

ON SLEEP

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Abstract: *Theatre demands our attention, our senses to be wakened continuously in order not to miss something. In this respect, in plays and on stage, the state of sleep gets to be used as a metaphor, as a way to signal or disclose something: a fault of character – laziness, for instance, which is much more common in contemporary plays; a suspension of the retaliatory acts, as it happens in “Oresteia” by Aeschylus; a tension which comes from the insomnia which bears the tremor of the guilt in “Macbeth” by William Shakespeare; or a deeply metaphor for the wakening from a state of blindness, of oblivion in “Waiting for Godot” by Samuel Beckett.*

Keywords: *sleep, Oresteia, Macbeth, Waiting for Godot, vengeance*

Themes and motifs exceed texts and transcend centuries while remaining as relevant as always. Themes like revenge, darkness, dream and violence remain as relevant and redolent no matter the author who tackles them. The victory of their impact is up to the mastery of writing and the context in which the works appeared. This article tackles three different texts regardless their period of writing and publication from a particular point of view: the dramatic function of the theme of sleep. This essay is about sleep and its re-enactments and manifestations in plays spanning different genres and centuries of theatre: “Oresteia” by Aeschylus, “Macbeth” by William Shakespeare and “Waiting for Godot” by Samuel Beckett. Sleep is the liminal space in which we multiply exponentially life, while also living the small deaths preparing us for the final frontier. In fine arts, sleep is a recognisable subject of art,

from Hieronymus Bosch's reveries and nightmares to Goya's "The Sleep of reason produces monsters" (1799). In poetry, Keats famously encompassed all the romantic themes in "To Sleep": sleep as escape, oblivion, sweet withdrawal. In theatre, sleep also furnishes metaphors. Sleep is a way to communicate something. Through sleep, something gets to be disclosed: a character's fault, a metaphor for waiting or for secluding into another world, a tense state of vulnerability. This article's purpose is not a way of assessing the similarities between the works of three important figures like Aeschylus, Shakespeare and Beckett. It is rather an essay of piercing down a powerful theme - that of sleep and how it transcends through their oeuvre regardless of their source of inspiration.

First of all, though any influence can be justified when treated chronologically, can we truly assess any influence of Aeschylus on Shakespeare? There is no doubt on the Latin influence on Shakespeare. Seneca, Ovid, Plautus, they all come back one way or another into Shakespeare's oeuvre: "The Comedy of Errors is a free adaptation of the *Menaechmi* of Plautus [...] *Titus Andronicus* is a tragedy in the style of Seneca that brings onto stage the *Metamorphoses* [...] *Julius Caesar*, *Antony and Cleopatra*, and *Coriolanus* all derive from Plutarch's *Lives* [...]"¹, as the renown Shakespeare scholar Jonathan Bate stated. But if the Latin dramatists' influence is undeniable, with Aeschylus things are different. There is no direct influence to be stated, only random or not parallels. In the English literature and on the English stage, Aeschylus was kept in a dark corner up until the first part of the eighteenth century. The scholar Louise Schleiner stressed that Aeschylus might have become known to Shakespeare only through the Latin version of the texts: Jean the Saint-Ravy's translation (Basel, 1555) and the Vettori Aeschylus editions published by Henri

¹ Jonathan Bate, *How the Classics Made Shakespeare*, Princeton University Press, 2019, p. 9

Estienne (Paris, 1557, 1567)². Further, she noted that Ben Jonson owned a copy of the Saint-Revy adaptation of the “Oresteia” in 1614³. Few scholars ventured on a path of assessing the similarities between Greek Tragedy and Shakespeare and these similarities were mostly attributed to natural affinities. J. Churton Collins has stated that there is a direct connection between “Macbeth” and “The Oresteia”: “Clytemnestra in the Agamemnon might well be the archetype of Lady Macbeth. Both possessed by an idea are, till its achievement, the incarnations of a murderous purpose.”⁴ Laura Japsen is appealed by the common ground of “Macbeth” and “The Oresteia” which is the *poetic justice*, which is to be found at the crossroad between individual struggles and hereditary guilt: “Like Aristotle, the Greek Tragedians and Shakespeare generally conceive of a universe in which standards of morality are absolute.”⁵ Jepsen suggests that the guilty conscience of Macbeth might be compared to the one which tormented Clytemnestra in “Choephoroe”, but this similarity might again be attributed to the normal course of the guilt, the remorse after the violent deed is done. Further, both queens, Clytemnestra and Lady Macbeth are torn to pieces, afraid by the darkness which might wreck them, thus asking that the torches and candles should be lit at night by their servants. Finally, the violent image of the bloodstain that cannot be cleansed strikes in both of the plays. In the third antistrophe of the “Choephoroe”, the Chorus triggers this frightful precaution that no murderous hand shall ever be cleansed: “For him that has violated a bridal bower there is no/remedy; and though all

² Louise Schleiner, “Latinized Greek Drama in Shakespeare’s Writing of *Hamlet*”, *Shakespeare Quarterly*, Vol. 41, Nr. 1, 1990, p. 31

³ *Ibidem*.

⁴ J. Churton Collins, *Studies in Shakespeare*, Archibald Constable&co, Westminster, 1904

⁵ Laura Jepsen, “Poetic Justice: The Oresteia and Macbeth”, in *Ethical Aspects of Tragedy: A Comparison of Certain Tragedies by Aeschylus, Sophocles, Euripides, Seneca and Shakespeare*, AMS Press, New York, 1971, pp. 8-31

streams flow/in one channel to cleanse the blood/from a polluted hand, they speed their course in vain.”⁶ Macbeth’s frightful downfall conscience echoes the Chorus of Aeschylus: “What hands are here? Ha! they pluck out mine eyes. Will all great Neptune’s ocean wash this blood/ Clean from my hand? No, this my hand will rather e multitudinous seas incarnadine, Making the green one red.” (2.2.56-60)

Shakespeare’s influence on Beckett is undeniable. Jan Kott was the one to stress the parallel between Shakespeare and Beckett, specifically between “King Lear” and “Endgame”, highlighting the storm scene in “King Lear” as the core to Beckett’s work: “Almost as in Brueghel’s famous picture, Edgar is leading the blind Gloster to the precipice at Dover. This is just the theme of Endgame; Beckett was the first to see it in King Lear; he eliminated all action, everything external, and repeated it in its skeleton form.”⁷ No language heroism gets its part of the shine. Complaint, traumas, oblivion creep into the plays of Beckett. No one puts their life at risk heroically anymore. We are bystanders and witnesses mostly. Things are hard. We admit it. We succumb to it: “I think anyone nowadays who pays the slightest attention to his own experience finds it the experience of a non-knower, a non-caner (somebody who cannot). The other type of artist — the Apollonian — is absolutely foreign to me.”⁸ Beckett’s oeuvre is antiheroic, there is no heroic closure anymore, no one is redeemed. As Vivian Mercier puts it: “where fact is the tragic to be found? Beckett cannot believe in, or at least cannot create, a genuine tragic hero — powerful, proud, yet essentially good save for the tragic flaw. Beckett’s anti-heroes do not aspire, so they can never fall.”⁹ This abandonment of the world, this bleak feeling of

⁶ Aeschylus, *Choephoroe*, Bloomsbury, 2014, line 71-74

⁷ Jan Kott, *Shakespeare our Contemporary*, Methuen, 1967

⁸ Ronan McDonald, *Tragedy and Irish Literature: Synge, O’Casey, Beckett*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2002, p. 127

⁹ Vivian Mercier, *Beckett/Beckett*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1977, p. 13

the world is echoed by Macbeth in the famous *tomorrow* soliloquy: “Tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow,/Creeps in this petty pace from day to day,/To the last syllable of recorded time;/And all our yesterdays have lighted fools/The way to dusty death. Out, out, brief candle!/Life’s but a walking shadow, a poor player,/That struts and frets his hour upon the stage,/And then is heard no more.” (5.5.20-26) The modern total anxiety in a rush with time which seems to escape us at every moment is echoed by Beckett. Also, Macbeth’s famous monologue *tomorrow tomorrow tomorrow* bears the modernity mask of total anxiety. In “Waiting for Godot”, the whole concept of time is crucial: “In Act 1, the words “tomorrow” and “yesterday” are used six times each; in Act 2, they appear eight and twenty-four times respectively. The reiteration of that word may be a final Shakespearean marker in Beckett’s temporal tragicomedy. Because Vladimir’s repeated “tomorrow” must recall, to the Shakespearean ear that has been alerted by the many other allusions throughout, the soliloquy from the denouement of Macbeth that had so “thrilled” Beckett when he read it as an undergraduate at Trinity College, Dublin, in the 1920s (Knowlson, *Damned to Fame*, 54).”¹⁰

Therefore, different play texts are always perceived in a web of relationships: from the period they were written in to the allusions to previous works, or even imitations and reworking of past oeuvres. In this article, I am more interested on how a certain theme - that of sleep, gets to unite different works and how it reflects certain attitudes and motifs taking into account of the different times and contexts, when the *present* can’t be looked away, or solely perceiving how the theme transcends the oeuvre when the universe of the play is so powerful and universal.

In “Oresteia”, Aeschylus delicately sets about tackling multiple sleep-related themes. In a trilogy which is dominated by the

¹⁰ Stanley van der Ziel, „Godot’s Shakespeare”, *Irish Studies Review*, Vol. 27, Nr. 1, 2019, pp. 38-55

bloody reckoning of a family, of a gruesome pattern of killing and counter-killing, the act of sleep creeps in sometimes as a warning signal for the beholders, sometimes as a realm of bad prophecies and other times as an anticipatory release for peaceful times. “Agamemnon” conveys sleep both as a metaphor for suspension of retaliatory acts and as a metaphor for vulnerability as Clytemnestra tangles Agamemnon in sleep. In “Choephoroe” sleep is the known realm of ominous dreams which frighten Clytemnestra and in “Eumenides” sleep is literally transposed theatrically on stage as the Erinyes are wakened from their sleep by Clytemnestra.

“Agamemnon” begins with the watchman fighting his sleep. He has been put on the roof of the Palace of Argos by Clytemnestra and stayed there waiting for the beacon fire which would signal the end of the Trojan War and Agamemnon’s return. The watchman’s cure for sleeplessness is a song, but a song that cannot soothe his misfortune. This song twists dissonantly into lament: “And when I have a mind to sing or hum,/incising this remedy of song against sleep,/then I weep, lamenting this misfortune of this house,/not now, as in time past, excellently kept in order”¹¹.

The watchman’s song anticipates the things that are about to happen in the house. Sarah Nooter, a Greek scholar, dedicated her research on voice and she beautifully argues the particularity of the watchman’s song in relation to the metaphors of the play: “What is exceptional here is the singularity of this song: it is not simply the song of just one voice, it is a «private» song with no audience, not even the actual audience, since the music is only described, never heard.”¹² Underlining the song as a communal activity in Greece, she goes to say that Aeschylus started the play in the mid of catastrophe, anticipating the many failures of singers. When the watchman sees, in the fictional realm that is concealed from us, the beacon of fire,

¹¹ Aeschylus, *Agamemnon*, Bloomsbury, 2014, line 16-19

¹² Sarah Nooter, *The Mortal Voice in the Tragedies of Aeschylus*, Cambridge University Press, 2017, p. 131

the fire is not simply there, but it emerges, and though it promises him the silence of the sleep, he knows that this silence comes with menace. The fire of the triumph of life is born, and mortality is right away created before his eyes: “But for the rest I am silent; a great ox stands/upon my tongue; but the house itself, if it could find a voice,/could tell the tale most truly; for I of my choice/speak to those who know; but for those who do not know I forget.”¹³ *A great ox stands upon my tongue* is the silence as suspension of truth. Moreover, succumbing to the sweetness of sleep means also leaving room for the vengeance and the evil to happen. He would be forbidden to tell Agamemnon of the adultery between Clytemnestra and Aegisthus and the plotting to kill Agamemnon. The watchman’s waking furthers the retaliatory murder.

Sleep often comes with dreams. Dreams have this inherent nature of the soul laid bare. Therefore, dreams have been the most susceptible terrain for psychoanalysis. Dreams are the X-ray of our fears, anguishes, wishes, most beautiful memories. The pivot moment in “Choephoroe” is Clytemnestra’s dream of nursing a serpent who will come to bite her. Here, the dream is not used by Aeschylus solely as a prophetic warning, or solely as a mirror for the guilt moment. The internal affinities of the dream are surpassed by its dramatic purpose of discourse. First of all, the dream is not told by Clytemnestra, but rather disclosed by a third part during the dialogue between Orestes and Chorus and this is extremely important since it actually pushes forward the action. The dream is not treated solely psychologically, as it doesn’t hold a psychological value related to Orestes and the context in which is told. After Clytemnestra dreams that she is stung in the breast by a serpent, she pays libation to Agamemnon, not to Orestes who might be considered the actual serpent. Her guilt is related to Agamemnon. Prior to this scene, the nurse tells that she was the one who nursed

¹³ Aeschylus, *Agamemnon*, Bloomsbury, 2014, line 36-39

Orestes. Therefore, the dream also signals the incongruity between Clytemnestra's motherhood and her guilt of maybe not properly nursing Orestes. Therefore, Orestes is the one who must assume to be the serpent his mother dreamed. Clytemnestra had a snake dream that linked the dead Agamemnon as dream-sender to Orestes as dream-interpreter and fulfiller. "*Choephoroe*" closes with a call for the cessation of *ate*, "destruction": "What shall be the decision, what the end/ of the might of destruction, lulled at last to rest?"¹⁴ With sleep, comes peace.

"*Eumenides*" complicates and infers a transitional state: the ghost of Clytemnestra, though never named thus, declares at the beginning in verse 116 that she herself knows that she is in a medial state: "for as a shadow I, Clytemnestra, now invoke you!"¹⁵ She returns to wake the Erinyes from their own sleep. Two dreams occur almost simultaneously. On stage, Orestes crumbles on stage and in the same time Erinyes sleep and they almost believe they are chasing Orestes. They even seem to catch him. It is their collective sleep-dream. Clytemnestra's ghost appears to wake them from their own sleep. Her purpose is to wake them up to avenge her. Once cast into the dead world, where she says she is suffering because of the dishonour, the Erinyes are her only chance of vengeance. The personal vengeance is transferred into a collective one, that of the Erinyes. And this transfer happens in a medial state of sleep. Her disgraced afterlife is the sole and most powerful argument for the Erinyes to act on her behalf in the real life. In Homer, ghost usually returns in the living world to make demands. They want a burial ritual. Patroclus's ghost appears to Achilles in *Iliad* 23 and it happens the same to Elpenor in *Odyssey* 11. The passage of Clytemnestra's waken vengeance call also stirs metaphorically. From the beginning sleep was associated with a suspension of the retaliatory act.

¹⁴ Aeschylus, *Choephoroe*, Bloomsbury, 2017, line 1075-1076

¹⁵ Aeschylus, *Eumenides*, Bloomsbury, 2017, line 116

Clytemnestra was awakened by the watchmen so that she can get prepared for Agamemnon's return. Now, once the Erinyes have fallen asleep and she is dead, the avenge act is also suspended. If the vengeance is to be successful then they must awake as she also tells them that only with the eyes wide open can they perceive their true destiny: "In a dream you pursue your beast, and you bay like/a hound that never ceases to think of the chase"¹⁶. The retaliatory activity is suspended.

The sinister theme of sleep which has been crawling till now, makes one last appearance toward the end of "Eumenides". This devilish theme of sleep intertwined with that of danger and vengeance is transformed into one with light-hearted overtones. At the end, Athena declares that she is founding the new council of the Areopagos: "Proof against thoughts of profit is this council, /august, quick to anger, wakeful on behalf/of sleepers is the guard-post of the land that I establish."¹⁷ Alan Sommerstein, Greek scholar, points to the importance of the council to protect those sleeping menaced by potential nocturnal killings: "The nocturnal killer is, in fact, both harder to guard against and harder to bring to book, and it is therefore intelligible if he inspired greater fear"¹⁸.

Sleep as a suspension of the wrongful thoughts appears also in Macbeth. Sleep is also escape, liberation, shelter. In sleep, all desires and wrongful deeds are suspended for a moment. Has anyone ever committed a murder while sleeping? Unless maybe under the spell of a nightmare that makes one to take the knife? All these can be endless possibilities, but sleep suspends the disaster for a moment. But what happens when Macbeth kills sleep? Macbeth had murder sleep when he killed Duncan in sleep. Right before the moment of kill, he seems to hear a voice: "Sleep no more/Macbeth does murder

¹⁶ *Ibidem.*, line 131-132

¹⁷ *Ibidem.*, line 704-706

¹⁸ Alan Sommerstein, *The Tangled Way of Zeus: And Other Studies In and Around Greek Tragedy*, Oxford University Press, 2010, p. 147

sleep” (2.2.35-36). Sleep, with all its valences and extensions into insomnia, fatigue, alertness, psychic crises, confusion and with its romantic, gothic, postmodern representation occupies a central place in the play.

Darkness appears to have almost entirely obliterated the entire scene in “Macbeth”. It takes hold of each definite moment: the dagger splashed with blood, the murder of Duncan and Lady Macbeth’s sleep walking. It takes hold of the two Macbeth up to the point of they find no more shelter under the protection of darkness. When the king of right is killed and replaced by Macbeth, the unnatural prevails into the world. The awake state takes place of sleep, night dominates the day, and Lady Macbeth’s frailty in the end is signalled especially by her fright of darkness. “Macbeth” is Shakespeare’s play that challenges the most the introspection of oneself, becoming a stage for the showcase of internalization, with all the necessity and destructive forces to exacerbate everything we are. All our inner battles are more susceptible to fragility when thought in the most intimate, lonely realm of our inner struggle, where we confront ourselves late at night on the verge of sleep – our second nature: “Sleep that knits up the ravell’d sleeve of care/The death of each day’s life, sore labour’s bath/Balm of hurt minds, great nature’s second course” (2.2.37-38). The murder of Duncan has effects on both of them and their sleep is disturbed. Macbeth tells Lady Macbeth after he kills the king that one of guards laughed in his sleep and the other shouted murder. The insomnia in which Macbeth is thrown is not an exclusive sign of guilt, but the captivity of the insecurities, of the small fragility acts, of the imagination that gets to dominate him. The dagger, the arm of the murder, is impregnated onto the retina.

Macbeth is held captive by the imagination, which does not release him into a world of self-knowledge but locks him into a present in which to give way to fantasies means expose himself and ruin himself. Both he and Lady Macbeth free themselves from the

dream only through death. The problem of consciousness is the one that alters the boundaries between dream and reality. Macbeth doesn't stop at the first murder, obviously. Like Richard III, why would he stop at one murder if the second would bring him the security of the throne. It is the lack of pleasure in manipulation that condemns him. Because every murder entails the insecurity of the throne. If he killed a king so easily, he could just as easily be killed. It is not care and guilt that keep him awake, but almost the certainty that no matter how much blood is shed, it would not make a difference: "Blood will have blood" (3.4.128). No extra drop will bring him the much-desired sleep, not even Macduff's death. If for Macbeth the dream of power poisons reality, for Lady Macbeth reality dominates the sleep-like state, from which she cannot escape. The imagery of sleep is confronted and put constantly into a dialogue with the image of death, hauntingly said by Lady Macbeth right before killing Duncan: "The sleeping and the dead/Are but as pictures". What is first thought by Lady Macbeth as an easy way to commit the murder, as a way of escaping the horrible truth of cutting through someone's body thanks to asserting their already deadness look-alike during sleep, will come to haunt her. There is no coincidence for the fact that most sleep-related themes emerge in this scene, as Professor Foakes has shown: "Of the many references to sleep, sleeplessness, and kindred ideas, eighteen occur in one scene (II.ii) and thirty-one in the whole of Act II. Macbeth has murdered Duncan in his sleep, and his punishment is [...] «Macbeth shall sleep no more.» (II.ii.40)"¹⁹ They will both be tormented with the insomnia which feels like a burden, a constant awakening which wrecks them up to a psychic havoc. Past actions echo and reverberate in the present and strikingly they come to be enacted again. The torture of the murder is always put in balance with the will, Macbeth's first

¹⁹ R.A.Foakes, "Suggestions for a new approach to Shakespeare's imagery", *Shakespeare Survey*, Vol. 5, 1952, p. 85

spark of hope at becoming more than he already is. There is no pattern in murders, just a mean of eliminating those who challenge the throne: “He speaks no more, as before Duncan’s murder, of honour or pity. That sleepless torture, he tells himself, is nothing but the sense of insecurity and the fear of retaliation. If only he were safe, it would vanish. And he looks about for the cause of his fear; and his eye falls on Banquo”²⁰.

If for Macbeth the murders are sometimes eclipsed by his wish to assert himself, Lady Macbeth gets to be controlled, haunted by the murder she can’t erase from her memory not even in sleep. In the famous sleepwalking scene when Lady Macbeth creeps in holding the candle, then obsessively keeps washing her hands, the sleepwalking state has nothing narrative, but acquires a powerful dramatic and theatrical quality through the repetitive gesture – washing the bloodied hands – that condemns the deed: “A little water clears us of this deed.” (2.2.68) Both of them, anticipating the inner tumult that will follow the crime, try to break free from the torment before the act: Lady Macbeth by assuming the shed blood, but ends up drowning in it, and Macbeth by the dream-projection that will bring him the peace of the throne. In the monologue before Duncan’s murder, what he is trying to do is convert the future of creation into the past already made without the consequences of the present: “If it were done when ‘tis done, then ‘twere well/It were done quickly” (1.7.1-2) Creation is also fall. Macbeth and Lady Macbeth create darkness. They use nature wishing the stars to disappear, and they disappear, they use nature to hide like a snake in the grass and hide, until nature lurking from the deeply disturbed world announces the end with the famous scene of the forest advancing from Birnam to Dunsinane. They fulfill the prophecy, but they are killed even by the prophecy, even by what their own hand has created, because by

²⁰ A. C. Bradley, *Shakespearean Tragedy*, Palgrave Macmillan Higher Ed, 2006, p. 274

arrogating a greater right than they could have, they have been overthrown even by the force of desire. Macbeth becomes the paradigm of confusing, misleading expectations. The imagination that carried Lady Macbeth beyond the limits is the one that throws her nothingness into the chaos of the creation in which she feels lost: "I 'gin to be aweary of the sun,/And wish th' estate o' th' world were now/ undone." (5.5.48-49). It almost seems that not death is the terrible sister of sleep, but the cruel awakening that engulfs one in despair and total intensity which covers the whole humanity, the still hope of Macbeth, the desperation of Lady Macbeth: "There remains something sublime in the defiance with which, even when cheated of his last hope, he faces earth and hell and heaven."²¹

In the recent memory of today's world, no other century bears such a heavy memory as the 20th century. In a blink of a second, in Europe, life passed from the belle époque years to the two World Wars, and then, in parts of Europe, to dictatorship. The collective trauma that spanned from the systemic mass murder to terrible acts of inhumanity, from the experience of the justified evil to the experience of living the inhuman hell of states that drained the life out of its own people with its lost and restricted freedoms and abuse of power, brought out such cruelty hardly to escape. There's no need to prove how much almost every family in Europe was threatened by acts of violence. Therefore, under this threateningly fragile life and the worst degradation of the individual, there is no wonder that the existential questions aroused. In theatre, the gathering anguish strikes along with Samuel Beckett. Beckett's work does not tackle directly the violence, but under the absurdist, bleak humour of his plays, there are constantly these themes of loss, disappearance, and of desperation and fractioned humanity. "Waiting for Godot" came out during the post-war world and though unspoken it bears the marks of the war and Beckett's time in the French

²¹ *Ibidem.*, p. 277

Resistance. It's the play that may allude to any theme we try to ascribe and in the same time resist establishing any clear meaning to it. The experience of passivity permeates many of the works, but in "Waiting for Godot", besides the obvious allude of the title, the non-action of the play strikes a chord. When Beckett directed the play in Berlin, he told the actors that it should be done very simply and that the essential aim was "to give confusion a shape... through the visual repetition of themes. Not only themes in dialogue, but also visual themes of the body."²² To illustrate his point, he chose the initial tableau of Estragon asleep on the stone and called this a *Wartestelle*, calling for "fixed points of waiting, in which everything stands completely still, in which silence threatens to swallow everything up. Then the action starts again"²³ as reported by his associate director Walter Asmus. Passivity acquires its liminal object in sleep. The blurring of any decision is suspended in sleep. Of course, there is no active action that can be asked during sleep but treated metaphorically sleep becomes a metaphor for ignorance alluding to those who stand aside in times of suffering. "Was I sleeping, while the others suffered?" Vladimir asks himself in "Waiting for Godot". Vladimir's echo of ignorance and of oblivion strikes a chord. Vladimir's realization comes after tragic utterances: Pozzo's revelation that he is blind and that Lucky is dumb and Pozzo's striking vulnerable remark that once the baby comes into the world, death has already lurked in: "They give birth astride of grave."²⁴ Besides any allegory, mythology that can be built up around "Waiting for Godot", Beckett avoided moralizing, and for sure his characters did not take a position as sole spectators. Vladimir and Estragon are hovering between ambiguous states, pulsing images that in the whole existential context of the 20th century anyone can make up their mind. Both Vladimir's question of the imperceptible sleep

²² S. E. Gontarski, *On Beckett: Essay and Criticism*, Anthem Press, 2012, p. 212

²³ *Ibidem.*, p. 211

²⁴ Samuel Beckett, *Waiting for Godot*, p. 89

and Pozzo's speech about the finitude that comes with the first breath of air conjure a *dream* like effect, an endless repetitive time, which encompasses all our eternal and recurrent moments. If Pozzo saw how each one of us is born already with the mark of the death and the long history of connection and resemblances between us, Vladimir goes to deeply narrate this state of connection between us, as seeing himself in the other's eyes, being him the one who is watched, echoing Pozzo's remark: "Astride of a grave and a difficult birth [...] At me someone is looking, of me someone is saying. He is sleeping, he knows nothing, let him sleep on."²⁵ Vladimir is watching Estragon, we in the theatre are watching Estragon, someone invisible is watching us. If for Vladimir, sleep is used as a metaphor for ignorance, for Estragon sleep is the reclusive protective internalization. Estragon is sleeping all the time, succumbing to a foetal position. As soon as Estragon stops an activity, he immediately falls asleep and begins dreaming. In addition, although his dreams invariably turn into nightmares, he never misses an opportunity to fall asleep again. Estragon briefly escapes through sleep, turned inward – poet and Christ figure-absorbed by his pain. Memory seems to escape them and the concreteness of living. Memory seems to exist only in the wounds, the only tangible things that give them "the impression that we exist"²⁶. Individual recognitions by both the other and the self are intertwined, and Vladimir's remark about sleep comes striking as it is a suspension of his belief and recognition in the eyes of the other. Estragon seeks escape from pain in restless sleep. And in this bleak world, things are simply to be understood as one of the most compelling critics of Beckett put it: "Two men waiting, for another whom they know only by an implausible name which may not be his real name. A ravaged and blasted landscape. A world that was ampler and more open once, but is permeated with

²⁵ *Ibidem*.

²⁶ Beckett, *Waiting for Godot*, line 59

pointlessness now. Mysterious dispensers of beating. A man of property and his servant, in flight. And the anxiety of the two who wait [...]”²⁷

All three plays discussed in this essay tackle the night-time and sleep within oppressive settings. Sleep does fulfill neither a dream, nor a liberation. In the same way, its absence keeps the spirit so tense, that the anguish becomes unbearable. In “Oresteia”, being awake during night-time comes with destructive force; and when finally succumbing to the sweet realm of sleep, one can fall victim to his or her own gruesome vengeance. In “Macbeth” killing the sleep of others predicts the restless nights of awakening. In “Waiting for Godot”, sleep is the self-imposed blissful ignorance. We choose our sleep and what to make out of it.

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