together, unable to leave and unable to justify staying, concentrated on the mundane particularities of their ill-fitting and borrowed attire. They resolve themselves to leave, and yet they do not move.

At the heart of this is the ultimate indecision: to remain waiting, caught in limbo between staying and going. It is true that one could argue that this pseudo-ending is allowable under

⁷¹ Beckett, *Waiting For Godot*, 84-85.

Ricoeur's demand that it "finally be acceptable, as congruent with the episodes brought together by the story," given that this waiting has been thematic throughout.⁷² The threat that this non-ending delivers, then, is to emplotment, for which Ricoeur argues that

an event must be more than just a singular occurrence. It gets its definition from its contribution to the development of the plot. A story, too, must be more than just an enumeration of events in serial order; it must organize them into an intelligible whole, of a sort such that we can always ask what is the "thought" of this story. In short, emplotment is the operation that draws a configuration out of a simple succession.⁷³

The events in the final scene of *Godot* do not seem to contribute to an overarching plot. What consequence does Gogo's dropped trousers have on the story? To what end do the two contemplate death? For what reasons do they verbally decide to go and physically decide not to go? These are all actions that seem to have no direct causes or contributions to a story, though they constitute the culmination of the entire play. The conclusion of the play is an absolute lack of conclusiveness. But the 'followability' of Beckett comes from its episodic, rather than configurational, dimension, as Ricoeur divides time in narrative.⁷⁴ In describing a Beckett play, the sequence of events is more present than a unified whole. There is no causal effect between characters' entrances and exits, breaks for vaudevillian theatrics, and the staccato conversations of Didi and Gogo—they take the "then, and then" format that Ricoeur proposes for episodic storytelling. The unified whole remains obscure, for "[t]o understand the story is to understand how and why the successive episodes led to this conclusion, which, far from being foreseeable, must finally be acceptable, as congruent with the episodes brought together by the story."⁷⁵ But the opacity of the configurational dimension (the overall structure and sense of ending of the story) leaves the narrative more dilapidated by its 'end point' than clarified.

⁷² Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, 67.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 65.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 67.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

What remains, rather, is a direction in which the play slides—a direction of narrative entropic decline. The idea of equilibrium and decay, constant incremental change and consistent disappointment, is addressed throughout *Waiting for Godot*. Pozzo’s pipe—the second never so sweet as the first, but “sweet just the same”⁷⁶—and Gogo’s carrot—the more eaten, the worse its taste, or else simply muck that one gets used to over time—demonstrate the fundamental decline of a consistently known quantity throughout the play.⁷⁷ The most salient of these moments is in the change of Pozzo and Lucky in the second act. Not unlike Winnie, the two are reintroduced as the same but for two crucial debilitations, Pozzo’s lack of sight and Lucky’s lack of speech. What I wish to convey with the concept of narrative entropy is the idea of an intentional unraveling of story, discourse, and narrative certainty, all headed toward the ultimate nothingness that lies at the heart of the narrative delusion. As Beckett scholar Erik Tønning points out,

Beckett undermines expectations of significant plot-development and a closing resolution. Instead, the disintegrative processes of ‘waiting’ and ‘ending’ are constantly being foregrounded. The projects, ideas, and games of the characters are defined in opposition to the ‘something’ inexorably ‘taking its course’. It is easy to see that this sense of being trapped in a net against which one can only struggle in vain (vividly exemplified by Lucky’s dance in *Godot*) remains essential to *Krapp’s Last Tape* and *Happy Days* as well [...] Beckett transformed the insight that imitating a process of disintegration itself requires strict formal control into an approach to practical play-writing.⁷⁸

While Tønning’s argument centers on the concept of time and selfhood without directly addressing narrative, the combination of his theory of disintegration along with Ricoeur’s theory in *Time and Narrative* delivers us to the conclusion that the narrative form of Beckett’s play is the net enmeshing his whole project. The play does not abandon the narrative form, but it also

⁷⁶ Beckett, *Waiting For Godot*, 20.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 13.

⁷⁸ Erik Tønning, *Samuel Beckett's Abstract Drama: Works for Stage and Screen, 1962-1985* (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2007), 53.

remains markedly resistant to the category of narrative throughout, in both its structure and its subject matter. The intense formal control that Beckett's text has over its performance (via commanding stage directions, specific instructions within dialogue and monologue, etc.) is itself a response to the even more controlling form of narrative. The dance is a collection of questions, frustrations, and vaudevillian tricks that fills up the time in a text that is simultaneously resistant to narrative and still captive to its form.

Conclusion

Across these three plays, Beckett's approach to narrative is one of intense struggle and reluctance. Although he technically fits under the category of dramatic narrative, it is not a comfortable fit, and navigating the already perilous bridge between the live, durational performance of drama and the preserved, literary text of print, he is constantly drawing out the anxieties of each. In each of the plays, he teases out another facet of insecurity in the dramatic narrative form—identity and memory in *Krapp's Last Tape*, relationships between characters, narration and action in *Happy Days*, and the pitfalls of monologue and dialogue, solitude and companionship in *Waiting for Godot*. All of these rigorously question Paul Ricoeur's claims that narrative is a cure for life's suffering, pointing out the fallacy of assuming narrative to be the 'correct' and restorative way of looking at the world.

That being said, he does not offer any sort of solution or alternative to his audience beyond acknowledging that the only truth in our perception of time is in viewing it as entropic decline. Bear in mind that the tools he uses to portray this outlook is, ironically enough, narrative—not only narrative, but the live, durational narrative of drama, which begs real time of its audience. The power of his narrative critique lies in its position as self-acknowledged narrative, exposing all of its fraught elements instead of pretending at a cohesive, reparative whole. Sliding entropically through time, the characters of Beckett's narratives lose purpose, mobility, and narrative faith as they scramble to remain an active part of their own stories, realizing (whether acknowledging it, in the case of Krapp and Didi or not, in the case of Winnie) that narrative has not been the balm of truth it has historically been expected, but an illusion disguising ultimate meaninglessness. They are left onstage with spools, handbags, and hats—inert at the inconclusive finale of their narrative as the lights go down.

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