

Samuel Beckett in history

by Ariel SUHAMY

***Waiting for Godot*: jewel of absurdist theatre or historical play? Valentin and Pierre Temkine topple the interpretation of this classic play by replacing it within the context of its creation. Their essay is drawing a lot of attention in Germany, despite being written in French, by Frenchmen, about a French play.**

Pierre Temkine (ed), *Warten auf Godot. Das Absurde und die Geschichte*, Matthes & Seitz, Berlin, 2008; translated from the French by Tim Trzaskalik. Texts by Pierre Temkine, Valentin Temkine, Raymonde Temkine, François Rastier, Denis Thouard, Tim Trzaskalik. 192 pp.

A book on Samuel Beckett's famous play, *Waiting for Godot*, is causing quite a stir beyond the Rhine, and further: even the Danish press mentions it. Nothing is known in France of this commotion, despite the fact that the book is translated from the French – it hasn't found a publisher here. Why? Is it because its authors are not university-spawned? Or because the position they defend is unbearable? Indeed, according to Pierre and Valentin Temkine, *Waiting for Godot* is not the play we thought it was. The famous collection *Les Ecrivains de toujours* once summed up the play in these terms: "Vladimir and Estragon, two puppets stranded in the limbo of a no man's land where everything repeats itself – lingering words, gestures of tenderness or aversion, clowning around meant to elude suffering, visits from humanity [...] – persist in expecting the unlikely rescue from an outside or a great beyond which leaves them to their own devices, trapped within their questions in the here and now" (Ludovic Janvier, *Beckett par lui-même*, Seuil, 1969). It's the same song and dance in a recent theatre programme: "In a bit of countryside, on a slow evening, two tramps await a certain Godot [...] What are Vladimir and Estragon, this pair of bewildered jokers, harping on about?" (Compagnie Kick Theatre, Theatrical Centre of Guyancourt, 2007, quoted in the book by

François Rastier). From the time of the premiere, a critic had set the tone: “Godot, in an indefinite past, in rather uncertain circumstances, set them a rather imprecise appointment in an ill-defined place at an indeterminate time”. Valentin Temkine’s comment is: “One couldn’t be more systematically mistaken!”

Repetition, no man’s land, clowning, all these categories that constitute what by common accord is called “absurdist theatre” are energetically dispatched by Temkine. Quite conversely, the play has a place, a time and its characters have a well-defined identity. The plot is set in the Roussillon region of southern France (where Beckett resided during the war), at the time of the invasion of the free zone, and the two characters Vladimir and Estragon are Jews who are waiting for the smuggler who is to save them: some Godot. In 1942, there would have been no reason for them to leave Roussillon. By 1944, they would already have been deported. The play is therefore set in the Spring of 1943 precisely.

This is nothing less than a thesis, since Temkine the grandfather (this would be Valentin, the historian) and Temkine the grandson (Pierre, the philosopher) manage the demonstrations and critical remarks. The decisive passage is found pages 13 and 14 of the current Minuit edition, where an allusion is made to “la Roquette”, a Parisian area where Talmudic schools existed from the 1900s up to the 1930s; as well as mentions of images of the Holy Land, of the Dead Sea, of the crime of being born, of circumcision. To which can be added a number of converging clues, of which the most striking – and incidentally, known to specialists, although no conclusion, it seems, was drawn – is that the character of Estragon was initially named Lévy, as can be verified in the manuscript that was on display a few years ago during the Beckett exhibit at the Beaubourg Museum.

It can be objected, however, that if the author chose to replace this name with another, quirkier one, then maybe this is an indication that he deliberately chose to move away from a historical setting. If the reference to the persecution years can, presumably, explain the conceptual origin of the play, must it therefore dictate the reading of the finished work? Pierre Temkine’s answer is that Beckett did not obliterate all the traces, rather he left a number of clarifying signposts; enough of them, at least, to make *Waiting for Godot* a historical play – with the small detail that in this instance, to use François Rastier’s sapient expression, there is an “inversion of allegoresis”. That is to say, a conventional historical play uses clear allusions and the historical references serve to flesh out an allegorical purpose, in order to deal with a

contemporary problem; whereas inversely, Beckett crafts a metaphysical and abstract fable that is based on, and treats, a very singular historical situation. Thus he invents, according to the authors, a way of keeping silent on the subject. Certainly, Beckett went on, after *Godot*, in an increasingly abstract direction, as indeed his early work was very much rooted in setting, with an abundance of historical detail. But *Godot* is at the crossroads of this evolution, and remains inscribed in history.

Beckett must therefore have sought and found a certain distance so that the readers or spectators who lived through the events wouldn't recognise them on any conscious level but rather, would live them from within, so to speak. According to Pierre Temkine in a beautiful essay titled "What not saying anything does", he creates a new literary artefact that can only be understood from the vantage point of the event of Auschwitz. By erasing the name Lévy, Beckett refuses, according to Temkine, to "show the Jew as a Jew. For he is neither a rampant menace, as fantasised by some, nor the quintessential victim, as erected by others. Beckett cuts straight to the flesh and bone: these people are men. They might inspire compassion, disgust or boredom, but not because of their origin." An author who treats such a subject can no longer designate or name his characters. To designate, to name, means to turn in, to destroy. The author now needs a different audience: one that can no longer think it understands because it recognises or identifies. The subject must be left in penumbra, in order to prevent the audience from designating too. The idea is to respect the characters by neither classifying nor labelling them, says Pierre Temkine who quotes Lévinas: "The best way to encounter another is to be unaware even of the colour of his eyes" (Emmanuel Lévinas, *Ethics and Infinity*, Livre de Poche, p. 79).

But if this is the case, then why lift the veil? Isn't restoring the play to its tacit source a betrayal of the author's intentions? Pierre Temkine's answer to this is that the play has become a classic that has been gone over almost too much, and that its clown-esque staging is outdated. According to him, it is necessary to renew with the historical background in order to breathe new life into the potentialities of staging and acting. Because there is a great gap between a road in an imaginary country and one in a place where the militia or the Resistance can burst in at any moment. Abstract angst becomes concrete fear and the stakes become vital.

Above all, the situation presented in the play is no longer doomed to endless repetition, as warranted by the absurdist reading that has been imposed on the play. It is true

that Godot does not show up: but is this surprising, in the context of war? Perhaps he will come tomorrow. As Beckett writes in a contemporary text to *Godot, L'innommable*: “Nothing has changed since I’ve been here, but I daren’t conclude that nothing will ever change.” What the Temkines, grandfather and grandson, have in fact achieved is a new interpretation of one of the most famous plays in contemporary repertoire. What remains to be done is to spread the news.

Translated from French by Johanna Nepote-Cit.

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