

“Staring Sightlessly”: Proust’s Presence in Beckett’s Absence

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Photographs by Steven Foster

Act Three: It begins and ends with boots, straining to remove them, and a pleading finally for someone to come, for someone to care; Estragon, in Samuel Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot*, calls out “*feebly*” to Vladimir, “Help me!” But as the playwright’s critical stage directions then critically instruct, Estragon “*gives up, exhausted, rests, tries again. As before.*” Finally he concludes, there at the very start of the play, there at the boots—“*pull[ing] . . . with both hands, panting*”—where nothing has begun, that there is “Nothing to be done.”¹ Beginning at the end, ending at the beginning, the comings and goings—the non-comings, the non-goings—of Estragon and Vladimir settling onto boots, and swollen feet; a very precise picture of pain.



What a way to begin a play, to begin to play, so mundanely, with boots, the ache and tenderness located in the very soles . . . of the feet, of the image . . . of Estragon “*tear[ing] at his boot,*” bending, stooping, “*giving up again.*” The painfulness of the play seen in the straining and the sad, soulful gesture, this sensuous sign of his very real suffering; the body bending, the parabola extending; the simple desire, the immediate need, to remove them, to take off his boots. Nothing more, nothing less; so much in so little. “Why don’t you help me?,”² Estragon asks of an unlistening Vladimir.

Moments later, the boots do, with great effort, finally come off, just as Vladimir absent-mindedly soliloquizes about nothing in particular of all that appalls him—“...appalled. (*With emphasis.*) AP-PALLED”—to an unlistening Estragon who is

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single-mindedly thinking about the specifically appalling condition of his aching feet. Beckett parenthetically describes what follows, again in a rich stage direction, concrete instructions that seem readymade to be pictured into form:

*(Estragon with a supreme effort succeeds in pulling off his boot. He peers inside it, feels about inside it, turns it upside down, shakes it, looks on the ground to see if anything has fallen out, finds nothing, feels inside it again, staring sightlessly before him.)*³

“Well?” Vladimir abruptly inquires of the staring Estragon. Nothing. “There’s nothing,” Estragon lamely reports, “to show.” While the suddenly interested Vladimir, expecting something more from *this* show, urges Estragon who is now described as “*examining his foot*” to “try and put [the boot] on again,” suggesting with the odd request that by repeating the removal, willfully going through its gestured motions once more, something might finally “show” itself. However, Estragon—resisting Vladimir’s peculiar command, his directorial injunction—keeps the boot off and sits idly, insisting instead that, of the boot, he “air it a bit.”⁴

Of this banal exchange between Beckett’s two misfit characters, who would have thought that there might be more to “show” from something as simple (though painful) as the removal of a pair of misfitting boots? For it appears that the taking off of the boots wasn’t only, or all, about the pain that they were causing

poor Estragon, but that something more had been desired or expected by their removal—something to be shown, something to be seen. Something more than just the tired old feet of Estragon and the empty boot, and empty Estragon left “*staring sightlessly*,” having hoped instead for something insightful to stare at. But what might that have been? In the boot, on the foot—what was to be shown? And what, finally, could not, would not *be* shown? Once done, nothing done, once seen, nothing seen; Estragon pitifully, “*examining his*

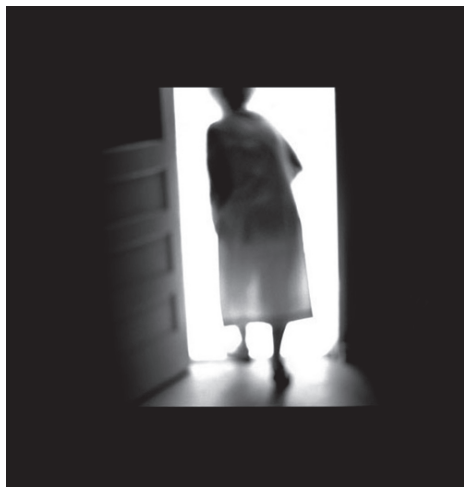


foot,” airing his boot, and Vladimir then caustically concluding, “There’s man all over for you, blaming on his boots the faults of his feet.”⁵ Still, considering the

scene and the situation, what else was Estragon to blame his faults upon, *but* the boots, tight and ill-fitting, biting at his soles, blistering his heels and toes?

Act Two: It begins and ends with boots, reaching to remove them, in a state of exhaustion and despair, after a long train journey from the city to the sea. Finally he arrives, there at last, at the Grand Hotel at Balbec. The young narrator Marcel, in Proust's *Remembrance of Things Past*, finds himself unhappily situated in the disorienting confines of the unfamiliar hotel room. While his beloved and ageing grandmother, joining him on the journey (and as the remembering narrator describes her, "still hardly grey"), comes to him from the adjacent room and stoops down to help her exceedingly sensitive grandson—"Oh, do let me!,"⁶ she dotingly implores. As she then gently takes off his boots, to put him reassuringly at peace. And, in a temporary sense, at peace, he is put. The devoted grandmother unbuttons the boots, comforts and calms the suffering boy, easing him into the hotel habits that will slowly domesticate this grandly imagined room in the Grand Hotel into the familiar intimacy of a temporary home, away from home. The boots are pictured there, neatly now, placed beneath the hotel's bed; a very precise picture of pain, averted and appeased.

Fast-forward, some years ahead, and to a year after this same grandmother's death (an intervening conclusion to a life which was always—unnoticed by the distracted narrator—already well underway in that initial scene with the removed boots; had the younger grandson only possessed the ability to see what was right before his eyes). An older Marcel has traveled again to the sea, again to the Grand Hotel, even staying in the same room as before. Once more exhausted from his travels and disoriented—as always—by the disruptions of his orderly day and the loss of the consoling hauntings of habit, *this* time, Marcel finds himself alone with his suffering, with no one to comfort him, no one to witness his despair, no one to whom he might cry out for help; "nothing to be done," for indeed, no one is now listening. In this state of nervous fatigue and domestic distress brought on by his travels (grandly described by the narrator as nothing less than "the disruption of my entire being"), he must again remove his boots, perhaps the very same boots as before, the ones that his now dead grandmother had years before stooped down to unbutton. The body bending, the parabola extending. As the



recollecting narrator recalls it, "I bent down slowly and cautiously to take off my boots, trying to master my pain."⁷

Suddenly, however, with that stooping gesture of reaching for the boots and, as Proust writes, "scarcely ha[ving] . . . touched the topmost button," the recollecting narrator voluntarily narrates this miraculous, *involuntary* event, the profane revelation, of being abruptly "filled with an unknown, a divine presence . . . the being who had come to my rescue, saving me from barrenness of spirit . . . I had just perceived, stooping over my fatigue . . . my real grandmother . . . I now recaptured the living reality in a complete and involuntary recollection."⁸ Bending down, removing the boots, and in that single, unrepeatable moment, the narrator's revealing insight now suddenly seen, something ghostly shown, "phantasms" of a death, both defying and defined, arising from out of an unbuttoned boot.

Act Four: In his early, prescient essay on Marcel Proust from 1931, a young Samuel Beckett examines several specific episodes in *Remembrance of Things Past* where the narrator Marcel abruptly sees before him evidence of time's corrosive invasion, signs of decline that can no longer be ignored or denied. In one of the more poignant and well known scenes described by Beckett, the young Marcel returns rapidly to Paris from his travels in order to be with his, *not* just ageing, but now ailing grandmother. This pivotal section of Proust's vast narrative falls chronologically between the two with the boots depicted moments ago—the first, with the grandmother stooping to unbutton the boots (with the younger Marcel oblivious to the grandmother's encroaching mortality); the second without her, and Marcel stooping alone (but with the grandmother's phantasmatic return from the dead, belatedly confirming her very deadness).

The day before, in Doncières, Marcel had spoken with his grandmother on the telephone, hearing a voice almost unrecognizable, so different, Beckett writes, from the one "that he had been accustomed to follow on the open score of her face that he does not recognise it as hers." Soon after, Beckett notes, having returned rapidly to Paris, Marcel arrives at his grandmother's home and quietly, unannounced and unseen, enters the drawing-room where, turned away, she is sitting alone, resting and reading. But, as Beckett states, the unseen narrator, the unseen spectator, precisely because he *is* at that moment *unseen* by his grandmother, suddenly feels "he is not there because she does not know that he is there. He is present at his own absence." The domestic scene disrupted, the familiar sentiment disturbed (as if the known home had abruptly transformed itself into a profoundly unfamiliar hotel), "His eye," Beckett writes, "functions with the cruel precision of a camera. . . . And he realises with horror that his grandmother is dead, long since and many times. . . . This mad old woman, drowsing over her book, overburdened with years, flushed and coarse and vulgar, is a stranger whom he has never seen."⁹

“Never seen,” he says, until that moment, at which point it’s too late; his grandmother is already dead, “long since and many times,” as if buried alive by the burdensome weight of the moment’s own oblivion. Or, as Marcel himself soon concludes of this revealing encounter with his grandmother, indeed, having seen it suddenly as the single audience member to its grave unfolding:

We never see the people who are dear to us save in the animated system, the perpetual motion of our love for them, which, before allowing the images that their faces present to reach us, seizes them in its vortex and flings them back upon the idea that we have always had of them, makes them adhere to it, coincides with it. . . . Every habitual glance is an act of necromancy, each face that we love, a mirror of the past.¹⁰

Something of this harrowing moment, as examined and described



so richly by Beckett—of death’s presentiment, or *previewing*, indeed, of death’s *rehearsal*—recalls a theatrical enactment of vanishing and loss within the strict confines of the grandmother’s drawing-room. As if upon a stage, within a kind of laboratory of light, one sees—constructed by Proust, recounted by Beckett—this vivid installation of time itself, a quietly dramatic space of lucid awareness, and of what Proust elsewhere describes

as “. . . the morbid phenomena of which [my grandmother’s] body was the theatre. . . .”¹¹

This depicted scene in which the narrator finds himself suddenly confronted by this “morbid” theater of the mortal body, revealing itself so materially, so unexpectedly in his grandmother’s drawing room, reads now like one that Beckett was likely to have found instructive for so many of his own future stagings, his own rehearsals of death, the framed intimacies of decline and disappearance. Undetected, we watch them there, these isolated characters sitting alone in rooms, or together but separately, unseen and unseeing, and in which, so often, to be is to be seen—*Esse*

est percipi—and to *not* be seen is to be rendered abruptly absent: “. . . present at his *own* absence.” (Bringing to mind now Vladimir’s insistent question to the mysterious little boy who appears, as if out of nowhere, in *Godot*, “You’re sure you saw me, you won’t come and tell me tomorrow that you never saw me!”).¹² Pictured thus in the staged simplicity of the grandmother’s drawing room, the alienated eyes of Proust’s narrator suddenly see that they have never seen, or, have never seen, *but* to see, what it’s now too late to see. In which case, it’s not quite clear what remains *there* to be seen at all. Or, as Herbert Blau describes the indeterminacy of the perceptual event so frequently faced in Beckett, the preying eyes of characters, and of us in the audience, who are—in the play of sight—“precipitously about to see something which, in the very activity of perception, *disappears*, as if in fact exhausted in the energy required . . . to see it . . . the very instruments of perception dematerialize the object; that is, the instruments of perception get in the way.”¹³

Alongside our earlier image of Estragon, his boots finally removed, and “*staring sightlessly before him*,” Proust’s scene in the grandmother’s drawing room, as depicted so acutely by Beckett, can’t help but raise the unsettling question as to whether the desiring eyes, staring dumbly at their own blindness (as if into an empty boot), are now seeing *that*—dumb blindness, “nothing to show”—this cataracting movement of a disappearance that will not reveal itself. The grandson, the grandmother together, but separately—appearing, disappearing—the one watching the other, and us, separately, strangers, watching them both watching.



Act One: From out of this blinding scene, this blinding revelation of a feared sightlessness, of nothing to show, and showing it, we return now—having seen what we *don't* see—back to where we began, to the bending, the stooping, the unbuttoning



of boots. Two pairs of boots now, seen adjacently, and these bodies bending—Estragon's, Marcel's, the grandmother's—each of them offering its very precise picture of pain, a picture that presents, as Theodor Adorno characterizes Beckett's mode of relentlessly concrete thought, "a situation of inwardness . . . still preserved in its gestural shell."¹⁴

We know of the young Beckett's interest in this other pair of boots, Proust's boots. For Beckett at length describes in his book on Proust the scene

with the grandmother—"a year after her burial"—and the recollected stooping gesture as, among all of the other moments of "Proustian revelation," the one that is, as Beckett classifies it, "particularly important."¹⁵ And it is to such specifically, physically repeated and rehearsed gestures as seen in Proust that Beckett was clearly drawn, the stooping over, the body's bending down to the boots, while, as Beckett later characterized it, "extract[ing] from this gesture" not only the "lost reality of his grandmother," but also the "lost reality of himself, the reality of his lost self."¹⁶ Pictured thus with what Beckett had called the "cruel precision of a camera,"¹⁷ it is Proust's poignantly described gesture, contained there in this "gestural shell," within this Deleuzian "image of thought" thinking itself through the moving body, that is now abruptly seen as a "sensuous sign" forcing thought, forcing *us* to think—violently, unremittingly—to which Beckett also seems theatrically drawn. There it is, right in front of our eyes, the bent body before us, performing—*live*—its own perceptible decline. We suddenly see it (like a cast shadow), that material moment of matter collapsing, the dense gravity of time's inescapable pull just prior to what Beckett characterizes—not quite dismissively (and as if holding out hope)—as the "mystic experience," the "sacred action," when the grandmother's "divine familiar presence"¹⁸ reenters the room and returns to Marcel.

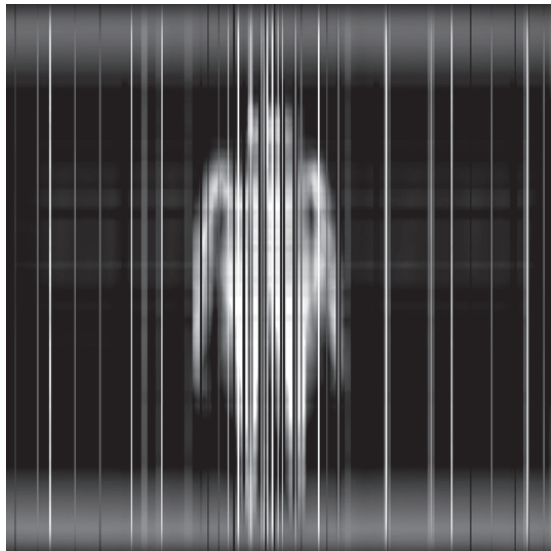
But as we soon recognize in *Godot*, as well as in so much of Beckett's subsequent work, no such shadowy presence—divine or otherwise—graces Estragon at the



removal of *his* boot, no genies from a bottle, no ghostly grandmothers from a boot, nothing of what Beckett elsewhere characterized—probably dismissively (as if finally removing any remaining vestige of the “mystic,” the “sacred,” the “divine”)—as the “vulgarity of a plausible concatenation.”¹⁹ And however many times, at Vladimir’s directorial urging, that Estragon might repeat the gesture of removing the boot, putting it on and taking it off again and again, the forced and voluntary effort will not conjure from it the involuntary

revelation of something suddenly shown. Or, as Herbert Blau, again, traces the occlusions of perception seen through the movements of Beckett’s described desire: “It’s like something in a photographic studio, presumably coming into sight, the image materializing from the processing itself, and just when you think you’ve brought it into focus, it disappears. What you thought you were seeing is there and not there.”²⁰

Having “extract[ed] from [Marcel’s] gesture” of bending down to unbutton the boots a subsequent truth, finally and profoundly—existentially received—of his grandmother’s death, it appears that Beckett has decisively stopped voluntarily there, at the very edge of this “gestural shell,” at that extracted image of desire reaching for revelation, hoping to be helped—the scene, a poignant sign pointing (as if in a mirror) back to itself pointing. Where the only show is finally the show of that. While, as elsewhere described (in Beckett’s “dialogues” on art that accompany his book on Proust), the author himself maintains to the end his



“fidelity to failure,” but a failure that offers—as if emerging from out of itself—“a new occasion, a new term of relation, and of the act which, unable to act, obliged to act . . . makes . . . an expressive act, even if only of itself, of its impossibility, of its obligation.”²¹ For at such an impossible site, the ghosts—like Godot—are unarriving, and the shadows—like theatrical characters—are left uncast; nothing to show from this “new occasion . . . [this] new term of relation” but the unbuttoned boots and the body bending, time’s parabola extending.

Of the morbid phenomenon of the body, seen necromantically now as theater, there remains the remains of the living and loved body dead and dying in front of our eyes, offering as it does a form of posthumous (or is it a prosthetic?) perception of what Blau describes as the “long initiation in the mystery of its vanishings.”²² But now, neither blaming the boots, nor faulting the feet, what is finally encountered, performing right there in front of us, is the mortal, physical fact of this particular body that matters so much, the singularity of its vanishing presence seen feelingly, fleetingly. “There’s a man all over for you”: Marcel sitting alone, despairing at the edge of his bed, “trying to master [his] pain”; Estragon exhausted, frustrated, holding his empty boot, “air[ing] it a bit,” his foot now “swelling visibly.”²³ Stopping there, at that stilled site, that stalled image, at that very precise picture of pain, showing what refuses to show, and where, “just when you think you’ve brought it into focus, it disappears.”²⁴

For it is upon those bending bodies, those removed boots, found in both Proust and Beckett, in those two specific images of briefly focused thought, that thought itself violently arises, and where—as Deleuze describes it in his book on Proust—“time itself . . . becomes sensuous,” and where, “hidden by the . . . sensation,” “nothingness dawns.”²⁵ Or, borrowing from the vivid language of astrophysics and black holes, seeing such stilled boots and bodies before us, it is *there* at the “event horizon” of the corporeal gesture, at “time’s dilation,” the slowing of the flow of time—and beyond which, as if passing through a black hole, *nothing* emerges—that vision itself becomes



occluded by the stretching and straining of sight towards its own tethered limit, creating (in its wake) a kind of afterimage of absence imprinted like an undeveloped, *undevelopable* photographic negative onto the delicate cornea of the eye.

Proust's narrator, alone in his empty hotel room, had removed his boots, and in the removal revealed the movement of an appearance, the phantasmatic presence of his grandmother returning—"the living reality in a complete and involuntary recollection."²⁶ But returned, she was to confirm to her grandson—at long last and unexpectedly—the irreversible permanence of her death, indeed, returned to represent death, returning to die again, or rather, to finally, fully die one year after the fact. While Beckett's Estragon was to remove *his* boots, and in the removal reveal—unlike Proust—the movement of a *disappearance*, an absence, "nothing to show," nothing to see, a nothing *not* to be represented. And yet, what *was* revealed in the very straining, tearing, panting effort of it all, in the morbid theater of the body—taking us to the dilating horizon of *this* event—was something of Estragon's very desire to see what would not show itself and could not be seen—a very precise picture of *that*.

Held still at this site of time—the very sight of time—the "cruel precisions" of Beckett's earlier described camera are no longer offering up a printable picture, a representable return of things past, what Beckett was to characterize as a "contradiction between presence and irremediable obliteration" that he found "intolerable." Instead, what *is* offered, and what faintly and tolerably remains for Beckett, is a performable, temporal image that coalesces upon a pair of battered boots and a still poignant gesture "alive and tender."²⁷ Stalled, but not entirely stopped, as if seen in slow-motion—as if "swelling visibly"—these moving images movingly dissolve at the precise point of perceptual contact. Recalling what he later spoke of as a "pain [that] could only be focused at a distance,"²⁸ Beckett's distanced stage is presented now like the drawing room of Proust's grandmother, drawing us in to this delineated image quietly collapsing in upon itself, and upon us. Beckett writes elsewhere that "to restore silence is the role of objects."²⁹ And for Proust and Beckett, it is *these* objects, the boots of both, that have finally functioned as the silencing props of their respective performances, the well-worn boots from which each would differently locate the loss, sound out the situated silences, and measure the painful movements of their own dispersion and disappearance.

Notes

1. Samuel Beckett, *Waiting for Godot* (New York: Grove P, 1954) 2, 4.
2. 3, 4.
3. 4.
4. 4.
5. 4.
6. Marcel Proust, *Remembrance of Things Past*, trans. C.K. Scott Moncrieff and Terence Kilmartin,

- 3 vols. (New York: Random House, 1981) vol. I, 719.
7. Vol. II 783.
8. Vol. II 783.
9. Samuel Beckett, *Proust and Three Dialogues with Georges Duthuit* (London: John Calder, 1965) 26-28.
10. Proust, *Remembrance of Things Past*, vol. II, 142.
11. 308.
12. Beckett, *Waiting for Godot* 106.
13. Herbert Blau, *Sails of the Herring Fleet: Essays on Beckett* (Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 2000) 153.
14. Adorno, Theodor W. "Trying to Understand *Endgame*" *Samuel Beckett's Endgame*. Ed. Harold Bloom. (New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1988) 33.
15. Beckett, *Proust* 39, 38.
16. 41.
17. 27.
18. 35, 36, 41.
19. 81-82.
20. Blau, *Sails of the Herring Fleet* 153.
21. Beckett, *Proust and Three Dialogues with Georges Duthuit* 125.
22. Herbert Blau, *Take Up the Bodies: Theater at the Vanishing Point* (Urbana: U of Illinois P, 1982) 299.
23. Beckett, *Waiting for Godot* 6.
24. Blau, *Sails of the Herring Fleet* 153.
25. Gilles Deleuze, *Proust and Signs: The Complete Text*, tr. Richard Howard (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 2000) 20.
26. Proust, *Remembrance of Things Past*, vol. II, 783.
27. Beckett, *Waiting for Godot* 42.
28. Beckett, *Proust and Three Dialogues with Georges Duthuit* 45.
29. Samuel Beckett, *Molloy, Malone Dies, The Unnamable* (New York: Knopf, 1997) 10.

