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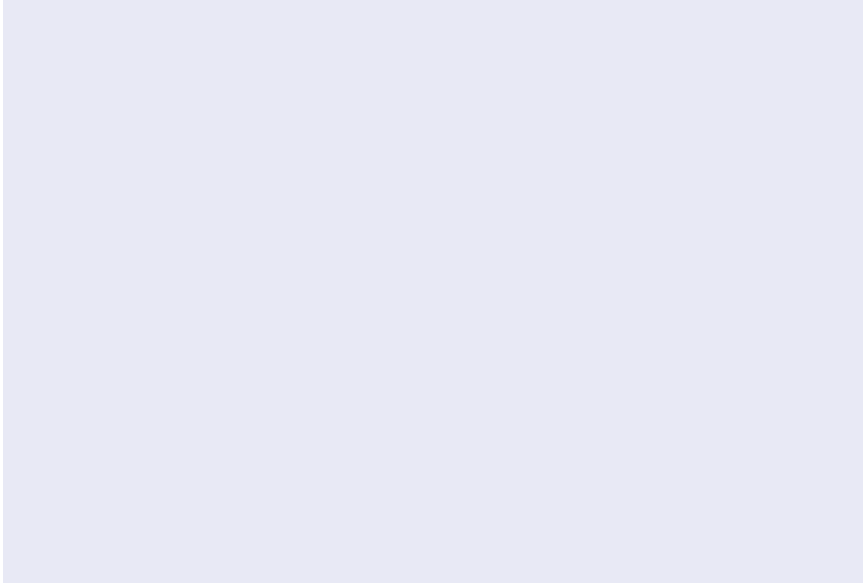
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Playing the crowd: Beckett, Havel, and their audiences

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ABSTRACT

This article discusses debates over whether Beckett’s plays should be adapted to respond to changing times, places, and audience expectations. It considers controversial, context-sensitive performances of the late play Catastrophe (1982) and Beckett’s first full-length play Eleutheria (1947), and it argues that both plays seem to have been destined for such controversy, since their authorized scripts address specific audiences in uncharacteristically explicit ways that leave them dated. Catastrophe speaks to an Avignon audience intent on honouring the then-imprisoned Czech playwright and dissident Vaclav Havel, and Eleutheria is rife with references to the imagined expectations of French postwar audiences. By elucidating Catastrophe’s play with Havel’s reputation in the West and Eleutheria’s play with the legacy of experimental interwar playwrights in France, this article suggests that both plays have an inbuilt capacity to resist the interpretive schemes that they imagine their audiences will bring to bear on them, including schemes based on received understandings of Beckett’s intentions. The same applies to a wide swathe of Beckett’s plays, from Waiting for Godot to Ohio Impromptu, which suggests that creatively updated performances of his work can constitute continuations, rather than betrayals, of an ongoing Beckettian challenge to changing audience complacencies.

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Less than three months after Samuel Beckett’s death in December 1989, a pro-duction of his play Catastrophe at the John Houseman Studio Theater in New York exposed latent anxieties about how his dramatic legacy would unfold. Catastrophe was a relatively recent work – Beckett had written it in 1982 for the ‘Night for Václav Havel’ organised by the Association Internatio-nale de Défense des Artistes (AIDA), a night held at that year’s Avignon Theatre Festival in protest of Havel’s imprisonment in Czechoslovakia1 – and now, less than a decade later, changing political circumstances had led to a production that was relatively cavalier in its alterations to Beckett’s script. In a clear nod to the recent success of the Velvet Revolution, in which Havel played a crucial role, Vasek Simek, the Czech expatriate director



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of the 1990 New York production, added a moment to the end of the play that is famously summarised in an angry letter to the New York Times written by Barney Rosset, Beckett’s American publisher, along with Martin Garbus, his lawyer: ‘Instead of the play’s ending with the defeated protagonist being shown to the crowd, it now ends with the playing of the Czechoslovak national anthem as the catalyst for the protagonist unfurling himself to his full height, now victorious’.2 There was immediately some disagreement about the triumphalism that Rosset and Garbus saw in Simek’s production. The stage and screen actor Sally Moﬀet wrote a letter in response to theirs to claim, ‘The dehumanized object at the centre of the play never seemed “vic-torious” to me’; ‘[The protagonist’s] “unfurling” and smiling appear only two more reflexes manipulated by the director’; and, ‘The playwright’s genius is well served, I think’.3 Nevertheless, it is unlikely that Rosset and Garbus’s con-cerns would have been assuaged even had they conceded such points. Their letter makes it clear that for them, serving ‘the playwright’s genius’ leaves little room for creative adaptation: ‘Not so long ago’, they write, ‘[Beckett] asked to have his name removed from a production of his play “Endgame” by JoAnne Alkalitis [sic] in Boston, even though she tampered with his play far less’.4

Within five years, similarly heated confrontations would arise over the unpublished typescript of Eleutheria, the first full-length play that Beckett ever wrote. Claiming that Beckett considered the play a failure, Jérôme Lindon, Beckett’s long-time French publisher and literary executor, did not want it published and never allowed it to be performed. Lindon’s stance led to confrontation with Rosset, who claimed that Beckett had given him per-mission to publish the play shortly before his death.5 Rosset pushed for pub-lication in the early 1990s and even tried to organise a public performance against Lindon’s wishes. When the New York Theatre Workshop backed out for fear of legal action, Rosset quickly arranged to have a ‘private reading’ of the play in the American Mime Theater, which was housed in his own apartment building, a reading that led the Beckett Estate to ‘[dis-charge] Rosset as Beckett’s North-American theatrical agent’ (Tucker, p. 239). A number of such ‘private readings’ have taken place since then, some of which oﬀer free admission with the donation of a non-perishable food item, and the play has been publicly staged once in Iran (p. 241). None of these performances has been approved by the Estate. Lindon raises Beckett’s apparent reiteration in later life that he did not want the play pub-lished or performed, and he cites the ‘pact of friendship’ between him and Beckett as justification for his opposition to its widespread dissemination. If newcomers had their first encounter with Beckett’s work through Eleutheria, he implies, they might be put oﬀ from exploring the rest of Beckett’s oeuvre.6

As case studies in how to interpret Beckett’s scripts for the stage, Eleutheria and Catastrophe, as the first and (nearly) last plays that Beckett wrote, provide

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interesting, if odd, bookends to his playwriting career.7 Neither fits easily with widely held notions of ‘the starkness and the specificity of [Beckett’s] vision’, as Mel Gussow puts it in his review of Simek’s production.8 Eleutheria calls for a large, revolving set and includes vague stage directions that leave the ‘mar-ginal action’ of each act ‘for the actor to determine’ (p. 5). The play also seems uncharacteristically indexed to a particular historical moment. It makes repeated, unusually direct references to the French postwar context in which it was written, and with its intrusive spectator characters, its explicit references to its own script, and its onstage characters’ propensity to flag up their status as characters in a play, it engages with the legacy of experimen-tal theatrical works of the interwar period such as Luigi Pirandello’s Six Char-acters in Search of an Author and Guillaume Apollinaire’s The Breasts of Tiresias (both adduced below).9 Catastrophe, for its part, stages a relatively realistic situation that might seem out of place alongside more enigmatic or introspective dramatic works of the late 1970s and early 1980s such as A Piece of Monologue, Rockaby, or Ohio Impromptu. With its central, decrepit figure subject to the whims of an oﬃcious authority figure, it too seems unu-sually context-specific: it seems to reflect, and even oﬀer commentary on, Havel’s imprisonment.10 In the case of Catastrophe, the debates over staging seem to arise from a critical wish to reconcile the play’s particular, his-torically rooted themes with the more recognisably Beckettian sense of uprootedness, a wish that any added reference to contemporary events would seem to work against. In the case of Eleutheria, a suspicion of total irre-concilability seems to be at least partially responsible for the ban on performance.

Such attitudes – as Rosset and Garbus make clear in their letter – tend to be predicated upon claims about what Beckett’s attitudes were or likely would have been, many of which are inferred from Beckett’s letters to Alan Schneider, his preferred American director. In one well-known letter, for instance, Beckett claims that his work is a matter of ‘fundamental sounds’ and that those over-interpreters who give themselves ‘headaches among the overtones’ should be ignored and allowed to ‘provide their own aspirin’.11 In a similarly comical and cantankerous letter, he expresses strong objections to directors with a ‘taste for improving authors’.12 But his commendation of Schneider’s commer-cially disastrous American premiere of Waiting for Godot is perhaps the best representative of the sort of reasoning commonly thought to underlie his resist-ance to directorial re-workings and updatings of his scripts:

I cannot help but feeling that the success of Godot has been very largely the result of a misunderstanding, or of various misunderstandings, and that perhaps you have succeeded better than any one [sic] else in stating its true nature. […] I am not suggesting that you were unduly influenced by all I said or that your production was not primarily your own and nobody else’s, but it is probable that our conversations confirmed you in your aversion to

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half-measures and frills, i.e. to precisely those things that 90% of theatre-goers want.13

Despite their disagreements, many with personal ties to Beckett are prone to cite such well-known comments in order to argue that productions ought to remain as faithful as possible to an authorised master-text, conceived as a repository for a finished work of art. Where exceptions are made, these are usually only in deference to received anecdotes about decisions Beckett made while directing his plays, decisions to which performance styles, too, are often expected to conform.14

It is far from obvious that an author ought to have the final say in interpret-ations of his work, but even putting that point aside, it is important to note that while Beckett’s attitudes might seem direct and unambiguous in all of these cases, his comments on Schneider’s Godot in particular are more complex than they appear at first glance. At one level, the attitude is familiar: Waiting for Godot is conceived as an abstract entity that can only be distorted by a director’s desire to respond to imagined audience expectations. At the same time, however, Beckett’s inherent kindness and tact prevent him from going too far, and he very quickly makes concessions. He even shows some openness to novelty and creative adaptation, provided that the original vision of the playwright continues to function as a guarantor of the play’s unity. Such openness could be taken even farther than that, since that vision hardly seems independent of external circumstances, which are always subject to change. While Beckett’s expressed disdain for ‘what 90% of theatre-goers want’ could be interpreted to mean that in his playwriting Beckett had little concern for audience expectations, it could equally be inter-preted to suggest that Beckett’s writing was shaped by his ideas about his audi-ences’ expectations and by a desire to explore what happens when those expectations are subverted. In this light, directors and performers wishing to respond to changing audience expectations can be conceived as inheritors, rather than betrayers, of an ongoing Beckettian project.

Indeed, Beckett did not always describe his dramatic vision as perfectly clear, specific, or unrelated to external circumstance. When he recalls com-posing Waiting for Godot, for instance, he writes, ‘I must have indicated the little I have been able to make out. The bowler hats for example’.15 Here the notion of vision seems not a synonym for a totalising idea for a work but rather a metaphor for a compositional practice that consists merely of registering those ideas that make themselves apparent. With this idea in mind, it might not be so surprising that the stage directions of Eleutheria at times seem only partially worked out or that the events of Cat-astrophe might resonate with events at the forefront of the Beckett’s mind, and it might seem even less surprising that as a director Beckett would continue to tweak and adapt his scripts according to changing theatrical conventions.

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These comments and practices resonate with those of some of Beckett’s more liberal interpreters, who tend to view his works as fluid and contingent entities. In his stage adaptation of Beckett’s prose work The Lost Ones, for example, Lee Breuer both made cuts to the text and featured music composed by Philip Glass. (According to Beckett, this production ‘worked outstandingly well in its own terms’.)16 The Breuer production resonates with the views of theatre practitioners such as Akalaitis, who tend to approach Beckett as an innovative dramatist whose pieces necessarily call for constant revision as they are adapted to changing times and places. After studying with the exper-imental director and theorist Jerzy Grotowski, Akalaitis learned to emphasise ‘working with […] an image to the text’ over strict ‘interpretation of the text’, the latter of which she links with the views of Stella Adler.17 While ‘strict interpretation’ might seem more commensurate with what Beckett demands of his directors in his best-known obiter dicta, it is interesting to note that Adler’s naturalistic techniques, derived largely from methods first developed by Constantin Stanislavsky, are concerned with motivation and character development in ways that resonate with the literary aesthetic of the ‘naturalists’ whom Beckett disparaged in his lectures at Trinity College Dublin and in his ‘Three Dialogues with Georges Duthuit’.18 On the other hand, although Akalaitis’s emphasis on working with images rather than the-matic interpretation may seem to fly in the face of fidelity to Beckett’s scripts, it does fit well with Beckett’s own widely perceived propensity to think in terms of stage images rather than character motivations. Such matters are rarely black and white.

What I show here is that discussions of these matters need not draw only upon letters, interviews, and other comments and decisions that Beckett made outside the work. Beckett’s scripts, themselves, often anticipate and render fundamentally ambiguous the question of how (or whether) they should be performed in ways responsive to particular times and places, and this makes the question of what constitutes faithful interpretation more open than it has tended to appear. I demonstrate this, in the first instance, through a reading of Catastrophe, beginning with the observation that the play is dedicated to a playwright who, in his drama as in his politics, strove to articulate what he saw as simple, timeless truths but repeatedly confronted the near impossibility of doing so in a way that could withstand the vicissi-tudes of changing contexts. In what follows, an initial examination of Havel’s work suggests concrete, contemporaneous terms for understanding how Catastrophe attempts to make a direct statement to a specific audience while acknowledging its own comic inability to articulate anything that would be free of the need for eventual re-interpretation and adaptation. This comparison suggests how other Beckett plays might articulate that con-undrum in changing terms indexed to particular contexts, a tendency that indeed seems to have begun with his very first play. The complexity and

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fragility of the critiques oﬀered in Beckett’s drama suggest that a certain degree of directorial ingenuity might indeed be necessary to ensure that it continues to challenge, rather than edify, audiences eager to recognise them-selves in the work.

The diﬃculties of being direct

Curiously, there has been little critical interest in comparisons of Havel’s and Beckett’s work.19 This is perhaps partially because Havel’s avowed political humanism could seem at odds with what is increasingly viewed as Beckett’s anti-humanist aesthetics, but correspondence between the two suggests both aesthetic and critical aﬃnities. In 1983, Havel wrote to Beckett to thank him for contributing Catastrophe to the Avignon event, and in that letter he expresses his great admiration for Beckett: ‘From the first you have been for me a deity in the heavens of spirit. I have been immensely influenced by you as a human being, and in a way as a writer, too’.20 In his response to Havel, Beckett claimed to have ‘read and admired [Havel’s] plays in French translation’, and he wrote of Catastrophe, ‘To have helped you, however little, and saluted you and all you stand for, was a moment in my writing life that I cherish’.21 At the time of his death, Beckett owned a copy of Havel’s play The Memorandum (1965) and copies of his three one-act plays, Audience (1975), Unveiling (1975), and Protest (1978), the latter three nicknamed the ‘Vanek plays’ because they all centre around the mostly silent, withdrawn protagonist Ferdinand Vanek.22 These plays find strong aﬃnities with Catastrophe and Eleutheria: they all feature protagonists iso-lated from the ideologies professed by their contemporaries, but even their best attempts at subverting those ideologies seem doomed, ultimately, to be appropriated within them.

Before elucidating those resonances with Beckett’s own withdrawn prota-gonists, however, it is first worth noting that aﬃnities between Beckett and Havel are apparent even in their critical thinking. Havel is well known for his concept of ‘living in the truth’, an idea he coined in his 1978 essay ‘The Power of the Powerless’. According to Havel, ‘living in the truth’ amounts to a commitment to a ‘free expression of life’ by which individuals refuse to ‘live within a lie’, which would require that they be ‘alienated’ from ‘the terrain of their authentic existence’.23 Such expressions, Havel explains, tend to take the form of straightforward statements of obvious truths, state-ments that refuse to participate in the ‘world of appearances’. They occur when a citizen ‘stops putting up […] slogans merely to ingratiate himself’, when ‘he stops voting in elections he knows are a farce’, or when ‘he begins to say what he really thinks at political meetings’ (pp. 55–56). Just as Beckett is tempted to imagine Godot (and other works) as ideal entities that can only be corrupted or needlessly complicated by inauthentic concessions

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to audience expectations, Havel, in his nonfiction, imagines an ideal form of political speech totally independent of dominant pieties and ideologies.

This conception of the power of authentic utterance proves more tenable in Havel’s political writing than in his playwriting, however. Thirteen years before he wrote ‘The Power of the Powerless’, The Memorandum had already demonstrated, in comic fashion, the naïveté of attempts to expose the hollowness of bureaucratic language games by speaking clearly and plainly. The Memorandum satirises excessive governmental bureaucracy through its representation of the fictional, government-invented language Ptydepe, which is purportedly a ‘thoroughly exact language’, but which in fact only introduces extreme confusion conducive to a power grab by the play’s chief villain (and chief Ptydepe proponent), Jan Ballas. At the same time, however, attempts to cut through the bureaucratic manipulation that Ptydepe represents are shown to be ineﬀective. When the protagonist Josef Gross protests, ‘I’m a humanist and […] every single member of this staﬀ is human and must become more and more human. If we take from him his human language, […] we shall have prevented him from becoming fully human’, he may be anticipating what Havel would later define as an anti-ideo-logical desire to ‘live in the truth’ and remain grounded in ‘the terrain of […] authentic existence’, yet the comically confused and circular nature of his logic, combined with his inability to translate his desire into actual change, only underscores the naïve ineptitude of his attempts to expose, rather than play, Ballas’s power games.24 Similarly, the Vanek plays demonstrate how comically inept a commitment to ‘living in the truth’ is for eﬀecting actual social change: Vanek’s embarrassed, confused taciturnity and politeness repeatedly and invariably lead him to pretend to sympathise with beliefs to which he is manifestly opposed. At the end of these plays, he finds himself reinforcing the worldviews of corrupt informants (Audience), shameless con-sumerists (Unveiling), and cowardly collaborators (Protest). No clear alterna-tives to posturing and deception are evident within any of these endings. This may partially account for why Havel later titled a collection of his political speeches, which attempt to describe how politics can be combined with a straightforward adherence to common sense and a consistent moral code, The Art of the Impossible.25

Catastrophe similarly demonstrates an awareness of the diﬃculty of making direct, unequivocal statements. It is true that, just as Vanek’s proclivity to remain distant and guarded tends, at least at first, to highlight the superficiality of the worldviews of his interlocutors, so P’s passivity and silence throughout the majority of the play exposes the emptiness of the rhetoric of D and A and the cruelty in the way that they manipulate his body. Yet just as Vanek tends ultimately to engage with his interlocutors in a way that could be inter-preted as capitulation to their demands, and just as Gross’s attempts at unequi-vocal protest are somewhat inept and quickly manipulated by Ballas, so P’s final

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gesture of raising his head and silencing a ‘[d]istant storm of applause’ ulti-mately seems to conform to the expectations of D and A.26 Reportedly, for Beckett, P’s final gesture was an unambiguous gesture of protest: ‘He’s saying, you bastards, you haven’t finished me yet’.27 Yet like Vanek’s line ‘It’s all a bloody mess’ at the end of Audience – a line that could be interpreted both as a genuine expression of protest and as a concession to what his infor-mant boss wants to hear – P’s gesture, however unambiguous his intentions, lends itself to appropriation and reinterpretation within diﬀering contexts. In the very moment that P ‘fixes’ the audience with his gaze, for instance, he inad-vertently participates in creating the very eﬀect that D had hoped to create, albeit in a manner that is probably too explicit for D’s liking (CDW, p. 461). Earlier in the play, when A suggests to D, ‘What if he were to […] raise his head?’, D’s rejection of that possibility reflects not a rejection of the meaning it might aim to convey, but rather a sensitivity to the context of performance: ‘Where do you think we are? In Patagonia? […] For God’s sake!’ (p. 460). D points out that this play is not being staged in a contextual vacuum – and here I read ‘in Patagonia’ as analogous to ‘on the moon’ – and it seems to be D’s knowledge of his specific audience that leads him to dismiss A’s idea. The phrase ‘for God’s sake’ is the same phrase he uses to reject A’s idea that P be fitted with a gag, a decision based on the feeling that a gag would be too on the nose – ‘This craze for explicitation!’ (CDW, p. 459) – not because it would contravene his own vision of his ‘catastrophe’.28 The audience, D assumes, will get the idea thanks to a shared set of codes and conventions. So when P ultimately does raise his head, he might indeed be saying, ‘You bastards, you haven’t finished me yet’, but it is important to remember that his audience remains free to decide who the ‘bastards’ are.

P’s inability to protest unequivocally and on his own terms – and the fact that he attempts to do so nevertheless – is an important thread linking a late play such as Catastrophe to an early play such as Eleutheria, in which Victor, despite his best eﬀorts, proves to be incapable of doing anything but conform-ing to the demands made of him by others. Victor despises and feels distanced from a ‘mania’ on the part of his family, acquaintances, and even spectator characters, ‘to understand a life like [his]’ (E, p. 144). The comic naïveté of his attempt at withdrawal is made particularly clear in a speech in which he articulates his own vision of freedom. This speech might be described as Victor Krap’s attempt to speak from the terrain of his authentic existence:

You accept it when someone is beyond life, or when life is beyond you, and that people can refuse to compromise with life if they are prepared to pay the price and give up their liberty. He’s abdicated, he’s dead, he’s mad, he’s got faith, got cancer. Nothing wrong with that. But not to be one of you through being free, that’s a disgrace and a scandal. […] Your own liberty is so miserable! (p. 148)

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Yet Victor is not free. He only delivers this impassioned tirade after the spectator threatens to have him tortured unless he explains himself. Like P’s gesture of raising his head, this monologue can ultimately be made to conform to audience expectations in the act of challenging them. As with Josef Gross’s speech about ‘becoming fully human’, Victor’s logic here is so convoluted and vague as to be laughable, and his invocations of the concepts of liberty and freedom are as ironic as his name. Victor seems to consider himself free because the motive for his withdrawal from ‘life’ is indescribable in readymade terms, yet the spectator is evi-dently able to form a conclusive interpretation: ‘What you have said makes sense’, he says to Victor (p. 149). Even Victor’s final, silent gesture at the end of the play – his ‘turning his emaciated back on human-ity’ (p. 170) – which seems an absolute rejection of the conventions of life and of theatre, is interpretable as compliance with them. He has evidently made a choice to continue leading his withdrawn life, and in so doing he has adequately resolved, in accordance with convention, the conflict that has driven the action of the play: namely, the question of whether or not he could be reformed.

Victor and P seem incapable of articulating direct, unequivocal protests against their (mis)interpreters, yet their very lack of agency only highlights the cruelty of their implacable tormentors, and in this sense that lack of agency forms part of a deliberate protest on the part of the plays in which they appear. Especially in performance, the constant presence of a withdrawn character can serve as a constant visual reminder of the vacuity of the dialogue that swirls around them. This intended eﬀect might be one way of under-standing Beckett’s putative contribution of Horace Egosmith to Mary Man-ning’s Youth’s the Season … ?, particularly with regard to the party scene in which Egosmith’s silence, a seeming symptom of his shyness more than a tac-tical tool, oﬀers a quasi-moral (or at least non-immoral) counterpoint to the scandalous confessions he elicits from nearly everyone present.29 That tactic also seems evident in Beckett’s Rough for Theatre II, in which the silence and full-back posture of C casts him as wholly removed from the apparently hollow ground on which the calculations of A and B rest. What is special about Eleutheria and Catastrophe is that both have explicitly self-reflexive structures that make particularly obvious a connection between the withdra-wal of a protagonist and the aﬀected withdrawal of the work from conventions of performance, as dictated by the imagined expectations of specific audiences.

What theatre-goers want

Havel was sensitive to those sorts of expectations – he stated that Audience revealed to him that he ‘really must write for a concrete audience’ (quoted

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in Rocamora, p. 160) – and each of the plays in the original Vanek trilogy seems aimed to subvert the expectations of the audiences before which they were originally to be performed. Audience was written for ‘an annual gather-ing of writers’ at Havel’s country house in Hrádeček (p. 148), and although at one level the play seems to oﬀer encouragement to writers struggling with state censorship and censure, at another level it seems aimed to challenge writers who might see an aesthete’s sensibility as superior to that of the average worker. Despite that latent critique of its own audience, the play was a great success (p. 159), so as if to drive the point home more forcefully, Unveiling critiques the consumerist impulses underlying the ambitions of the aesthete class. Unveiling, too, was very popular, especially abroad (pp. 159– 60), and so as if in response to a feeling of moral superiority on the part of Western liberal audiences who might imaginatively align themselves with Vanek, Protest aﬃliates Vanek’s steadfastness with a particular type of naïve idealism.

Beckett’s plays, too, are often manifestly designed with the expectations of particular audiences in mind, and usually with an eye to subverting those expectations. En attendant Godot almost immediately suggests the French postwar context in which it was originally performed: Vladimir’s wish that he and Estragon had thrown themselves from the Eiﬀel Tower before the horrors of the twentieth century began seems calculated to scandalise Godot’s audience, to imply that things have only gone downhill since they were born.30 Ohio Impromptu, which Beckett wrote to be performed at an Ohio State University symposium held in honour of his seventy-fifth birthday, both encourages and gently pokes fun at the forms of close reading practised by its anticipated academic audience. The listener’s intense attention to what the reader reads is ethically admirable, but it also comes oﬀ as a bit misguided given the text’s (and the play’s) opening line, ‘Little is left to tell’ (CDW, p. 445). Each play seems calibrated, with equal measures of kindness and censure, to the desires of a particular demographic. Eleutheria and Cata-strophe are especially explicit in this regard. Both use comically determinate, even heavy-handed metatheatrical devices in order to invoke and parody the conventions and codes according to which they imagine they will be interpreted.

In many ways, Eleutheria, even more explicitly than Godot, addresses itself to a middle-class French audience still scarred by the horrors of the Second World War. Victor Krap’s very name calls to mind the rhetoric of the victory of humanity espoused by the Gaullist regime, with his surname passing rather obvious judgement on that rhetoric.31 The play also evokes the spectre of Nazism in several places, for example when Dr. Piouk elaborates his ridiculous plan for how to ‘solve’ the problem of humanity, which amounts to a disturbingly well-organised procedure for eliminating the human race that calls to mind the ruthless eﬃciency of Nazi death camps

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(E, pp. 44–45). The laughter that could be inspired by Piouk’s plan might be hollowed out by the knowledge of widespread collaboration with the Nazis in Vichy France, and a similar hollow laughter might be inspired when the spec-tator character, who claims to be ‘not just one’ but ‘a thousand spectators’ (p. 128), proves equally un-averse to the use of violence:

Glazier: We can’t torture him.

Spectator: Why not?

Glazier: It’s not done.

Spectator: Since when? (p. 141)

Even the Glazier’s objection that ‘it’s not done’ seems dubious, as it is based less on moral conviction and more on a sense of bourgeois respectability. Moments such as these indicate a work that anticipates its audience’s con-cerns and predispositions and then tries to subvert the expectations that go along with them.

Those expectations might be better understood with reference to the legacy of self-reflexive plays that came to prominence in interwar Europe. The com-parison between Beckett’s work and such plays is a common one dating back at least to the 1960s, when Martin Esslin coined the term ‘theatre of the absurd’ to describe experimental plays by writers such as Antonin Artaud, Apollinaire, Pirandello, and Beckett.32 Yet Beckett might not so much belong to such traditions as invoke them in a comic vein in order to highlight how their apparently subversive experimentalism could be made to conform to existing frameworks. For example, despite initial resistance to its experi-mentalism, Pirandello’s Six Characters in Search of an Author proved a ‘triumph’ only a few months after its premiere when a Milan audience who ‘had had time to read the text’ viewed the play ‘in religious silence’: by 1927, it had been performed in ‘every major city in Europe as well as in New York, Buenos Aires, and Tokyo’.33 In 1925, Pirandello himself wrote a preface to the play in which he claimed that despite its eccentricities it never-theless contains a ‘universal meaning’, that it conforms to rather than under-mines the expectation that theatre ought to convey coherent ideas and truths.34 Even more relevant is Apollinaire’s 1917 play The Breasts of Tiresias, with its prologue that blurs the line between the fictional space of the perform-ance and the nonfictional space of the auditorium when the director character addresses the audience in verse before the play proper begins: ‘[H]ere I am once more among you’.35 This play was reconceived as an opera in 1945 by Francis Poulenc, and it premiered at the Opéra-Comique in Paris in June 1947, just four months after Beckett completed Eleutheria, so the resonance between the two works may be more than coincidental (assuming Beckett was aware of the forthcoming production in early 1947).36 Both plays seem to take the relationship between performance and audience as their central concern, and in both, that relationship is shown to have been shaken by the

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trauma of world war. As Pirandello did for Six Characters, the director char-acter of The Breasts of Tiresias explains that his production is designed to strengthen or renew that relationship. Addressing his remarks to survivors of the Great War, he says that his play ‘aims to reform society’, that it will ‘above all try to entertain’ so that the audience ‘will be inclined to profit / From all the lessons that the play contains’ (p. 208).37 Such justifications of artistic expression hark back at least as far as the sixteenth century, when Sir Philip Sydney argued that the purpose of ‘poesy’ was to ‘delight and instruct’, and perhaps much farther than that, since Sydney echoes Horace here.

These arguments might have seemed especially bankrupt after artistic attempts at social renewal had failed to prevent a second world war. From a cynical point of view, such arguments cast significance and meaning as mere synonyms for profit and entertainment. Eleutheria engages with this legacy in its own cynical fashion: what Pirandello and Apollinaire presented as open-mindedness it presents as closed-mindedness. With its multiple, mocking references to the shallowness of the presumption that theatre ought to entertain, it bemoans the ease with which subversive experimen-tation can be turned into simple entertainment.38 Dr. Piouk comments to M. Krap, ‘If you make a little eﬀort, you might manage to keep the punters amused’ (E, p. 33). M. Krap insists that Mlle Skunk sits where the audience can see her, since ‘she has a place’ in the play ‘only in so far as she displays her charms’ (E, p. 38). Victor warns the Glazier that his explanation of himself will be ‘boring’, which the Glazier describes as matter more ‘serious’ than whether Victor’s explanation has any truth to it (E, p. 143). In this context, Victor’s impassioned tirade to the spectator, in which he equates liberty with compromise, calls to mind the many Nazi collaborators who continued to enjoy successful political careers under de Gaulle.39 Victor’s final, silent turning of his back at the end of the play, too, might con-stitute not only a rejection of the conventions of theatre, but also a sign of frustration with French postwar audiences themselves.

In a similar manner, Catastrophe addresses the context in which it would first be staged in a way that seems aimed both to give the Avignon audience what it would expect – namely, a statement of unequivocal solidarity with Havel – and to scandalise, or at least challenge, that audience by flagging up the ethical problems inherent in expecting Beckett to speak for Havel. Given the strangeness of the initial image of the black-clad body on stage, the play within Catastrophe can be seen as a riﬀ on pieces such as Ohio Impromptu. The pre-recorded storm of applause seems a dramatised version of the applause that such plays regularly received and of the almost certain applause with which Catastrophe would be met at the Avignon Festi-val. In an interview with the Guardian, James Knowlson argues that Cata-strophe demonstrates that ‘however much you reduce somebody to an

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object, a victim, there is resilience and persistence’.40 The ‘Night for Václav Havel’ may itself have threatened to reduce Havel to an object or victim, and Catastrophe critiques this tendency for Havel to be used as a ‘poster boy’ for Western moral superiority.41 This is a problem that Havel had addressed in ‘The Power of the Powerless’. He had come to perceive and resent that the nuances of his own plays were being suppressed due to an increasing tendency to read them through the lens of his ever-growing inter-national reputation as a dissident:

Regardless of their actual vocations, […] [so-called dissidents] are talked about in the West more frequently in terms of their activities as committed citizens, or in terms of the critical, political aspects of their work, than in terms of the ‘real’ work they do in their own fields. From personal experience, I know that there is an invisible line you cross – without even wanting to or becoming aware of it – beyond which they cease to treat you as a writer who happens to be a concerned citizen and begin talking of you as a ‘dissident’ who almost incidentally (in his or her spare time, perhaps?) happens to write plays as well. (Havel, p. 77)

It is telling here that Havel singles out the West. His relative silence with regard to Western politics, he seems to suspect, has been complacently inter-preted in the West as a sign that he does not find much to criticise there.

This is a suspicion that surfaces elsewhere in Havel’s essay, and it reinforces his sense of anxiety surrounding the myriad ways in which his words, and even silences, can be appropriated and interpreted in diﬀering contexts. To be sure, Havel’s essay focuses almost exclusively on a critique of the hollow rhetoric and pregnant silences of what he calls the ‘post-totalitarian system’ in his home country. An extremely sophisticated and flexible structure and ideology, he argues, leads to a situation in which power is not perpetuated by a ‘ruling clique’ but rather by a ‘blind automatism’, a situation in which individuals of all levels find it easier to profess a false faith in oﬃcial ideology rather than to point out its obvious faults (pp. 43–44). For Havel, even passive toleration of this situation means that ‘individuals confirm the system, fulfil the system, make the system, are the system’ (p. 45). But alongside that (necessarily) near-exclusive focus is an anxiety about the essay’s relative silence on issues relating to Western capitalist ideology. In addition to his complaint about how he is ‘talked about in the West’, Havel makes occasional but pointed remarks that seem aimed to short-circuit an anticipated compla-cency on the part of Western readers. He states that the system in place in Czechoslovakia constitutes ‘simply another form of consumer and industrial society’ (p. 40). It is ‘built on foundations laid by the historical encounter between dictatorship and the consumer society’ and thus might ‘stand […] as a kind of warning to the West, revealing to it its own latent tendencies’ (p. 54). Havel seems to suspect that in the bipolar rhetoric of the Cold War, criticism of one political system is easily interpreted as support of the opposing system. He carefully attempts to articulate his mistrust of both by

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arguing that any ethical critique would have to be grounded outside of this dualist framework.

With this in mind, if P is still taken to be a stand-in for Havel, it is possible to interpret D and A as stand-ins for the organisers of the AIDA event. The way that D and A treat P could reflect the way those organisers were present-ing Havel on a world stage as a symbol of Western liberal conceptions of human rights. This is not to cast aspersions on Beckett’s fundamental support for Havel or for the cause of AIDA more generally. By 1982, Beckett was a Nobel Prize winner whose reputation was well established, and he must have realised that the mere inclusion of his name on the bill could only add to the cultural legitimacy of the Night for Havel. Beckett even oﬀers a dramatic counterpoint to the self-interested waﬄing of Stanek in Protest, whose justification for not signing Vanek’s open letter of protest includes a litany of convoluted logical leaps aimed to obscure the obvious self-interest at the root of his decision. Nevertheless, Catastrophe oﬀers a cri-tique of its interpreters in Avignon in its subversion of the idea that any con-sistent, didactic position is possible with regard to Havel’s imprisonment.

That critique is brought into focus by considering how uneasily the play sits with the expectations of AIDA founder Ariane Mnouchkine. She ‘rejects the activist aesthetic, which […] dooms theatre to sink into realism’, and she maintains,

The function of theatre is to bring people pleasure. It is also moral, educational. It must lead people to think. […] The point is to embody in poetic form a current, contemporary fact, giving it suﬃcient weight after the manner of a metaphorical fable.42

Like Pirandello, and like Apollinaire’s director character, Mnouchkine is happy to imply that the function of artistic expression is to delight and instruct. The hierarchy of values in Catastrophe, on the other hand, seems to invert those articulated by Mnouchkine. The play is not particularly con-cerned about ‘sink[ing] into realism’, as it stages a relatively realistic situation, itself. The idea that ‘theatre is [there] to bring people pleasure’ is especially at odds with the silencing of the fictional applause at the end of the play. That applause would presumably amount to the fictional audience having their own preformed value systems confirmed in ‘the manner of a metaphorical fable’, and its silencing seems to condemn them to leave the theatre without having anything at all confirmed.

This presumed result, however, might be a mere fantasy, as an alternative, if tenuous, interpretation of the ending can make clear. It is possible to con-clude that the applause ‘falters’ and ‘dies’ of its own accord. The fictional audi-ence might be conceived as simply taking the stillness of P’s gaze as a sign that the play is over, that its point has been made. They could be imagined going about their evenings, perhaps with the nagging feeling that the protagonist’s

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raising of his head was a bit of a heavy-handed touch, but nevertheless taking home with them ‘a wider and loftier meaning […] along with the programme and the choc-ice’, as Beckett sarcastically puts it in his introduction to the 1952 radio broadcast of En attendant Godot.43 The intended eﬀect of P’s protest is entirely irrelevant in this scenario. While this interpretation might seem a particularly egregious travesty of the spirit of Beckett’s play, it has the advantage of describing what in all likelihood will be the actual reac-tion of the literal audience within the theatre. As re-stagings of Catastrophe have made clear, the play indeed has the propensity to give theatre-goers what they want, to fit with expectations that theatre exists to entertain and to edify. Eleutheria, too, has manifestly failed to fail to pique the interests of directors and audiences, as evidenced by the various, continuing, semi-illicit productions of it.

The withdrawal of the playwright

These eventualities, too, are anticipated and parodied within the plays’ scripts, which suggests how they might continue to be negotiated. Both plays pass ironic commentary on the parts of a production over which the playwright has little control, highlighting the sway that performers, directors, technicians, and audiences will have over the finished product. In the midst of such con-fusion, the playwright seems to have washed his hands of the whole scenario in order to subvert, pre-emptively, attempts to find a playwright’s intention within the production, which will always be a creative adaptation of a script. In Eleutheria, the inevitability of adaptation and alteration is suggested most explicitly (and comically) when the prompter character suddenly inter-jects, ‘That’s it! That’s the end! You’re not following the script!’, and later, when the spectator looks at the script the prompter has left behind and reads out the name of the playwright – ‘Beckett (he says Béké), Samuel, Béké, Béké’ (E, pp. 132, 136).44 ‘Beckett’ would seem to have lost all control of the events onstage, and yet the action continues (in the Faber and Faber edition) for another thirty-five pages. While the spectator’s Gallicised pronun-ciation of Beckett’s name might seem to constitute another jab at the audience for its ignorance of other cultures and languages, the Glazier’s subsequent jab at Beckett – ‘Never heard of him. Seems he eats his soup with a fork’ (E, p. 136) – demonstrates a certain degree of self-mockery that would indeed grant more agency to collaborators in the theatre.

Eleutheria further highlights the necessary influence that actors and directors will have over a play by including stage directions that make certain parts of the play literally impossible, rather than merely almost impossible, to perform faithfully. At one point, for example, Mme Meck makes ‘an indescribable movement’: whatever the actor does here, it will necessarily spring at least as much from her own imagination as from

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any indication given within the script (E, p. 15). Victor delivers his tirade about freedom ‘incoherently’, an adverb that makes little sense as an instruc-tion to an actor and leaves plenty of room for creative interpretation (E, p. 148). These kinds of stage directions take to an extreme the tactics employed even in the most outrageous stage direction of The Breasts of Tir-esias, which dictates that Thérèse’s breasts ‘fly oﬀ, like toy balloons, but remain attached by strings’ (p. 210). This could conceivably still be inter-preted for the stage (albeit with diﬃculty), as could the outlandish stage directions in Artaud’s play The Spurt of Blood (1925), which among other things demand that stars collide onstage and that entire buildings fall from above.45 Eleutheria, on the other hand, forces the point that creative liberties will have to be taken in performance.

Catastrophe uses subtler forms of self-reflexiveness in order to anticipate how actors and directors are likely to stage it in a way other than as dictated by the script. The script for the performance that D stages is nowhere to be seen, and all of his instructions to A presumably have more to do with achieving his own dramatic vision, with highlighting P’s helplessness and innocence, than with staging the playwright’s more enigmatic and less readily comprehensible vision of a single figure clad all in black. This lends a particular form of humour to the play, with D engaging in precisely the type of alterations that would presumably outrage Beckett if D were staging his play. Catastrophe might even be seen as an invitation to a direc-tor to stage Beckett’s work as he or she pleases. The playwright, admitting an inability to prescribe a precise, unambiguously subversive event, abdi-cates responsibility entirely. The play itself, conceived as a coherent, ideal entity, is presented as a fantasy or phantasm, a vanishing point or a hollow centre, with diﬀerent performances of it relating to one another only in tangential fashion.

Such ironic self-reflexiveness might seem to suggest that a director wishing to remain faithful to Beckett’s vision would refuse, as far as poss-ible, to accept such invitations to deviate from the script or to interpret it creatively. It is more productive, however, to argue that innovative prac-titioners such as Akalaitis and Simek have responded to Beckett’s scripts particularly appropriately. The fact that Beckett’s plays, like Havel’s, cri-tique the interpretative touchstones of particular audiences suggests that today, when Beckett looms as large as ever in cultural centres such as London, Edinburgh, and Dublin, creative, even cavalier alterations to plays such as Catastrophe might constitute the only way of resisting the wholesale recuperation of his work within complacent industries. What needs to be challenged, it seems, is a certain unreflective adherence to the expectation that theatre must deepen and ultimately confirm audiences’ existing understandings of the world or of life. (‘We walk out of the theatre knowing we’ve been given one more chance to live’, raves one review of

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Lisa Dwan’s version of Not I.)46 Wild adaptations of Beckett’s scripts would combat the tendency to revere him in quasi-religious terms – as a ‘fiery apostle’ or as a ‘saint’ – a tendency compounded by the coincidences that he was born on Good Friday and died shortly before Christmas. Such alterations would treat his scripts as profane, worldly documents, rather than quasi-mystical indices of a transcendent, piercing vision. And even if such productions were to fail miserably, if they were to prove enormous flops in either aesthetic or financial terms – or in both

– they would nevertheless be commendable in their aim to escape a state of aﬀairs in which fidelity to a playwright’s intention, aesthetic success, and profitability are routinely conflated.

In ‘The Power of the Powerless’, Havel oﬀers a description of an ideal form of government that oﬀers a useful model for an ideal type of performance practice. In opposition to the ‘post-totalitarian system’, Havel envisions a ‘“post-democratic” system’:

There can and must be structures that are open, dynamic and small. […] There must be structures that in principle place no limits on the genesis of diﬀerent structures. Any accumulation of power whatsoever (one of the characteristics of automatism) should be profoundly alien. […] Their authority certainly cannot be based on long-empty traditions, […] but rather on how, in concrete terms, they enter into a given situation. Rather than a strategic agglomeration of formalized organizations, it is better to have organizations springing up ad hoc, infused with enthusiasm for a particular purpose and disappearing when that purpose has been achieved. (p. 118)

The 1990 performance of Catastrophe at the John Houseman studio in New York enters into the specific situation of Western perceptions of post-revolution Czechoslovakia, since the playing of the national anthem over the end of the play could be perceived as deeply ironic given the treatment to which P has just been subjected. It even resonates with the stage directions that indicate that Karel Gott’s version of ‘Sugar Baby Love’ be played at the end of Havel’s Unveiling. In both instances, the uplifting nature of the song exists in a bitterly ironic tension with the events of the play itself. The quasi-illegitimate performances of Eleutheria described by Tucker also find affiliations with Havel’s post-democratic system. They have mostly taken place in private locations, quite literally springing up ad hoc. If the Beckett Estate were to grant carte blanche for performances of Eleutheria, however, then such readings would lose their subversive aspect and would have to be abandoned in favour of new performance techniques. And all of this would be in keeping with how Beckett’s own plays present theatre as an institution that can challenge socially ingrained assumptions even as it proves beholden to their terms.

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Notes

1. Havel was imprisoned for his involvement with Charter 77, which called for an improvement in human and civil rights conditions in Czechoslovakia, for his involvement with the Committee for the Defense of the Unjustly Persecuted (VONS), and for his self-publication of plays and essays that were considered subversive. See Carol Rocamora, Acts of Courage: Václav Havel’s Life in the Theater (Hanover, NH: Smith and Kraus, 2004), pp. 196–202; hereafter cited parenthetically. See also introduction to Václav Havel, ‘Mistake’, Index on Cen-sorship, 13, no. 1 (1984), pp. 13–15.
2. Martin Garbus and Barney Rosset, ‘New Finale Would Appall [sic] Beckett’, letter to the editor, New York Times, 23 March 1990. [nytimes.com/1990/03/](http://nytimes.com/1990/03/23/opinion/l-new-finale-would-appall-beckett-726190.html) [23/opinion/l-new-finale-would-appall-beckett-726190.html](http://nytimes.com/1990/03/23/opinion/l-new-finale-would-appall-beckett-726190.html).
3. Sally Moﬀet, ‘Ending of Beckett Play Preserves the Meaning’, New York Times, 24 March 1990, A34. It is likely that Simek’s production did not seem too out-rageous to regulars of the John Houseman Studio Theater, which at the time was staging an eclectic variety of productions that were sometimes experimen-tal and sometimes explicitly political but often involved unexpected uses of music. See Jack Anderson, ‘What to Do (And Not) while Waiting’, review of ‘Something between Them’ by Grupo Danza Teatro de U. B. A., New York Times, 31 May 1991, C3; Jennifer Dunning, ‘Mixed Media from France’, review of Bare Barre by the Transe Express Circus, New York Times, 30 April 1989. [nytimes.com/1989/04/30/theater/reviews-dance-bar-barre-mixed-media-from-france.html](http://nytimes.com/1989/04/30/theater/reviews-dance-bar-barre-mixed-media-from-france.html); Stephen Holden, ‘A Long Conversation with a Captive Audience’, review of A Rendezvous with God by Miriam Hoﬀman, trans. Hoﬀman and Berkowicz, New York Times, 25 July 1991, C14.
4. Garbus and Rosset, ‘New Finale Would Appall’. JoAnne Akalaitis’s production of Endgame, staged in a subway tunnel, was only allowed to go on after a settle-ment was reached that included an insert in the production programme expres-sing Beckett’s total disapproval. For a thorough account of this confrontation and an intriguing argument that Beckett’s resistance to Akalaitis’s production had as much to do with circumstance as with the production itself, see Natka Bianchini, ‘Bare Interiors, Chicken Wire Cages and Subway Stations – Re-thinking Beckett’s Response to the ART Endgame in Light of Earlier Pro-ductions’, in Mark S. Byron (ed.), Samuel Beckett’s Endgame (New York: Rodopi, 2007), pp. 121–43.
5. Lindon, ‘Avertissement’, preface to Eleutheria by Samuel Beckett (Paris: Minuit, 1995), p. 7. All translations from this preface are my own. Garbus oﬀers his own version of events – which does not diﬀer substantially from Lindon’s in matters of fact – in his introduction to Beckett, Eleuthéria, trans. Michael Brodsky (New York: Foxrock, 1995), pp. iii–vi. This article draws primarily on Beckett, Eleutheria, trans. Barbara Wright (London: Faber and Faber, 1996); hereafter cited parenthetically as E. The Minuit and Faber and Faber editions were released in response to Rosset’s Foxrock edition, which was reportedly a rushed aﬀair and contains a number of howlers. For a general overview, see David Tucker, ‘Posthumous Controversies: The Publications of Beckett’s Dream of Fair to Middling Women and Eleutheria’, in Mark Nixon (ed.), Pub-lishing Samuel Beckett (London: British Library, 2011), pp. 229–44; Tucker’s chapter is hereafter cited parenthetically.
6. Lindon, ‘Avertissement’, p. 11.

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1. Beckett would ultimately direct filmed versions of his second-written, first-per-formed play, Waiting for Godot, that could easily be treated as definitive state-ments on how it ought to be performed, and the very last play he wrote, What Where, was quickly re-conceived as a piece for television over which Beckett had great control. In the cases of Eleutheria and Catastrophe, however, Beckett only ever served as playwright, never as dramaturg.
2. Gussow, ‘Homages to Martyrdom’, C3.
3. This is an engagement to which Beckett would allude when in 1986 he cited, as a reason for not wanting the play to be performed, the fact that ‘since he had written [Eleutheria], the theatre itself had moved on with the plays of Ionesco, Genet, and Adamov’. Quoted in James Knowlson, Damned to Fame: The Life of Samuel Beckett (New York: Bloomsbury, 1996), p. 363.
4. This is not to say that Havel was ever reduced to so abject a physical or mental state as is the protagonist of Catastrophe. He was forced to do hard labour during his time in prison, he was sometimes denied food, and he was bullied by prison guards, but the pressure on him was eased when his health began to suﬀer noticeably, and throughout his imprisonment he was allowed to write one four-page letter home per week. Paul Wilson, introduction to Havel, Letters to Olga, June 1979–September 1982, trans. Wilson (London: Faber and Faber, 1988), pp. 6–9. Originally published as Dpisy Olze in 1983.
5. Samuel Beckett to Alan Schneider, in Maurice Harmon (ed.), No Author Better Served: The Correspondence of Samuel Beckett and Alan Schneider (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998), p. 24.
6. Beckett to Schneider, 4 January 1960, in Harmon, No Author Better Served, p. 59.
7. Beckett to Schneider, in Beckett, Disjecta: Miscellaneous Writings and a Dra-

matic Fragment, ed. Ruby Cohn (London: John Calder, 1983), p. 106.

1. See, for example, Ernst Schröder’s description of how, in performing the role of Hamm in the 1967 revival of Endspiel directed by Beckett, he came to terms with the idea that he ‘could only do what was musically correct’. Ernst Schröder, ‘Proben mit Beckett’, Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung, 17 November 1967; my translation. Equally representative are the similar views expressed by directors and actors such as Walter Asmus, Lawrence Held, Billie Whitelaw, Peter Hall, Barry McGovern and Stephen Rhea in the radio documentary ‘Beckett and His Actors’, hosted by Stephen Rhea, BBC Radio 3, originally broadcast 9 April 2006.
2. Beckett, The Letters of Samuel Beckett, Vol. 2, 1941–56, ed. Martha Dow Feh-senfeld, Lois More Overbeck, George Craig, and Dan Gunn (Cambridge: Cam-bridge University Press, 2009), p. 316. This quotation is taken from a statement that Beckett prepared to precede a 1952 French radio broadcast of En attendant Godot.
3. Beckett to Barney Rosset, 1 April 1958, quoted in S.E. Gontarski, ‘Revising Himself: Performance as Text in Samuel Beckett’s Theatre’, Journal of Modern Literature 22, no. 1 (Fall 1998), pp. 131–46, 131.
4. See Craig Gholson, interview with JoAnne Akalaitis, BOMB Magazine, Spring 1983. [bombmagazine.org/article/ 237](http://bombmagazine.org/article/%20237).
5. Samuel Beckett, Proust and Three Dialogues with Georges Duthuit (London: John Calder, 1956), p. 103. On the Trinity lectures and Beckett’s somewhat idiosyn-cratic conception of naturalism, see John Bolin, Beckett and the Modern Novel (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), especially pp. 17–42.

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1. Keir Elam oﬀers a rare exception to this rule in an essay arguing that Havel’s plays, like Catastrophe, have the capacity to implicate their audiences in moral and ethical double-binds that oﬀer no chance for resolution. I am sym-pathetic to Elam’s approach, but whereas he speaks only of audiences in a general sense, I want to demonstrate the tendency for Havel’s and Beckett’s plays to imagine and address particular audiences in a particular place and time. See Keir Elam, ‘Catastrophic Mistakes: Beckett, Havel, The End’, Samuel Beckett Today/Aujourd’hui, 3 (1994), pp. 1–28.
2. Havel to Beckett, 29 May 1983, BC MS JEK A/2/146, Samuel Beckett Collection, Museum of English Rural Life, University of Reading.
3. Beckett to Havel, 17 September 1983, BC MS JEK A/2/146, Samuel Beckett Col-lection, Museum of English Rural Life, University of Reading.
4. See Dirk van Hulle and Mark Nixon, Samuel Beckett’s Library (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), p. 272. On the importance of these four plays within Havel’s canon, see Rocamora, Acts of Courage, pp. 66–67, 184– 94. See also The Memorandum, trans. Vera Blackwell (London: Eyre Methuen, 1981). For the Vanek plays, see Václav Havel, Selected Plays, 1963-83, trans. George Theiner, Jan Novak, and Vera Blackwell (London: Faber and Faber, 1992).
5. Václav Havel, ‘The Power of the Powerless’, trans. Paul Wilson, in Jan Vladislav (ed.), Václav Havel, Or, Living in Truth: Twenty-Two Essays Published on the Occasion of the Award of the Erasmus Prize to Václav Havel (1978; London: Faber and Faber, 1986), pp. 55, 57, 77; hereafter cited parenthetically.
6. Havel, The Memorandum, p. 12.
7. Václav Havel, The Art of the Impossible: Politics as Morality in Practice

(New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1997). The title is a play on Lord Butler’s memoir The Art of the Possible, which rehearses a number of familiar tropes around the notion of Realpolitik (and oﬀers a coded defense against what critics called Butler’s early politics of appeasement during the rise of the Third Reich). See Lord Butler, The Art of the Possible (London: Hamish Hamil-ton, 1971).

1. Samuel Beckett, Catastrophe, in Samuel Beckett: The Complete Dramatic Works

(New York: Faber and Faber, 1986), p. 461. Beckett’s Complete Dramatic Works is hereafter cited parenthetically as CDW.

1. Quoted in Knowlson, Damned to Fame, p. 680.
2. Ironically, a poster bearing the image of Beckett himself with a gag in his mouth would serve as anti-government propaganda shortly before the Velvet Revolution. Underneath the image was the caption, ‘If Samuel Beckett had been born in Czechoslovakia we’d still be waiting for Godot’. See Octavian Saiu, ‘Samuel Beckett behind the Iron Curtain: The Reception in Eastern Europe’, in Mark Nixon and Matthew Feldman (eds.), The International Reception of Samuel Beckett (New York: Continuum, 2009),
   1. 255.
3. See Mary Manning, ‘Youth’s the Season … ?’, in Curtis Canfield (ed.), Plays of Changing Ireland (New York: MacMillan, 1936), pp. 321–404. On the diﬃculty of determining how much of Egosmith Beckett is responsible for, and on the resonances between Manning’s play and Eleutheria, see Emilie Morin, ‘Odds, Ends, and Beginnings’, in S.E. Gontarski (ed.), The Edinburgh Companion to Samuel Beckett and the Arts (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014),
   1. 218–19.

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1. See Samuel Beckett, Waiting for Godot / En Attendant Godot (London: Faber and Faber, 2006), pp. 4–5.
2. For more on this rhetoric and how Beckett’s work engages with it, see Andrew Gibson, ‘French Beckett and French Literary Politics, 1945–52’, in The Edin-burgh Companion to Samuel Beckett, pp. 103–16.
3. See Esslin, The Theatre of the Absurd (Garden City, NY: Anchor Books, 1961), esp. pp. 40, 351–55, 370–75.
4. Gaspare Giudice, Pirandello: A Biography, trans. Alastair Hamilton (London: Oxford University Press, 1975), pp. 115–17.
5. Pirandello, introduction to Six Characters in Search of an Author, trans. Felicity Firth, in Pirandello: Collected Plays, Vol. 2 (London: John Calder, 1988), p. xv.
6. Apollinaire, The Breasts of Tiresias (1917), trans. Louis Simpson, in Maggie B. Gale and John F. Deeney (eds.), Routledge Drama Anthology and Sourcebook: From Modernism to Contemporary Performance (New York: Routledge, 2010), p. 208. The play was originally composed in 1903, but it was not performed until 1917, at which time this prologue was added. See Wilfrid Mellers, Francis Poulenc (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), p. 98.
7. Gale and Deeney, introduction to The Breasts of Tiresias, in Routledge Drama Anthology and Sourcebook, p. 207. John Pilling, A Samuel Beckett Chronology (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), p. 100. See also Mellers, Francis Poulenc, p. 98.
8. As Mellers argues, ‘No one doubted at the time of the première [of the opera adaptation of the play], […] [that it] was [still] pertinent to social life in the late 1940s’ (p. 98).
9. By 1956, Roland Barthes would predict that Beckett’s plays were destined for a similar fate. He wrote gloomily that ‘the bourgeoisie [would] […] ultimately [put] on splendid evenings of Beckett’. Barthes, ‘Whose Theater? Whose Avant-Garde?’, in Roland Barthes (ed.), Critical Essays, trans. Richard Howard, (1956; Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1972), p. 69.
10. See Richard J. Golsan, ‘The Body in the Basement’, introduction to Vichy’s Afterlife: History and Counterhistory in Postwar France (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2000), pp. 1–23.
11. Knowlson quoted in Jo Glanville, ‘“Godot is here”: How Samuel Beckett and Vaclav Havel Changed History’, Guardian, 15 September 2009. [theguardian.](http://theguardian.com/culture/2009/sep/15/vaclev-havel-samuel-beckett-catastrophe) [com/culture/2009/sep/15/vaclev-havel-samuel-beckett-catastrophe](http://theguardian.com/culture/2009/sep/15/vaclev-havel-samuel-beckett-catastrophe).
12. Michelle Woods uses the term ‘poster boy’ to describe how Havel came to stand in the West for Western conceptions of free speech. Michelle Woods, Censoring Translation: Censorship, Theatre, and the Politics of Translation (New York: Continuum, 2012), p. xiii. For a detailed reading of how Catastrophe challenges the politics of sympathy and advocacy at a more fundamental level, see Jim Hansen, ‘Samuel Beckett’s Catastrophe and the Theater of Pure Means’, Con-temporary Literature, 4, no. 4 (2008), pp. 660–82.
13. Ariane Mnouchkine quoted in Bérénice Hamidi-Kim, ‘The Théâtre Du Soleil’s Trajectory from “People’s Theatre” to “Citizen Theatre”: Involvement or Renunciation?’, in Susan C. Haedicke, Deirdre Heddon, Avraham Oz, and E.J. Westlake (eds.), Political Performances: Theory and Practice (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2004), p. 82.
14. Beckett, The Letters of Samuel Beckett, Vol. 2, 1941–56, p. 316.
15. In the French text published by Minuit, this line reads, ‘Beckett (il dit: ‘Baquet’) Samuel, Béquet, Béquet’ (p. 136).

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1. See Artaud, The Spurt of Blood (1925), trans. Victor Corti, in Routledge Drama Anthology and Sourcebook, pp. 219–21.
2. Lyn Gardner, production review of Not I, Royal Court Theatre, London, Guar-dian, 22 May 2013. [theguardian.com/stage/2013/may/22/not-i-review](http://theguardian.com/stage/2013/may/22/not-i-review).

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