

Theatrical Space and the Domain of *Endgame*

Brian Richardson

“There’s no more nature.”

—*Endgame*

The concept of narrative space in fictional texts, once a cornerstone of the theory and analysis of the classic texts of modernism, has recently receded somewhat from the critical horizon. In addition, while work on space in modern drama continues to be done, it typically does not explore in any depth the specifically ontological issues foregrounded by modernists who created fictional worlds that closely resemble but ultimately elude or transcend the ordinary world of everyday existence. Les Essif for example has recently set forth an engaging account of theatrical space in the twentieth century along with an impressive reading of the function of space in Beckett’s *Endgame* in the pages of this journal (“Introducing the ‘Hyper’ Theatrical Subject: The *Mise en Abyme* of Empty Space,” *JDTC* 9:1, Fall 1994, 67-86).¹ In doing so, he argues for a connected set of important issues surrounding the concept of space that simultaneously involves modern dramatic theory, the interpretation of Beckett, and the staging of *Endgame*—a cluster of issues I wish to respond to in this paper.

Essif draws attention to the relatively neglected subject of the empty stage and its relations to theatrical space as well as to its dialectical interaction with the stage as the site of modern representations of a single consciousness. As he states: “two revolutionary concepts—one concerning empty space, the other, inner space—became inextricably connected, as the written text focused on the mind of the dramatic character and on how best to represent it on the three-dimensional stage” (67). Furthermore, in the dramatic works of Samuel Beckett, “the void that *surrounds* the mind is duplicated *within* the mind, producing a double referent that invokes metatheatricality in a profound way” (68-69).

As timely and worthwhile as this article is, nevertheless (and in this respect it both resembles and may stand for most theories of space in drama), it fails to do justice to the most neglected aspect of theatrical space—the ontological claims always implicit in a drama’s setting. I will argue it is precisely this ontological

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level that it is essential to theorize adequately if we are to comprehend the full nature of Beckett's play with space in *Endgame* including, as we will see, a staged representation of that space that led Beckett to take legal action against a widely respected American theater. It is my hope that this analysis will also contribute to the corpus of Beckett criticism, which generally tends to view the drama's spatiality either in somewhat reductive terms (Kenner's "And where is this place? It is here, that is all we can say, here before us, on stage"²), or with the eloquent fuzziness of Steven Connor: "*Endgame* asks us to conceive of a place which is both absolute and relative. The stage space both is and isn't its own space."³

It will probably be useful to begin with some discussion of the nature of the narrative representation of space. Every story, whether enacted or narrated, has both a temporal and a spatial setting. Thus, the work may either represent the world of our experience, or a rather different realm that will contain intermittent points of congruence with our world. In other words, the represented space will be coextensive with that which we inhabit and therefore more or less subject to the facts of geography and the laws that govern spatial relations, or it will eschew, abrogate, or contest those laws.⁴ We may recall how Joyce plays with these conventions by using an exhaustively accurate representation of the physical features of Dublin in 1904, to the extreme of locating Bloom's residence in an actual building that was unoccupied at the time of the action of *Ulysses*.

On the other hand, writers like Blake, Borges, or Calvino will describe alternative narrative spaces—even logically impossible ones like that of Borges's "The Aleph"—that nevertheless bear some resemblance to our domain, and generate both interest and tension by their varying degrees of correspondence and divergence. Thus we can contrast more or less verisimilar settings with legendary or fantastic ones as well as with parodic or nonexistent spaces. Furthermore, the selection of either type of ontological position will either be evident from the outset or more gradually revealed over the course of the work, as the characters, the audience, or both simultaneously discover very different spatial dynamics than those that were expected. An extreme case of disorientation for both protagonist and reader is a typical feature of the work of writers like Maurice Blanchot. To reiterate, these distinct types of narrative space—that is, what Michael Issacharoff terms "discourse space"—are best differentiated through ontological criteria, by understanding their apparent congruity with or divergence from the physical space we inhabit.⁵

In modern drama, we find a number of ingenious creations of alternate worlds and destabilizations of superficially realistic ones. We may note the curious domains that constitute the settings of various dada and surrealist dramas (just where does Tzara's "The Gas Heart" take place?), as well as interesting afterworlds invented by atheists in Shaw's *Man and Superman*, Brecht's *Trial of Lucullus*, and Sartre's *No Exit* (a hell that, significantly, is said to resemble a Second Empire drawing room). In many absurdist dramas—indeed, this is in part why they are

termed absurdist—the represented space both closely resembles and substantially differs from any conceivable place on earth. In works like Pinter's *The Basement*, each individual spatial setting is perfectly realistic, but the conjunction of these scenes within a contradictory chronology results in what I suggest is a logically impossible narrative space.

For quintessentially modern settings, we may look at the dramas of Slawomir Mrozek, many of which begin in some kind of ontological confusion or even limbo. In his "Striptease," two characters are literally thrust into an unusual place they do not recognize and cannot comprehend; it is a space that tends to elude effective description, though we may identify an important antecedent in Artaud's equally ambiguous "Jet of Blood," which Mrozek's play builds on. These, I suggest, are other worlds that cannot be reduced to the contents of any single subjectivity; ontological criteria need to be evoked for a full explanation of these modern universes. It is a mistake to press too hard on the empty space/inner space postulate, since the imaginative possibilities set free by the move away from verisimilar space and realistic set design have enabled the dramatization of a great number of unusual domains that cannot be reduced to mental projection.

There is another distinction that is equally important to observe. In (and only in) the theater, which visually presents on stage a portion of the represented narrative space, there is, as Manfred Pfister has briefly mentioned, an additional possibility, that of contradiction or ambiguity between the physical representation we see and the surrounding space offstage we hear described.⁶ Sometimes of course we feel a seamless continuity between these two areas, as when Pegeen Mike, standing within the realistic set of a typical shebeen in rural western Ireland, looks out the window in Act Two and watches the race being run in the countryside without. In other plays, and this I suggest is a typically twentieth century phenomenon, the relation between these two (and still other) spaces is problematized.⁷ Indeed, it might not be an exaggeration to claim that one of the great inner dramas of modern theater is the need of both characters and audiences to determine and come to grips with apparently confusing, ambiguous, or indeterminate spaces and spatial relations.

In Pirandello's *Six Characters in Search of an Author*, the stage that the audience views represents a stage in Italy in the 1920s. But an actual stage does not precisely represent a stage (anymore than a real apple represents an apple)—it *is* a stage; only through the dialogue can one know that the play's spatial setting differs from the physical space the audience sees. Just this difference is challenged in Jack Gelber's metadrama, *The Connection*, in which the script calls for the naming of the theater in which the play is being produced at the time. Peter Handke's "Offending the Audience" goes still further. The space of this spectacle is exactly co-extensive with the area it is performed within, and the resulting "unity of place" is far more rigorous than anything ever imagined by neoclassical critics ("The

emptiness of this stage signifies nothing This stage represents nothing. It represents no other emptiness").⁸ These examples reveal not merely an evocation of empty space but rather an extension of the partially represented or actual stage space to include the traditionally neutral area where the audience is (perhaps uncomfortably) seated.

These two aspects of theatrical space—the ontology of the dramatized world and the precise relation of the visible stage space to that which exists just beyond the boundary of the stage—are insistently problematized in *Endgame* so as to invite a number of incompatible interpretations (including those of Essif) while at the same time rendering each alternative both inconclusive and even ultimately reductive. In the wordless action that the play begins with, Clov looks at and finally through both windows, emitting a brief laugh each time. These actions inaugurate a kind of hermeneutic mystery concerning just what lies outside Hamm's room. Throughout the play, the audience is given a number of teasing hints. When Hamm interjects, "What dreams! Those forests!" some spectators may reasonably conclude that the world they inhabit is being evoked; others may assume that a world with forests can exist for these characters only in a dream.⁹ These readings are further complicated by Hamm's other, more cryptic statements: "There's nowhere else" (6) and "Outside of here it's death" (8).

Here the play moves further from the world of our experience, as it becomes increasingly possible that Hamm's descriptions of his external world might be more uncanny or more unexpectedly literal than we may perhaps first have assumed. That is, it may be that the words signify that life outside the room is not worth changing places for, or they may refer to a future world that has been largely annihilated. On the other hand, Beckett may be dramatizing an invented world the nature and extent of which are still to be revealed—and it may just be that in this world there is literally or virtually nothing beyond the room. Alternatively, the room could be, *pace* Essif, an image of Hamm's consciousness (though it is also one that Clov is said to be doomed to share [36], as a single subjectivity is, in typical Beckettian fashion, thoroughly contaminated). And of course a self-reflexive meaning is always hovering behind ostensibly referential statements in Beckett's works. Essif finds "a central core that, in turn, signifies a progression of 'deep' metatheatrical and metaphysical meaning in the reflective empty space of his skull" (78). I would argue instead that for statements like "outside of here it's death," a rather different position is being adduced—that characters *qua* characters can exist only on a stage, and that outside the performance space they are necessarily non-existent, and in this sense, "dead."¹⁰

The play's ontological ambiguity is further exacerbated by additional, self-canceling statements about the space surrounding the characters. Clov avers, "There's no more nature" (11), a claim that has a tantalizing number of potential meanings, including the possibility that world being staged is an ontologically

distinct one that does not contain what we would call “nature.” Later, Hamm touches the wall and states, “Beyond is the . . . other hell” (26, Beckett’s ellipsis), suggesting yet another, eschatological space. Then, striking the wall, he exclaims, “Do you hear? Hollow bricks!” (26), presumably referring to an actual stage property. Possible meanings continue to proliferate, but the identity of the space outside remains obscure.

Throughout the entire play, the mysterious area outside the room is contradictorily evoked. We find clichéd historical locales (Lake Como, 21) and unspecified, almost generic areas: a desert (23), the woods (18), the ocean (30), the steppe (36), a current that leads to the South (34)—each perfectly plausible in itself, but quite unlikely to exist together, and as often as not rendered dubious by the subsequent dialogue. There are also presumably impossible landscape features (“There’s no more tide” 62), as well as the numerous metatheatrical locutions noted by Essif. In addition, due to the absence of any intermission and the intimate nature of the smaller theaters the play was intended for, it usually produces a distinct claustrophobic feeling in the audience as the area containing the spectators threatens to bleed into the enclosed stage it surrounds. “The other hell” referred to by Hamm is one that exists outside the building. His hell, by contrast, includes those “multitudes” situated just beyond the markedly porous fourth wall before him.

Perhaps the most intriguing bit of space in the play is the reference to the geographical designation of the presumed homeland of the boy in Hamm’s story. Not surprisingly, Hamm’s words are entirely indeterminate: “Where did he come from? He named the hole. A good half-day, on horse . . . I enquired about the situation at Kov, beyond the gulf. Not a sinner. Good” (52). The physical location is thus left unknowable, though it is teasingly proximate. The measure of distance provided is as likely to confuse as to enlighten a spectator necessarily unfamiliar with horse travel, and indeed adds to the play’s chronological destabilization (i.e. premodern, postapocalyptic, or the temporality of a parallel world?)

Most interesting is “Kov.” A thorough gloss on the name should help disclose some of the range of Beckett’s spatial imagination. As most critics might have guessed, there is currently no town of this name in the world, according to the National Geographic Society. Beckett would seem to have invented a location, though admittedly one that sounds like it might well be situated near a steppe. On the other hand, this may be an extreme specimen of self-reflexivity. A cove is rather like a diminutive gulf, and the “place” Kov may have been generated by strictly verbal manipulation.¹¹ Finally, we may note that “Kov” is the standard pronunciation of Cóbh, a major Irish port that the occupying English renamed “Queenstown” in 1849. During a live performance, any spectator familiar with the port would naturally assume that it was the place being referred to. This would contribute to a subtle postcolonial interpretation of the play that could connect it

both to a historical Ireland and intertextually to Caliban's disputed isle in *The Tempest*.¹² Appropriately, the play ends with Clov at the door, about to leave, but still in the room. The multiple, incompatible spaces evoked throughout the drama will not be resolved by a definitive exit into an unambiguous place. It may just be literally true that "there's nowhere else."

In view of all of this, it is singularly appropriate that Beckett's stage direction refers to the space outside the windows simply as "the without" (26, 76). That is, there is a meticulously constructed "polysemic ambiguity," as it were, one that suggests numerous contradictory interpretations even as it refuses to validate any of the several spaces it so assiduously points toward. Here we have an extreme example of what Una Chaudhuri terms "geopathology," or the characterization of space as a problem.¹³ The play also discloses the performative nature (in the sense of the term articulated by J. L. Austin) of statements concerning a play's setting made by figures within the work: generally speaking, the setting is whatever it is stated to be at the outset—unless this information is contradicted by other subsequent statements. This is equally true of assertions made by an external narrator (e.g. the Chorus in *Henry V* who announces, "Unto Southampton do we shift our scene," II I 42) or by a character (the captain's statement, "This is Illyria, lady," *Twelfth Night*, I ii 2). Through his practice of continually calling into question prior spatial statements, Beckett reveals how effortlessly they ordinarily constitute the dramatic world.

This being the case, it is not surprising that directors and other interpreters have repeatedly tried to simplify this ambiguous, self-negating space by ignoring some of its aspects. On the other hand, the importance of maintaining this interpretive polysemy is attested to by the lengths Beckett will go to preserve his work from oversimplification. JoAnn Akalaitis, who directed a 1984 production of *Endgame* at Robert Brustein's American Repertory Theatre in Cambridge, Massachusetts, used a recognizable underground subway tunnel for its setting; the play's windows, which I have suggested are so important to the to the generation and maintenance of unresolvably multiple ontological positions, were not depicted at all. Once he learned of the changes, Beckett demanded that the production be stopped, and a temporary restraining order was prepared. A resolution was finally worked out, and the production went on as planned; Beckett however insisted that the following disclaimer be inserted into each playbill:

Any production of *Endgame* which ignores my stage directions is completely unacceptable to me. My play requires an empty room and two small windows. The American Repertory Theatre production, which dismisses my directions, is a complete parody of the play as conceived by me. Anybody who cares for the work couldn't fail to be disgusted by this.¹⁴

By providing a determinate, realistic setting, Akalaitis radically narrowed the specifically ontological questions the play properly forces us to explore and confront; with the audience immediately comfortable in the knowledge of the play's setting, the numerous discussions of the drama's world lose their point, their power, and their general destabilizing effect. Ironically, in an early working draft for this play Beckett utilized an extremely realistic setting: the region of Picardy, "more precisely in Boulonnais . . . near Wissant." The protagonists were originally conceived as survivors of a World War I battle, and the year was 1918. As S. E. Gontarski points out in his edition of Beckett's theatrical notebooks for the work, "[t]hese realistic details, necessary for the creative process, were progressively eliminated in revisions."¹⁵

A brief look at Beckett's fiction reveals a similar fascination with the multiple possibilities of narrative space. In *Molloy*, as John Fletcher has observed, the Molloy country seems very Irish, while Moran (who may be Molloy) nevertheless appears to inhabit a country like France.¹⁶ In "Ping" and "Imagination Dead Imagine," images of small, confining white areas are adduced, though it is not clear how real or how literal these spaces are. The spatial setting of *The Unnamable* is unknowable, and that of *Worstward Ho* is repeatedly stated and denied.¹⁷ A comic distillation of Beckett's play with narrative space may perhaps be found in Voice's attempt to construct an appropriate physical setting for the misadventures of Woburn, the protagonist of story he is compelled to narrate, in the radio play, "Cascando": the largely immobile figure is "moved" by his creator from lying face down in the sand to lying among stones to lying face down in a boat. Given this sustained remaking of all spatial areas, it will probably surprise no one that in M. C. Rintoul's reference work, *Dictionary of Real People and Places in Fiction*, there is no entry for Samuel Beckett.

Adapting Beckett's comment at the end of *Watt*, "No symbols where none intended," we may conclude that Beckett allows no interpretive play except that already scripted by the author or—alternately and perhaps more precisely—no reductiveness except that already distilled within the text. The moral for both stage productions and literary interpretations is to always allow the full range of meanings suggested by this rich work, no matter how uncomfortable it may make those who prefer a clearer, simpler, more consistent, or less ambiguous entity.

In the end, the *Endgame*'s spatial setting remains resolutely enigmatic and defiantly indeterminate. The construction of narrative space is suspended, suggestive but incomplete. Beckett draws on and then pulls away from virtually the entire range of possible spaces: historical, invented, parodic, futuristic, impossible, unknowable, and self-reflexive. He surveys, as it were, all possible types of theatrical space only to reject or negate each one. Even the reflexivity remains stubbornly polysemous, referring at once to the physical stage, to more general literary constructs, and to antecedent texts. The well known quotation that

equates "outside" with "the other hell" (26) may indeed be an oblique allusion to a comparable passage in Thomas Middleton's *The Changeling*:

Deflores: Yes, and the while I coupled with your mate
 At barley break; now we are left in hell.
Vermandero: We are all there, it circumscribes us here.
 (V.3. 162-64)¹⁸

In conclusion, we may affirm that Beckett's representation of space is much more complexly layered than is generally perceived. It is important for critic, theorist, and director to resist valorizing only one or two of the many incompatible spaces referred to but never confirmed within this piece. This is particularly important when dealing with the multiple ontological frames evoked, attenuated, denied, and evoked again throughout the work. To comprehend the full power of this setting, it cannot be reduced to a single, determinate space, external or internal. Neither should it be dissolved within an overly facile adjective like "vague" or "ambiguous." There are instead a multitude of disparate, competing spaces that should be identified though they cannot be situated hierarchically; paradoxically, these spaces constitute a profuse polysemy of indeterminacy. Beckett's construction of narrative space almost literally stretches its boundaries, collapses its forms, and partially erases the domains it continues to invent. We may concur with Mieke Bal's statement that "[f]ew concepts deriving from the theory of narrative texts are as self-evident and have yet remained so vague, as the concept of space."¹⁹ *Endgame* reveals just how multiform, changeable, and contradictory that space can be.

Notes

1. Subsequent references to this article will be incorporated into the body of this text.
2. Hugh Kenner, *A Readers Guide to Samuel Beckett* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1973) 121.
3. Steven Connor, "'What? Where?' Presence and Repetition in Beckett's Theatre," in *Rethinking Beckett*, ed. by Lance St. John Butler and Robin J. Davis (New York: St. Martin's, 1990) 10.
4. For a very useful discussion of these issues in relation to twentieth-century American fiction, see Carl Darryl Malmgren, *Fictional Space in the Modernist and Postmodernist American Novel* (Lewisburg, PA: Bucknell UP, 1985).
5. Michael Issacharoff, "Space and Reference in Drama," *Poetics Today* 2:3 (1981) 211-24; see esp. 215-18.

6. Manfred Pfister, *The Theory and Analysis of Drama* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1988) 260-61.
7. For a discussion of these relations in connection with the work of Corneille, see John D. Lyons, "Unseen Space and Theatrical Narrative: The 'Récit de Cinna,'" *Yale French Studies* 80 (1991) 70-90.
8. Peter Handke, *Kaspar and Other Plays*, trans. Michael Roloff (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1969) 10. The German text reads: "Die Leere dieser Buhne bedeutet nichts Diese Buhne stellt nichts dar. Sie stellt keine andere Leere dar." Peter Handke, *Die Theaterstücke* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1992) 18.
9. Samuel Beckett, *Endgame* (New York: Grove Press, 1958). All subsequent references in the body of the text will be to this edition.
10. For a comparable discussion of the levels of reflexivity in Beckett's fiction, see my article "Causality in *Molloy*: Philosophic Theme, Narrative Transgression, and Metafictional Paradox," *Style* 26 (1992) 66-78.
11. And of course, "the hole" he came from might be an orifice in his mother's body—hopefully the vagina (though Molloy makes an insistent case for the anus). Conversely, the aperture might be in the head of their creator, a trope dramatized in "Cascando."
12. For an exemplary postcolonial reading of this work, see Nels Pearson, "'Outside of Here It's Death': Co-Dependency and the Ghosts of Decolonization in *Endgame*" (*ELH*, forthcoming).
13. *Staging Place: The Geography of Modern Drama* (Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 1995) xii. Chaudhuri goes on to state that "Beckett places the blame for the failure of homecoming . . . not on the characters (or human nature) but, much more logically, on the figure of home itself, on the effort to force a conjuncture between place and personal identity *for its own sake*, without context or purpose" (xiii).
14. This document is cited in Martin Garbus and Gerald E. Singleton, "Playwright-Director Conflict: Whose Play Is It Anyway?" *New York Law Journal* 192 (1984) 1-2.
15. *The Theatrical Notebooks of Samuel Beckett*, Vol. 2: *Endgame*, ed. S. E. Gontarski (New York: Grove, 1992) 43.
16. *The Novels of Samuel Beckett*, 2nd ed. (New York: Barnes, 1970) 125-26.
17. Thus, near the beginning of the latter text, we find the following description: "First the body. No. First the place. No. First both. Now either. Now the other Somehow on. Till sick of both. Throw up and back. The body again. Where none. The place again. Where none. Try again. Fail again" (*Worstward Ho* [New York: Grove, 1983] 7-8).
18. Thomas Middleton, *Three Plays*, ed. Kenneth Muir (London: Dent, 1975) 209.
19. Mieke Bal, *Narratology: Introduction to the Theory of Narrative* (Toronto: U of Toronto P, 1985) 93.

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Philip C. Kolin

A Streetcar Named Desire revolutionized the modern stage and this book offers the first continuous history of the play in production from 1947 to 1998. Chapters survey major national premieres by the world's leading directors including Seki Sano, Luchino Visconti, Ingmar Bergman, Jean Cocteau and Laurence Olivier. Interpretations by Black and gay theater companies also receive analyses, and transformations into other media, such as ballet, film, television, and opera (premiered in 1998) form an important part of the overall study.

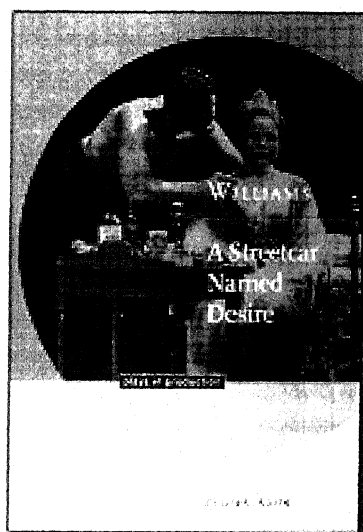


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