

From Authorial Kinship to Imaginative Sovereignty

Analysing the Influence of Samuel Beckett on Paul Auster's Texts

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Abstract: During his early years, Paul Auster wrote three plays: Blackouts (1976), Hide and Seek (1976), and Laurel and Hardy Go to Heaven (1976/77). Those works, however, are still little known to the general public or to literary criticism. The play Laurel and Hardy Go to Heaven exhibits close similarities to the dramatic works of Samuel Beckett, who strongly influenced Auster's development as a writer. This paper aims to reflect on the peculiar position of the play in Auster's oeuvre and to highlight its significance by tracing the arc of his creative maturation, in order to substantiate how Auster adopted Beckett's texts into his own writings, overcoming the anxiety of influence and discovering his authorial voice.

Paul Auster started his career in 1974 as a poet, playwright, literary translator, and essayist. During his early years, he published five collections of poetry: *Unearth* (1974), *Wall Writing* (1976), *Effigies* (1977), *Fragments from Cold* (1977), *Facing the Music* (1980), and the prose poem "White Spaces" (1980); he also produced three plays: *Blackouts* (1976), *Hide and Seek* (1976), and *Laurel and Hardy Go to Heaven* (1976/77), printed in the volume *Hand to Mouth* (1997); and published his seminal first work of prose fiction, *The Invention of Solitude* (1982). This period from 1976 to 1982 not only constitutes a landmark in Auster's *oeuvre*—as he broke away from writing poetry and drama—but it also displays a significant change regarding his style.

In his monograph, *Fehér terek* (2016), Pál Hegyi draws attention to a major shift in Auster's development as a writer:

His minimalist poems are likened to the poetry of Edmond Jabés, Paul Celan, Charles Reznikoff, and Laura Riding, while his plays are compared to Beckett's; however, this voice [of the poet and the playwright] fell silent with the writing of a memoir, *The Invention of Solitude*, to disappear forever ... (3, translation my own)

Auster first encountered Samuel Beckett's works when he was nineteen years old (Auster, "Albee & Auster Discuss Beckett") and wrote his plays under their strong influence. Even if he described these early plays as "hardly more than spare, minimalist exercises, an initial stab at something" (*Hand to Mouth* 104), they played a prominent role in his creative development and occupy a unique position in his oeuvre. *Laurel and Hardy Go to Heaven* exhibits close similarities with Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* (1953); it also echoes the two mimes *Act Without Words I* (1958) and *Act Without Words II* (1959), as well as Beckett's prose work *Mercier and Camier* (1974). Still, *Laurel and Hardy Go to Heaven* can be considered one of the fundamental works from which the authorial voice of the later novelist emerges. Julie Campbell has described the connection between the two authors, stating that "Beckett holds an important place in Auster's development as a writer, and this is especially true in the early stages"; meanwhile, she reads *Laurel and Hardy* as "too close to Beckett, too derivative" ("Legacy" 325). Campbell insists on the undeniable influence of "Beckett as a literary father" on Auster's unique poetics ("Creativity of Misreading" 299). In his recent *Samuel Beckett's Legacies in American Fiction* (2021), James Baxter further elaborates on the subject. Baxter's study asserts that Beckett's presence is more emphatic among American postmodern writers than their European counterparts. He argues that the release of the *Grove Centenary Edition* (2006) of Beckett's work "serve[s] as an important entry point into the subject of Beckett's post-millennial legacies. As the general editor of the Grove project, the postmodern writer Paul Auster would play a key role in the curation of Beckett's writing" (212). In Baxter's view, this also contributed to the shaping of *Travels in the Scriptorium* (2006); therefore, he analyses Auster's novel in comparison with Beckett's works. While *Travels in the Scriptorium* bears undeniable traces of Auster's involvement in the *Grove Centenary Edition*, this much later work exhibits a distinctive Austerean poetics, rather than derivations from Beckett's.

In what follows, this paper aims to reflect on the peculiar, *sui generis* nature of the play *Laurel and Hardy Go to Heaven* and its unique position in Auster's *oeuvre*, and to highlight its significance by unfolding the arc of the author's creative progress and maturation. The paper examines the play through its complex systems of signification while expanding the scope by comparing it to Auster's later works. First, I (re)establish the connection between Auster and Beckett by emphasising the presence of similar traits in their works, which could originate from Beckett and the Theatre of the Absurd. Then, I point out those elements in the plays that are strictly characteristic of Auster and can be found as recurring components in this early work as well as in his later novels and even in his screenplays (e.g. the figures of Laurel and Hardy, stones, the wall and the variants of walls, etc.). Relying on Bloom's theory to illustrate how Auster overcomes the anxiety of influence by veering away from his literary father to discover his own authorial voice, I also identify early traces of a decisive change in Auster's art: his turn away from European modernism and the avant-garde (including the strong Beckettian influence) toward consistently American themes with a pre-modernist interest.

SAMUEL BECKETT AS LITERARY FATHER

Auster confesses an early admiration that "bordered on idolatry" for the work Beckett and mentions an exchange of letters describing Beckett's responses to him as "kind and encouraging" (*Collected Prose* 533–534). "I looked up to Beckett in a way," Auster admits, "he was certainly a paternal figure for me" (qtd. in Varvogli 160). Aliki Varvogli deals with the subject of Auster's literary influences—the works of Franz Kafka, Knut Hamsun, French Symbolists, representatives of the American Renaissance, and emphatically, Beckett's trilogy (*Molloy*, *Malone Dies*, *The Unnameable*)—concentrating on the intertextual possibilities in Auster's texts, although she finds the use of the concept of influence (in the Bloomian sense) problematic (14). She sees Bloom's model as restrictive because it privileges the author as the "sole originator and agent of his or her creation," while, she reasons, "it leaves no room for interpretation by the reader" (14). Nonetheless, many of Varvogli's observations, especially in connection to Beckett, fit the Bloomian model. As we have seen, Campbell also reflects on the authorial kinship between the two writers, stating that Beckett's presence can be detected primarily in Auster's earlier novels ("Legacy" 325). Drawing on Bloom's concept of misreading, she focuses both on "the ties binding Auster

to the literary father” (“Creativity of Misreading” 299), and on “the family bonds, especially the bond ... between father and son that both writers explore with poetic intensity” (299): for instance, in Beckett’s *First Love* (1973) or Auster’s *The Invention of Solitude* (1982). Auster’s claim—that Beckett “had a tremendous hold over [him]. In the same sense, the influence of Beckett was so strong that [he] couldn’t see [his] way beyond it” (*Red Notebook* 105)—confesses to the anxiety he experienced over writing in Beckett’s shadow.

The present paper approaches the creative relationship of the two authors in a way similar to Campbell and Hegyi, for whom Bloom’s theory of poetic influence and the mapping of misreading served as the basis for comparative analyses. At the same time, I intend to reflect not only on the connections between texts by the two authors, but also on the transtextual relations of Auster’s texts (see Genette, *The Architext* 81–82), that is to say, I study Auster’s later works as hypertexts and position Auster’s play(s) as their hypotext. Gérard Genette introduced hypertextuality as the relationship that unites a later text (“B” text, or hypertext) with an earlier text (“A” text, hypotext) by transforming and reworking the previous text (pre-text or Urtext). In such instances, the hypertext cannot be a commentary on the previous text (metatext) or a collage of citations and allusions (intertext); moreover, the hypertext cannot exist without a hypotext that it essentially originates from (Genette, *Palimpsests* 5–8). In opposition to Varvogli, I believe that in order to comprehensively and thoroughly cover the “authorial kinship” of Beckett and Auster and to understand Auster’s creative development, it is important to employ both Bloom’s theory, Sigmund Freud’s concept of regression to childhood, and Donald. W. Winnicott’s notion of the transitional object. Additionally, one must consider the intertextual relationships between texts.

THE ANXIETY OF INFLUENCE

Young poets experience overwhelming anxiety when attempting to position themselves to their predecessors.¹ Bloom sets forth six “revisionary movements” to illustrate the possible traces of how one poet deviates from another: 1) *Clinamen* or *poetic misprision*: the poet acknowledges the precursor’s achievements up to a certain point, then veers into another direction to fulfil what the prior poet was unable to. 2) *Tessera*

1 For ease and convenience, throughout this paper the author uses male (pro)nouns when referring to Bloom’s theory, since it examines the creative relationship of two male authors anyway.

or *completion and antithesis*: the later poet aims to “complete the otherwise ‘truncated’ precursor poem” (66); meanwhile, the successor preserves its terms only to interpret them in a different sense. 3) *Kenosis* or *repetition and discontinuity*: comparable to the *defence mechanisms* the psyche adopts as a response against repetition compulsion. It is a disruption which makes possible the formation of the sort of poem that bare imitation or would not allow (88). 4) *Daemonisation*: the later poet turns against his forerunner’s Sublime; the precursor is dispossessed of his originality. 5) *Askesis* or *purgation and solipsism* define the act of self-elimination through which the successor aspires to achieve isolation from the precursor. 6) *Apophrades* is “the decisive ratio” (141) during which the successor’s poem generates the “uncanny” (*unheimlich*) effect, caused by the new poem’s accomplishment, making it appear as if the successor poet wrote the forerunner’s distinguishing work (16).

THE PLAY THAT MATURED INTO A NOVEL

The most characteristic and prominent motifs of Auster’s early art are those of stones, walls, and flowers. In his poetry, the frequent and conscious use of these images constitutes a link, which leads back to the traces of his primary literary influences. The motifs of flowers and stones are integral to Celan’s poetry; the theme of the wall firmly ties Auster to Kafka. It should be noted that Beckett’s texts also frequently employ images of walls as in *Endgame* (1957), *Molloy* (1957), *Film* (1963), *Rough for Radio II* (1975), *Ghost Trio* (1976), and of stones as in *Embers* (1957), *Cascando* (1962), *Eh Joe* (1966), and *That Time* (1973). The play *Laurel and Hardy Go to Heaven* (and *Hide and Seek* as well) can be recognised as an *imitatio* of Beckett’s drama, also employing the symbol of the wall. Hegyi discovers in Auster’s texts different aspects of the interpretative possibilities of the wall, which enable us to see new dimensions of the dialogue with Kafka and Beckett (*Fehér terek* 43). These include language, history, work/labour, and the work of art (*Fehér terek* 44) and the “white space of (poetic) absence” (Hegyi, “A Form that Accommodates the Mess” 108). My discussion will follow the above-mentioned interpretive concepts and wishes to extend and augment them by rethinking the contexts and connections between the individual works, thus expanding the scope of previous research. I argue that Auster adopts elements that are characteristic of Beckett’s drama and uses the tools and devices of the theatre of the absurd effortlessly. He masters the writing of Beckett-like

play(s);² however, he gradually departs from the Beckettian, avant-garde, and absurdist traditions, thus differentiating himself from his literary father.

LAUREL AND HARDY GO TO HEAVEN

This one-act minimalistic play with two characters, little action, few props and a “deserted” interior is much like a piece by Beckett; meanwhile, it can be regarded as the archetype, the hypotext/pre-text of Auster’s later novel *The Music of Chance*. Its bare stage is only disturbed by a “heap of stones” (*Hand to Mouth* 133), eighteen in number. The two characters are a “pseudo-couple,” similar to Beckettian pairs like Mercier and Camier or Vladimir and Estragon. Auster’s Stan Laurel and Oliver Hardy are “builder[s] of walls” (133): their task is to arrange the stones into a wall, for which they are provided with detailed instructions in the book. They are ordered to do all this by an unknown outside force, but the purpose of their actions is never explained. The two comic figures are look-alikes: they wear identical overalls, work boots, bowler hats, and both carry matching satchels; they cannot be described as distinct and definite “characters” or “identities,” which makes them Doppelgängers of some sort. They can be seen as the counterparts of Vladimir and Estragon: two “clowns, clochards and music hall comedians who demonstrate the clown’s special ability to survive under the worst of circumstances” (Simon 111). Throughout the play, one finds elements characteristic of Beckett’s drama: physical and verbal “comedy,” staggers, totters, falls, amusing language use, vulgar expressions, repugnant incidents, misunderstandings, cross-talks, non-sequiturs, questions that remain unanswered, humiliating situations, the suffering self, non-sensical incidents, the fallacy of memory, a sense of being lost in space and time, and many repetitions.

Similarly to Beckett’s *Act Without Words I*, the play begins with a fall: in the dim light Hardy crashes into Laurel from behind and both hit the ground groaning. The very first dialogue poses the question of alterity. Iván Nyusztay asserts that the *homo absurdus*, the man of the absurd is represented “through characters without definite identity, lacking connections and a sense of belonging (e.g. homeless persons, tramps such as Mercier and Camier, Vladimir and Estragon; lonely outsiders such as Krapp, Clov, Watt)” (“Experiment” 30). Hardy touches Laurel’s face and inquires, “Is it you?” (134); however, Laurel cannot provide him a firm, positive

2 Auster’s other play, *Hide and Seek*, strongly echoes Beckett’s *Happy Days* (1961).

answer. He starts touching his own face and asks back: “Is it me?” (134). Laurel seems to be unfamiliar, an “other” to his own self, while he is the “same” as Hardy. This paradox may be explained with their complementary personalities, that is, the slight differences between their conduct and behaviour. Hardy is more confident, he moves swiftly with purposeful “great strides,” and is contemplative, while Laurel is more cautious, uncertain (he seems to be uncertain of his own self and identity), moves slowly “as if in a daze” (133), and expresses himself in a more vulgar manner. As in *Waiting for Godot*, where Vladimir is more practical and persistent, more likely to recall previous incidents; he gets annoyed by Estragon’s jokes and initiates most of the interactions, while Estragon is “volatile,” prefers to share funny stories, and appears to be more defenceless (Esslin 48).

After they conclude that “I’m me, and you’re you” and that “It looks like we’re both here,” Hardy comments that “another day begins” and approaches the heap of stones to see “what they’ve given us today,” while Laurel states, “as if you didn’t know already” (134). These phrases are the first signals that they have been building the same wall in the same order for an indefinite period of time. To repeatedly carry and arrange stones are the central theme of the play, a cyclical movement that rhymes with *The Myth of Sisyphus* and the absurd—however, by the end of this play, a wall is built and remains standing. (Even though the play does not disclose the reason for their compulsive wall construction, the notion of punishment emerges when viewed through the lens of the novel *The Music of Chance*.) Hardy’s response to Laurel (to “as if you didn’t know already”) is striking: “Anything is possible. There are nuances ... variations ... wheels within wheels” (*Hand to Mouth* 135). To say anything is possible means that anything can happen. The options are endless and so are the outcomes; there might be an outer force (e.g. chance) which can intervene in the course of life to enable “variations,” different results (either positive or negative). The statement in itself is not compatible with the absurd: if anything is possible, there is a chance to break out from the habitual dullness of existence and even to escape the endless punishment. This notion is heightened by a figure of speech, the expression “wheels within wheels,” suggesting that their current situation is more complex and complicated than they may perceive. Furthermore, the word “wheel” bears various connotations worth considering. To spin the wheel results in randomness; this is the law of the “wheel of fortune.” There is an equal chance for a lucky outcome as for a negative one. Prefiguring the discussion of *The Music of Chance*, “wheel” is also a commonly used slang term in the game of poker, where it means

“the best possible low hand,” a set of cards (*Poker Terms*). In light of this, it is clear that Auster, while utilising the tools and devices of Beckettian and absurdist theatre (*tessera*), aims to distance his work (and himself) from the hold of his literary father (*kenosis*, *askesis*), while the play also anticipates terms and elements that will recur in his later novel(s) (and already meant in a sense different from his forerunner’s), such as the building of the wall or repetitive labour, while the diversions (*clinamen*) are the motifs of chance and the poker game.³

They are about to begin reading the day’s orders, when Laurel turns to Hardy: “Do you remember what day it is?” (*Hand to Mouth* 135), but Hardy cannot remember. One way to acquire knowledge is by posing questions; however, since the world is “not reasonable” (Camus 16), these questions are hardly ever answered, and the responses usually do not correspond or correlate to the inquiries. At the same time, the relentless interrogation reflects the individual’s need for familiarity, acquaintanceship, and personal history, since the absurd man “is deprived of the memory” (Camus 5). This loss of memory is an integral part of the Theatre of the Absurd. The characters do not seem to remember their own pasts, they are unable to keep track of time, inabilities which are (re)presented and enhanced by repetitive phrases, recurring actions and scenes. Vladimir and Estragon “repeat to fill their endless wait” (Cohn 105), Pozzo “repeats in mechanical commands to Lucky” (Cohn 105), Krapp searches for personal history by listening to his voice recordings habitually. The repetition of sounds, words, phrases, sentences, or dialogue segments is “Beckett’s most pervasive verbal devise” (Cohn 96).

After specifying the date, Laurel states that it is his turn to study their book of orders. When Hardy extends the book toward Laurel, he drops it, and the book falls. They simultaneously bend down to pick it up and “butt heads” (137). Laurel tumbles, while Hardy circles around the stage in pain “emitting loud, astonished noises”—an example of a comedic, silent film-like situation. They begin to examine the orders of the day. When the bell rings, they commence work (as in *Happy Days*, where the sound of a bell dictates Winnie’s actions during the day). “Each approaches a stone, and after many preparations—in the manner of weight lifters—they lift the stones. Grunts and groans, the strain of total exertion. Tottering under their burdens, they painfully make their way to ... the ‘wall line’” (*Hand to Mouth* 145).

3 It is clear that absurd theatre excludes real chance that enables various, differing results. One might consider the tossing of a coin in Tom Stoppard’s play, *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* (1966); however, the coin always lands on the same side, it is stuck in an “absurd habit.”

Similarly, the actor in *Act Without Words II* “picks up two sacks, carries them bowed and staggering,” creating a comic effect. Exhausted and motionless, they both lie on the ground, considering giving up; yet, Hardy proves to be more tenacious. He dwells upon why not to suspend their labour. He tries to find an excuse for their current miserable state. Eventually, he bursts out in a trance-like philosophical contemplation about the stone and his own position in relation to it:

I want to *learn*, once and for all, how to do the thing that has to be done. If I have to lift a stone, I want to learn how to *think* of nothing but the stone. I want to *admire* the stone for the strength it takes out of me. I want to *understand* that the energy I have lost now belongs to the stone. I want to *love* the stone. I want to learn how and why the stone is more powerful than I am. I want to *remember*, once and for all, that the stone will continue to exist long after I am dead. (*Hand to Mouth* 146, emphases added)

This passage is a builder’s manifesto. It is about the search for answers and for an understanding of energy transformations, that is, how inanimate objects extract power from an animate subject. It tells about Hardy’s effort to learn, remember, and master his task. At once, it elevates the stone to the rank of a monument, a memorial which, with its power, is beyond the mortal human and stands against time; the stone becomes history, which bears the memory of the past. On the other hand, one could argue that the stones are words in which case the wall is language in Auster’s microcosm; the speech may be read as a self-reflexive confession about the hardships of the act of writing.

Laurel is unimpressed by Hardy’s monologue. Instead, he tells a trivial “funny” tale about “two men” (*Hand to Mouth* 147), reminiscent of Vladimir’s story of “the two thieves.” It is essential to note that Vladimir aims to recall the Biblical narrative of Jesus and the two sinners; in contrast, Laurel’s recital is mundane. Laurel asks, “What time is it?” (147), to which Hardy always gives the same answer, “It’s late” (147)—a dialogue repeated several times throughout the play. Hardy starts another soliloquy (unlike Lucky’s tirade, his speeches are always thought-through and logical), this time about the wall: “A wall can be many things, can’t it? It can keep in or keep out. It can protect or destroy. It can help things ... or make them worse. It can be part of something greater ... or only what it is” (149), during which Laurel falls asleep.

By the end of his speech, Hardy wakes him up, then “Laurel stands up slowly, parodying a somnambulist” (149); he approaches the heap and lifts a stone with unexpected ease. Hardy follows him and he, too, is able to carry one without any effort. The *mysterious* lightness is inexplicable: all stones are identical with the exact same measurements; therefore, their weight should not differ.

Contrary to their expectations, the later stones are just as heavy as the first ones. Laurel “cannot advance in a straight line” under the weight of his stone and he “begins circling and weaving around the stage” (150). The subsequent parts portray their comic struggle to keep Laurel in line while Hardy conducts him. In accordance with the rules of silent films, Laurel mixes up the directions (“to *your* right,” “no, the other way”), but finally they manage to place the rock in its assigned position. What should be noted here is that Laurel and Hardy, as characters, start to veer away from the grotesque. Nyusztay specifies the use of the grotesque in absurd drama for instances where “the comic is mixed with the tragic, the ridiculous with pity, dignity with misery, elevation with humiliation” (*Az önazonosság alakváltozásai* 12, my translation); where this mixture takes place simultaneously, it leads to the reader’s ambiguous psychological response and incomprehension (12). In Auster’s play, the comic is no longer mixed with the tragic, the ridiculous is not combined with pity, and their humiliation is reinterpreted. Laurel and Hardy’s suffering is due to their clumsiness and awkwardness. A member of the audience might laugh at them; however, that laughter would be distinct from the uneasiness and ridicule of the absurd. One would root for them to succeed and experience relief (after finishing the wall). In my reading, this instance can be connected with the Bloomian revisionary movements *clinamen* and *tessera*, which means that Laurel and Hardy seemingly fit among the Beckettian pairs, however, only to a certain extent. They seem to follow the precursor’s terms (in their looks, habits, foolish actions) up to a point, and then they gradually start to veer away from them. They rather start to resemble the original comic duo, the silent-film comedians⁴, where laughter is liberating, freeing, and therapeutic—as in the novel *4321*, where they are freed from the grotesque elements. It seems that the play oscillates between Beckettian “aftershocks” and the exertion to escape them; between the absurd drama and something dissimilar to it.

After their ludicrous interlude, Laurel and Hardy collapse showing the physiological signs of extreme exhaustion. Laurel thinks he is “going to throw up,” while Hardy says he is “going to crap in” his pants (150), and both agree, while sniffing

4 Stan Laurel and Oliver Hardy were a US-based comedy team of silent films between 1921 and 1950.

around, that maybe Hardy already did. This again strongly echoes Beckett: bowel movements, or more precisely, the lack of them (constipation), is a common trait of Beckett's figures, e.g. Krapp in *Krapp's Last Tape*, or the protagonist in *First Love* (Nyusztay, *Az önazonosság alakváltozásai* 71). The presence of odours can also be found in *Waiting for Godot*: Vladimir's breath and Estragon's feet both stink.

Hardy notices two trees in the distance (reminiscent of the tree from *Waiting for Godot*; however, they do not consider hanging themselves). The trees are hard to see; therefore, Hardy pulls out a pair of binoculars from his satchel (the pair of binoculars may be reminiscent of the telescope in Beckett's *Endgame*). Two observations must be made here: first, about the origin of the binoculars. Hardy admits that he stole them, which foreshadows the crime of Jim Nashe stealing the two figures in *The Music of Chance*. Second, with the help of the binoculars, they notice a man they believe to be the "inspector" (*Hand to Mouth* 159) coming to supervise their work. In *The Music of Chance*, this position is filled by Calvin Murks, who oversees the work (the building of a wall) of the two captives, Jim Nashe and Jack Pozzi.

Approaching the end of the play, they gradually grow weary of their senseless labours and the idea of rebellion occurs to them. They entertain the thought of fighting their unknown employers, going on a strike, simply giving up, or finishing the wall, only to kick it down later. During these outbursts, their behaviour becomes occasionally violent; they use swear words and are willing to employ physical force, if needed. At one point, Hardy tries to convince Laurel to stop his resistance and continue to work for their "friendship's sake" (162), then Laurel's bitterness slowly turns into "compassion" (160). The absurd theatre, however, does not comprehend love, friendship, or empathy, and does not know compassion (Nyusztay, *Az önazonosság alakváltozásai* 39). Again, the conclusion can be drawn that Auster's play, while showing signs of derivation from the absurd drama, departs from its underlying tenets.

They agree to finish the wall. Before adjusting the final stone, Hardy goes behind the wall and "pokes his head through the gap" (*Hand to Mouth* 170), and they enjoy a brief game of peek-a-boo. It is important to emphasise the infantile attitudes and actions of Laurel and Hardy, and their worrying about an outside but superior (parent-like) governing force.

Infantilism and regression to childhood, as understood by psychoanalysis, occupy an important role in "shaping the life of a human being" (Mann 426). Likewise, the infantile peek-a-boo play may be recognised as a regression to childhood, which points toward Freud's findings about the game "*Fort-da!*" [*"gone-there"*].

Freud states that after a severe concussion or other trauma, “traumatic neurosis” may occur (*Beyond Pleasure* 10), during which the dreams emerging tend to be nightmares, through which one constantly re-experiences the traumatic event (11). Freud traced back this phenomenon to the earliest “normal” (mental) activities of children’s play and identified it as one of the most important moments of psychic formation (12). Monitoring a child’s habit of throwing his toy away from him to somewhere out of sight, Freud noticed that it was accompanied by a long “o-o-o-o” expression which “represented the German word ‘fort’ [gone]” (13–14). Then, the child would pull back the reel from its cover by the string attached to it, and the reappearance of the toy was followed with “a joyful ‘da’ [there]” (14). Freud understands the child’s actions as a reaction to the separation from his mother, during which the child was making himself accustomed to the trauma of her absence by symbolically “losing her,” letting her out of sight, and producing the joyful pleasure of seeing her again (15).

Separation from the mother is a topic that Donald Woods Winnicott also discusses. According to Winnicott, during the phase when infants start to separate from their mothers, approaching what he calls the “not-me” realisation, they substitute attachment to the mother with a teddy, a doll or soft toy, a so-called “transitional object” (1). However, the use of this transitional object does not mean complete liberation from the mother (1–3), but a movement of departures and returns. Both theories illustrate the child’s attempts at individuating itself from dependence on the parental force, which in Bloomian terms may be read as the *ephēbe*’s endeavour to liberate himself from the precursor’s (literary father’s) strong hold and overwhelming influence, as a step toward authorial independence and originality. Merging Bloom’s and Winnicott’s theory seems to provide a rounder, more complex ground for analyses that focus on individuation without the restrictions that Bloom’s gendered theory may offer.

As a prolepsis, I consider the play as the transitional object that, on the one hand, maintains a discourse with the Beckettian tradition and links the successor (Auster) to his precursor (Beckett). Temporarily, this holds him back from sovereignty, but on the other hand, it enables the course of separation from the strong hold of the literary father. Laurel and Hardy, as characters, are also in flux between absurdist and non-absurdist qualities: their appearance is tramp-like; their forced-upon labour may be seen as a punishment; their actions and speeches are repetitive and bear a cyclical character; while their strongly infantile attitudes separate them from the absurd as they rather start to resemble the original comic pair. They construct

a wall with great effort: the wall into which (metaphorically) the Beckettian heritage is built, which serves as a “membrane” between the “me” (authorial voice) and the “not me” (Beckettian influence)—as an intermediate state of kenosis, where the successor reaches a liberating discontinuity from the precursor.

As indicated earlier, the figures of Laurel and Hardy return, first in *The Music of Chance*, where they are transformed and completed into four distinct “real” characters (tessera, kenosis): as two builders of a wall (Jim Nashe and Jack Pozzi) and two infantile eccentrics (Flower and Stone). Although Auster’s interest in silent films and their characters remains constant (see Hector Mann in *The Book of Illusions* [2002]), one has to wait until the 2017 novel, *4321*, to see Laurel and Hardy revive, completely freed from any grotesque traits.

THE MUSIC OF CHANCE

Auster describes *The Music of Chance* as “a book about walls and slavery and freedom” (*Art of Hunger* 294). The story begins with the protagonist, Jim Nashe, inheriting an extraordinary amount of money. With the sudden gain of a fortune, he arranges his debts, buys a “red two-door Saab 900” (*Music of Chance* 4), and visits his “long time no see” daughter. On his return to Massachusetts, however, “as it happened, he soon found himself travelling in the opposite direction. That was because he missed the ramp to the freeway” (6). Nashe’s life takes an irreversible turn due to a “wrong turn,” just like Quinn’s life in *City of Glass* is changed by a wrong number: “Much later, when he was able to think about the things that had happened to him, he would conclude that nothing was real except chance” (Auster, *City of Glass* 3). This shows that *chance* (to which *Laurel and Hardy Go to Heaven* contains an early reference) is one of the central organising forces in Auster’s novels, as in *City of Glass* (1985), *Mr. Vertigo* (1994), or *Invisible* (2009), among others.

Without any responsibility to hold him back, Nashe explores the limitlessness and liberating sensation of the open routes, with the red Saab serving as a symbol of his liberty and instrument of freedom. This kind of narrative, that is, the road novel (Herzogenrath 160) aligns with the American sense of living and with literary traditions that are vivid parts of Auster’s novels. Nashe decides to continue his journey until his money runs out. When the time approaches, his fortune declines, and another unexpected twist seals his fate: he meets a beaten-up hitch-hiker, the poker “wizard” Jack Pozzi (the name may recall Beckett’s Pozzo). The pair eventually

winds up at the mansion of the two millionaires Flower and Stone to compete in “the chance of a lifetime” poker game (*Music of Chance* 30). “These guys are millionaires. And they don’t know the first thing about cards ... it’s like playing with Laurel and Hardy” (30), Pozzi asserts. As Auster described in an interview, “Flower and Stone are eccentrics, latter-day version of Laurel and Hardy” (*Art of Hunger* 333). One can notice that Flower and Stone retained the emblems of the play’s Laurel and Hardy and those were developed into character(istic)s. However, the power relations changed: Flower and Stone became the (un)known authority that forces labour upon the two builders (Nashe and Pozzi).

They begin the card game: Flower and Stone against Pozzi, while Nashe remains an observer, a “lucky charm” (*Music of Chance* 97). Pozzi seems to stand his ground, even though Flower and Stone prove more challenging opponents than Pozzi expected. Nashe, at one point, leaves the game and wanders through the house. He enters one of the rooms where Stone’s utopian miniature—a “scale-model rendering of a city” called the City of the World—is placed (79). It is an autobiography of Flower and Stone’s lives, displaying their past selves; a utopia “where the past and future come together, where the good finally triumphs over evil” (79). Four “state administrative bodies” operate there: the Hall of Justice, the Library, the Bank, and the Prison. The convicts, paradoxically, wear a smile on their faces; they are happy and even glad to be punished, because “now they are learning how to recover the goodness within them through hard work” (80). As the title would suggest, *Laurel and Hardy Go to Heaven* may be seen as an earlier version of the same prison, where Laurel and Hardy are the punished convicts: with the allusion to the two thieves in *Waiting for Godot*, Auster’s play offers punishment and the possibility for salvation. Heaven is usually seen as a place or condition of the absolute, highest happiness. Hardy even “enthusiastically” remarks at the beginning of the play: “And so ... another day begins,” to which Laurel replies: “You don’t have to be so happy about it” (134).

Stone plans to extend this miniature by building another City of the World, “a second city to fit inside the room within the room” (*Music of Chance* 80), “a model of the model” (81), the construction of which would continue forever. Through this composition, Stone would create an even more minuscule replica of the previous model and so on, *ad infinitum*—an instance of the *mise-en-abîme* characteristic of Auster’s works (Cf. Hegyi, “Continuity of Interpretation”). Nashe steals two

miniature figures of Flower and Stone, to which Pozzi refers later as the decisive movement leading to the decline of their luck.

Pozzi loses the game and they amass an incredible amount of debt; to repay it, they are forced to build a wall from the ruins of a fifteenth-century Irish castle that was once destroyed by Oliver Cromwell. Through their “punishment,” they become the captives of Flower and Stone’s universe: the two builders of the wall. Jack and Pozzi had been “stripped of their status,” “reduced to the level of hired hands, tramps” (112). Their freshly imposed status, the task to build the wall while being inspected by Calvin Murks links back to the play *Laurel and Hardy Go to Heaven*, while their vulnerable and degrading tramp-like condition may still evoke Beckett’s figures to a certain extent. They appear to be similar to the precursor’s terms; however, they are distanced from them and completed into true characters with their own identity, past, and memories, in the shaping of which fate and chance contributed equally.

Meanwhile, the stones of the wall are also transformed: they seem to constitute some kind of elevated, beyond-human entity, “a wailing wall” (86). The following passage illustrates Nashe and Pozzi’s sublime encounter with the stones when they first witness them from up close:

It had been one thing to look at the stones from a distance, but now that he was there, he found it *impossible* not to want to touch them, to run his hands along their surfaces and discover what they felt like ... the two of them just *wandered* around the clusters of granite, *timidly* patting the smooth gray blocks. There was something *awesome* about them, a stillness that was almost *frightening*. The stones were so *massive*, so cool against the skin, it was hard to believe they had once belonged to a castle. (*Music of Chance* 118–119, emphases added)

Nashe describes the sublime aesthetic quality generated by the sight of the massive stones as his mind seems to be “bound up” in the movement of “judging of the object” (Kant 85). Since the sublime is at once associated with notions of ecstasy, grandeur, terror, awe, astonishment, and admiration (Doran 1), it correlates with the feelings of awe and fright evoked by the grey blocks. Their primordial nature arouses an experience of transcendence, as sublime objects “raise the energies of the soul above their accustomed height and discover in us a faculty of resistance of a quite different kind” (Kant 100). I identify this transformation

as the movement of daemonisation: the act of a Counter-Sublime achieved through a heightening hyperbole.

When they begin their exhausting labour, Nashe initially welcomes the work as it was “almost a relief to have the decision taken out of his hands” (*Music of Chance* 110)—he does not see the wall as “a punishment so much as a cure” (110). Pozzi, however, after an unsuccessful attempt to run away from captivity, is found beaten up, half-dead. He is supposedly transported to a hospital but Nashe never hears from him again. Eventually, Nashe pays off the debt and earns his freedom but continues to work on the wall, since he is impoverished. By chance, one night he happens to be driving his expropriated red Saab 900 (with his ex-inspectors), when out of sudden ire, he crashes the vehicle and supposedly causes a fatal accident. It is almost as if Nashe’s life history came full circle: he was liberated by his car and the open road, and then, by disturbing the harmony of fate and chance, he fell into captivity, to be freed at last by an unexpected act in his red Saab 900.⁵

In *The Music of Chance*, the two figures of *Laurel and Hardy Go to Heaven* become four distinct, real characters, each with their own identity, past, and memories—aspects missing from the absurd. During this process, they lose continuity with the tradition of the Beckettian pairs, as well as with the play’s Laurel and Hardy characters. Meanwhile, the instrument of the punishment, the subject of hard labour, the wall and its building blocks are transformed in the novel into an elevated, beyond-human entity through the movement of daemonisation. Finally, the novel not only opens additional dimensions toward the play by completing and revising its central elements, such as the characters (punished–punisher, supervised–supervisor, and captive–detainer), themes (punishment, manual labour), or images (wall, stones), but it establishes a new kind of dialogue with the Beckettian heritage as well. In Campbell’s view, “reading Beckett ‘through’ Auster opens up *Endgame* in a direction I have not paid much attention to before: the fear of loss of self through the numbing sameness of day after day, but also the loss of self-worth through lack of love” (“Fathers and Sons” 308). Such a reading may be linked to apophrades,

5 Curiously, the film adaptation of *The Music of Chance* (1993) ends with Nash causing a car accident (probably killing his passengers while he barely survives) and in the next frame, the camera shows him walking down a deserted road, limping, in bloody clothes, when an unknown driver passes him and offers him a ride which he accepts. This adaptation provides another dimension, another frame-story for the narrative, since it vividly recalls Nashe and Pozzi’s first encounter. Another intriguing aspect is that the driver is played by Auster himself.

where the strong successor changes the temporal linearity of works and earns himself priority, authenticity, and originality in relation to the predecessor.

As formerly indicated, the symbol of the wall, stones, and even manual labour as a form of punishment are recurring elements throughout the *oeuvre*. The symbol of the wall plays a central role in the third novel of *The New York Trilogy*, *The Locked Room* (1986), *In the Country of Last Things* (1987), *The Book of Illusions* (2002), as well as in the screenplay *The Inner Life of Martin Frost* (2007). Stones occupy a fundamental position in the screenplay *Lulu on the Bridge* (1998), in the novels *In the Country of Last Things*, *Moon Palace* (1989), and *Invisible* (2009). Taking *Lulu on the Bridge* as a representative example, it may be observed that in contrast to the early play, where stones served as tools of punishment through futile, seemingly never-ending work, the screenplay utilises the symbol differently. *Lulu on the Bridge* emphasises two different qualities of the stone: one belonging to the realm of physical life, the other to the realm of the metaphysical. The narrative revolves around missed encounters, chance events, solitude, love, and loyalty all unfolding during the moment when a falling piece of debris strikes the ground, marking the protagonist's demise. "The very same piece of stone is utilised as the metaphor for the healing power of love in the tangent plot that commences after the fatal accident" (Hegyi, "Based on a True Story" 209). The realms of the physical world and the metaphysical intertwine: the piece of stone (rubble) on the one hand, symbolises the fragility of one's life; it can end in an instant, as quickly as a piece of plaster lands on the floor. It represents the material, physical life, and the passing of time (a few seconds) during which the main plot evolves. On the other hand, the magic stone stands beyond the realms of the physical world; it represents the inexplicable, something beyond human understanding: the magical levitating stone that shines with blue light kindles love between the two protagonists and ties their fates together. This example convincingly illustrates that although Auster's later works frequently employ elements that are characteristic of his early dramatic work(s), these show no signs of derivation from the Beckettian traditions.

CONCLUSION

The present paper sought to describe the early phases of Auster's creative development and maturation by positioning the play *Laurel and Hardy Go to Heaven* and the novel *The Music of Chance* at the centre of comparative analyses. Utilising

Harold Bloom's theorems, the paper attempted to illustrate how Auster adopts Beckett's texts into his writings overcoming the anxiety of influence. It can be concluded that Auster achieves that by yielding up part of his creative endowment at the high price of breaking away from writing drama (and poetry) and finding the proper medium for his creativity in prose (and screenplays). At the same time, another important shift takes place in the author's development as a writer: the turn away from European modernism and avant-garde conventions (and thereby from the Beckettian influence) toward a consistently American pre-modernist direction with an ontological and metaphysical interest that is related to the tradition of humanism (Cf. Hegyi, *Amerikai Fenségesről*).

Laurel and Hardy Go to Heaven serves as an excellent example that illustrates Auster's ability to write Beckett-like plays: the minimalistic, one-act play, utilising only a handful of props, displays a comic pair involved in cyclical and futile action. The two tramp-like figures are seemingly sentenced to undergo an absurd punishment that echoes Camus's *The Myth of Sisyphus*. The two figures are look-alikes, a pseudo-couple, or Doppelgänger (just like Beckett's Mercier and Camier, or Vladimir and Estragon), who are affected by a sense of being lost in space and time, accompanied by the fallacy of their memory, which is heightened throughout the play by their repeated phrases and expressions. Laurel and Hardy are seemingly doomed to build the same wall every day for an uncertain period (in *Waiting for Godot*, the time span of the characters' wait is similarly undecidable). The play begins in a manner similar to *Act Without Words I*, that is, with a fall; later on, the two characters commence to work after a bell rings, which is reminiscent of *Happy Days*. Further parallels could be drawn between Hardy's monologue and Lucky's tirade, or between Laurel's trivial tale and Vladimir's story of the two thieves.

Despite the numerous similarities between the works by the two authors, and even if Auster does utilise elements of the Theatre of the Absurd, they exhibit significant differences. Laurel and Hardy appear to blend in among the Beckettian pairs, but only to a limited extent. They seem to follow the precursor's terms to a certain degree (in their looks, habits, or foolish actions), but then they gradually start to veer away from them. On the one hand, they start to resemble the original comic duo, the silent-film comedians. During the comic instances, the two characters are liberated from the grotesque elements, which could be linked to the Bloomian revisionary ratio of clinamen. On the other hand, their relationship is based on friendship, compassion, and love, while the absurd theatre does not know about compassion

nor does it comprehend love, friendship, or empathy. Thus, this departure could be seen as a version of tessera and kenosis: the “ephebe” follows the precursor’s terms up to a point, and then gradually departs from them by at once renewing and reforming them. As explained throughout the paper, this departure reaches a critical point in the novel *The Music of Chance*, when during askesis the successor achieves discontinuity with his own works by completing and developing the play’s Laurel and Hardy into four distinct characters. Ultimately, the play oscillates between Beckett’s influence and the attempts to break away from it; therefore, it may be seen as the “transitional object” (Winnicott 2) that maintains a discourse with, and links the successor to, the precursor, while enabling the course of separation. Simultaneously, the play not only anticipates the main ideas and central elements of *The Music of Chance*, but it can also be regarded as the novel’s hypotext.

Auster’s “road novel” (the transformed hypertext of the play) displays key American values such as the freedom of the open road. The figures of Laurel and Hardy are completed into distinct characters: two builders of a wall (Jim Nashe and Jack Pozzi) and two infantile eccentrics (Flower and Stone); furthermore, the wall and the stones are transformed into an elevated, beyond-human unit (a wailing wall) during the movement of daemonisation or the Counter-Sublime, achieved through a heightening hyperbole. Moreover, the novel suggests that chance (to which *Laurel and Hardy Go to Heaven* made an early reference) is one of the central organising forces in Auster’s writings (also appearing in later works such as *City of Glass*, *Mr. Vertigo*, or *Invisible*).

As a final step, the paper provided further examples to demonstrate that the symbol of the wall, stones, and even manual labour as punishment are recurring elements throughout the author’s *oeuvre*. In spite of the overlap of imagery, the later works bear no signs of derivation from the Beckettian tradition. The screenplay *Lulu on the Bridge* was taken as a representative example to illustrate this: while in the play the stones served as tools of punishment, related to futile and seemingly never-ending work, the screenplay presents two different qualities of the stone: one belonging to the realm of physical life (symbolising the fragility of life), the other to that of the metaphysical (a magic stone that represents the inexplicable, the beyond human unit). It can be concluded that Auster adopted the Beckettian texts into his writing by overcoming the anxiety of influence and, from authorial kinship, reached imaginative sovereignty finding his original authorial voice.

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