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ALAPSZAKOS SZAKDOLGOZAT

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ALAPSZAKOS SZAKDOLGOZAT

Az irodalmi apafigura kötelékeitől a szerzői hang megtalálásáig: Paul Auster drámáinak elemzése Samuel Beckett örökségén keresztül

From the Bonds of the Literary Father to Discovering the Authorial Voice: Analyzing Paul Auster's Plays through the Legacy of Samuel Beckett

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2023

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By my signature below, I certify that my ELTE B.A. thesis, entitled From the bonds of the literary father to discovering the authorial voice: Analyzing Paul Auster's plays through the legacy of Samuel Beckett, is entirely the result of my own work, and that no degree has previously been conferred upon me for this work. In my thesis I have cited all the sources (printed, electronic or oral) I have used faithfully and have always indicated their origin. The electronic version of my thesis (in PDF format) is a true representation (identical copy) of the printed version.

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Date: 2023.04.15. Signed: Kovács Fanni Orsolya sk.

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Abstract

Keywords: anxiety of influence, the absurd, Beckettian theatre, literary father

Paul Auster during his early years produced three plays: *Laurel and Hardy Go to Heaven* (1976/77), *Blackouts* (1976), and *Hide and Seek* (1976)—these works, however, are still little known to the general public as well as to literary criticism. The plays *Hide and Seek* and *Laurel and Hardy Go to Heaven* exhibit close alikeness to the drama of Samuel Beckett—who had a strong influence on Auster's development as a writer and on his unique poetics. Meanwhile, *Blackouts* can be located as a slightly different impulse: different from the other two plays and something unique among the author's works. The research aims to reflect on the peculiar position, the *sui generis* nature of the plays in the author's *oeuvre*, and to highlight their significance by unfolding the arc of Auster's creative progress and maturation. The present paper attempts to illustrate how Auster adopted Beckett's texts into his writings overturning the anxiety of influence and discovering his authorial voice in comparative analyses based on Harold Bloom's theory of poetic influence, at the same time, reflecting on the transtextual relations of Auster's texts.

1. Introduction

Paul Auster started his career in 1974 as a poet, playwright, literary translator (Hegyi, *Fehér terek* 3), and essayist. During his early years, between 1974 and 1982, he published five collections of poetry: *Unearth* (1974), *Wall Writing* (1976), *Effigies* (1977), *Fragments from Cold* (1977), *Facing the Music* (1980); the prose poem "White Spaces" (1980); produced three plays: *Laurel and Hardy Go to Heaven* (1976/77), *Blackouts* (1976), and *Hide and Seek* (1976) (printed in *Hand to Mouth*, Henry Holt and Company edition); and published his seminal first work of prose *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 plays—but also displays a significant change regarding his style. In his monograph, *Fehér terek* (2016), Pál Hegyi draws attention to a major shift that took place 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; though this voice [of the poet and the playwright] became silent with the writing of a memoir, *The Invention of Solitude*, only to disappear forever and hand over its place to the stories of the 'Self'. (3) (my translation)

Auster first encountered Samuel Beckett's works when he was nineteen years old (Auster, *interview* 2013) and inarguably wrote his plays under their strong influence. The plays (especially *Hide and Seek* and *Laurel and Hardy Go to Heaven*) exhibit close alikeness to Beckett's plays, e.g., *Waiting for Godot* (1953), *Endgame* (1957), *Krapp's Last Tape* (1958), and *Happy Days* (1961), and echo *Play* (1962/63), as well as the two mimes *Act*

Without Words I (1958) and *Act Without Words II* (1959); while these works can be considered as the foundation of the authorial voice of the later novelist. Even though Auster describes the plays as "hardly more than spare, minimalist exercises, an initial stab at something" (*Hand to Mouth* 104), they play a prominent role in the author's creative development and occupy a unique position in his *oeuvre*. Reflecting on the similarities, Julie Campbell describes 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" ("Legacy" 325); meanwhile, she reads Auster's play(s)[1] as something "which is somehow too close to Beckett, too derivative" (325). Campbell insists on the importance of this relation as an ostentatious and undeniable influence of "Beckett as a literary father" ("Creativity of Misreading" 299) on Auster's unique poetics. The semblance between the plays by the two authors can be examined through comparative analyses by utilizing the effective theoretical framework expounded in Harold Bloom's *The Anxiety of Influence* (1997).

The aim of the present research is to reflect on the peculiar, *sui generis* nature of the plays and on their unique position that they occupy in Auster's *oeuvre*, and to highlight their significance by unfolding the arc of the author's creative progress and maturation. In order to do so, I examine the plays through complex systems while expanding the scope of the research and analyzing the plays in continuity, comparing them to Auster's later works. First, I (re)establish the connection between Auster and Beckett by emphasizing the presence of similar traits in their works (e.g., themes, techniques, language, plot, etc.) 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 these early works as well as in his later novels and even in his screenplays (e.g., the figures of

[1] Campbell described the play *Laurel and Hardy Go to Heaven* in parallel with Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*.

Laurel and Hardy, stones, the wall and the variants of walls, the characters of Black, Blue, and Green, etc.). I rely on Bloom's theory of poetry to illustrate how Auster overturns the anxiety of influence by veering away from his literary father to discover his own authorial voice, while exemplifying the early traces of a decisive change in Auster's art: turning away from European modernism and avant-garde conventions (from the strong Beckettian influence) toward consistently American thematics and interest in a "pre-modern" direction (Hegyi, *Fehér terek* 46).

2. Samuel Beckett as literary father

The present chapter provides a brief overview of the 'creative relationship' between the two authors, introduces and reflects on former studies about the topic, and outlines the core theoretical background that is utilized in the paper. Nevertheless, this chapter proposes the aspects that reflect on the 'authorial kinship' of the two writers, which leads back to the thesis of Beckett as a literary father.

2.1 Samuel Beckett as literary father

"I moved to Paris in February 1971, a few weeks after my twenty-fourth birthday. I had been writing poetry for some time by then, and the road to my initial meeting with Beckett began"—Auster recalls in his brief essay written for Beckett's one hundredth birthday (*Collected Prose* 533). Auster confesses his admiration for Beckett's work "which was bordered on idolatry" when he was young, and mentions an exchange of letters describing Beckett's responses as "kind and encouraging" and "whenever I sent him something I had published: books, translations, articles about his work" (533-34) were received favorably. "I looked up to Beckett in a way" (qtd. in Varvogli 160)—Auster describes looking back on their relationship—"he was certainly a paternal figure for me" (160).

Aliki Varvogli deals with the subject of literary impacts on Auster—including the works of Franz Kafka, Knut Hamsun, French Symbolists, representatives of the American Renaissance, and emphatically Beckett's trilogy of novels[2]—by concentrating on the intertextual possibilities in Auster's texts, though she finds it problematic to use the term 'influence' in the Bloomian sense (14). Varvogli sees Bloom's model as restrictive because it

[2] *The Beckett Trilogy: Molloy, Malone Dies, The Unnamable* (1979).

privileges the author as the "sole originator and agent of his or her creation," while, as she reasons, "it leaves no room for interpretation by the reader" (14), nonetheless, many of her observations, especially in connection with Beckett, exquisitely fit into the model. Campbell reflects on the 'authorial kinship' between the two, stating that Beckett's presence can be detected in Auster's works, primarily in his earlier novels ("Legacy" 325). She focuses both on "the ties binding Auster to the literary father" ("Creativity of Misreading" 299) (a term she conceives drawing on Bloom's concept of misreading) who influenced[3] Auster's development as a writer, and on "the family bonds, especially the bond (. . .) between father and son that both writers explore with poetic intensity"[4] (299). Further expanding on Campbell's findings, Hegyi shows Auster's crossings between genre boundaries, a pivotal moment in which Auster, the poet and playwright, transformed into the novelist; he asserts that this shift "may have been triggered by one fundamental impulse, the inherent aptitude to metamorphosis, which can certainly be rooted in the absence of the author's father" (*Fehér terek* 43) (my translation).

The present paper approaches the creative relationship of the two authors similarly to Campbell and Hegyi, in which Bloom's theory of poetic influence and the mapping of misreading serve as the bases of the comparative analyses—carried out within the context of the three plays and the relationship between (literary) father(s) and son(s). At the same time, the thesis intends to reflect on the connections between the texts of the two authors as well as on the transtextual[5] relations of Auster's texts—to an extent that is relevant to the argument. In opposition to Varvogli's views, I believe that in order to comprehensively and thoroughly cover the 'authorial kinship' of the two and to illustrate the traces of Auster's creative development, it is efficient and practical to employ both theories.

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[3] Beckett "had a tremendous hold over me. In the same sense, the influence of Beckett was so strong that I couldn't see my way beyond it" (*Red Notebook* 105)—could be read as Auster's confession of the anxiety he experienced living in the shadows of Beckett.

[4] See Samuel Beckett: *First Love* (1973); Paul Auster: *The Invention of Solitude.*

[5] Cf. "transtextuality" (Genette 81-82).

2.2 Harold Bloom: *The Anxiety of Influence*

Before directly applying Bloom's system to examine the two authors' corpora selected for this particular purpose, it is first necessary to introduce the theorems of *The Anxiety of Influence* and the main ideas of (Bloom's self-corrective and supplementary work)[6] *A Map of Misreading* (1975).

Bloom constructs his theory of poetic influence concerning potent poets, eminent figures "with the persistence to wrestle with their strong precursors, even to the death" (*Anxiety of Influence* 5), stating that these "figures of capable imagination appropriate for themselves. But nothing is got for nothing[7], and self-appropriation involves the immense anxieties of indebtedness" (*Anxiety of Influence* 5). Young poets, in Bloom's terms the "ephebes," experience overwhelming anxiety when attempting to (ap)position themselves to their predecessors—in a relation between "strong equals, father[s] and son[s][8] as mighty opposites" (*Anxiety of Influence* 11)—and to pursue an "impossible object" (*Anxiety of Influence* 10); the fight for *priority*, and thereby for *authority* (*Anxiety of Influence* 13), similarly to that sought before by their precursors. Bloom sets forth that poetic history should be seen as indistinguishable from poetic influence, in other words from poetic "misprision,"[9] since strong poets create that history by "misreading" one another to create or "clear imaginative space for themselves" (*Anxiety of Influence* 5). Accordingly, poetic misprision should be recognized as the study of the life cycle of the "poet-as-poet" and proposes to "examine simultaneously the relations between poets" (*Anxiety of Influence* 8).

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[6] Cf. (Bloom, *Map of Misreading* 95).

[7] Cf. causality.

[8] For ease and convenience throughout the paper, I continue to use male (pro)nouns when I refer to Bloom's theory since the thesis examines the creative relationship of two male authors anyway.

[9] Misreading or misunderstanding. Bloom uses the term "to mean a kind of defensive distortion by which a poet creates a poem in reaction against another poet's powerful 'precursor' poem, and which is also necessarily involved in all readers' interpretations of poetry" (Baldick 212).

Influence, as Bloom cogitates,

> means that there are *no* texts, but only relationships *between* texts. These relationships depend upon a critical act, a misreading or misprision, that one poet performs upon another, and that does not differ in kind from the necessary critical acts performed by every strong reader upon every text he encounters. (*Map of Misreading* 3) (italics in the original)

Bloom sets up six "revisionary movements" or "ratios" to illustrate the possible trace(s) of the strong poet's life cycle, of how one poet deviates and "swerves" [10] from another (*Anxiety of Influence* 10-11). These revisionary ratios are:

1) *Clinamen* or *poetic misprision*; an act of misreading; a kind of misinterpretation, when the poet "swerves" away from his precursor as a crucial corrective movement, during which the poet acknowledges the precursor's achievements up to a certain point, then veers it (likewise the precursor's poem) into another direction to fulfill what the prior poet could not (*Anxiety of Influence* 14). To perform a clinamen in relation to the forbearer's poem, and thereby veering away from the forerunner, Bloom finds, "is necessarily the central working concept of the theory of Poetic Influence, for what divides each poet from his Poetic Father (and so saves, by division) is an instance of creative revisionism" (*Anxiety of Influence* 42).

2) *Tessera* or *completion and antithesis*: the later poet aims to "complete the otherwise 'truncated' precursor poem" (*Anxiety of Influence* 66) (and poet), meanwhile the successor preserves its terms only to interpret them in a different sense, "as though the precursor had failed to go far enough" (*Anxiety of Influence* 14); thereby antithetically completing the prior poem and poet. Bloom explains the use of the term "antithetical" through its rhetorical

[10] Bloom explains that swerve "has a root meaning of 'to wipe off, file down, or polish,' and, in usage, to deviate, to leave the straight line, to turn aside (from law, duty, custom)" (*Anxiety of Influence* 85).

meaning, as "the juxtaposition of contrasting ideas in balanced or parallel structures, phrases, words" (*Anxiety of Influence* 65); this is similar to what Sigmund Freud expresses in connection with *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1997). The unique tendency of the "dream-work" ("On Creativity" 56) is to dismiss negation and to articulate opposite meanings by "identical means of representation; (. . .) [by] words which unite antithetical meanings" ("On Creativity" 56) and by combining "other compound-words (. . .) [for] contradictory concepts" ("On Creativity" 57). However, these combinations do not aim to create a third concept, but rather "to express, by means of the combination of the two, the meaning of one of its contradictory members, which alone would have meant the same" ("On Creativity" 58).

The term tessera originates from pottery where the broken pieces or halves were fitted together to complete and create a new whole. In this respect, the tessera exemplifies any successor poet's efforts to convince himself that "the precursor's Word would be exhausted if not redeemed as a newly fulfilled and enlarged Word of the ephebe"[11] (Bloom, *Anxiety of Influence* 67).

3) *Kenosis* or *repetition and discontinuity*; a "breaking-device" comparable to the *defense mechanisms* the psyche adopts, as a response, against repetition compulsion—an action intending discontinuity with the forerunner (*Anxiety of Influence* 14). During this revisionary movement the successor aims to reach the "liberating discontinuity" from the precursor by the "emptying, at once an undoing and an isolating movement of the imagination" (*Anxiety of Influence* 87). The poet rescinds the forerunner's "pattern" through an intentional loss of continuity: "His stance appears to be that of his precursor but the meaning of the stance is undone; the stance is emptied of its priority;" therefore the later poet also "becomes more isolated (. . .) from the continuity of his own self" (*Anxiety of Influence*

[11] Cf. The common use of language is compared to "the exchange of a coin whose obverse and reverse no longer bear but eroded faces, and which people pass from hand to hand 'in silence'. This metaphor suffices to remind us that speech, even when almost completely worn out, retains its value as a *tessera*" (*Écrits* 44) (italics in the original).

90). The emptying action of kenosis is a break or disruption, which makes possible the formation of the sort of poem that the bare imitation or repetition of the forbearer's "afflatus"[12] would not allow (*Anxiety of Influence* 88). Bloom declares that "[i]solating keeps apart what belongs together, preserving traumata but abandoning their emotional meanings, while obeying the taboo against touching" (*Anxiety of Influence* 89)—a statement which echoes Freud's remarks in *Totem and Taboo* (1998).

Essentially, the taboo[13] is defined by "prohibitions and restrictions" (Freud, *Totem and Taboo* 16), the purposes which are protective. There is a correspondence between taboo and the "compulsion prohibitions of neurotics" that lies in the fact that both inflict "an unconquerable anxiety" (*Totem and Taboo* 23) upon the individual. Taboo is similar to "touching phobia" during which the "prohibition extends (. . .) also to the figurative use of the phrase as 'to come into contact', or 'be in touch with someone or something'" (*Totem and Taboo* 24); since the danger rests in contagion (*Totem and Taboo* 24)—the notion is analogous with the later poets' attempts toward discontinuity with the forerunner.

4) *Daemonization* or "a movement towards a personalized Counter-Sublime" (*Anxiety of Influence* 15). "Daemons,"[14] who for the excellence of imagination approached the stature of Gods, were believed to have a powerful spirit that superseded the worldly weaknesses of mortals and existed to carry "voices from the planets" to elected men (*Anxiety of Influence* 100). When a poet gains strength, he becomes and remains a daemon, "unless and until he weakens again" (*Anxiety of Influence* 100). This daemonic force that makes a man a poet is "a power that distributes and divides" (*Anxiety of Influence* 100). The later but potent poet, who undergoes daemonization, turns against his forerunner's Sublime, by means of the Counter-

[12] Godhood.

[13] "The meaning of taboo branches off into two opposite directions. On the one hand it means to us sacred, consecrated: but on the other hand it means, uncanny, dangerous, forbidden, and unclean" (Freud, *Totem and Taboo* 16).

[14] From Greek "*daimōn* 'deity, divine power; lesser god; guiding spirit, tutelary deity' (sometimes including souls of the dead); 'one's genius, lot, or fortune'. Also *daimon* 'divider, provider' (of fortunes or destinies)" (*Etymology Dictionary*). "Daimon" in Bloom's concept is equal to *Ethos* (*Anxiety of Influence* 99).

Sublime, which "suggests *the precursor's relative weakness*" (*Anxiety of Influence* 100) (italics in the original); in this way, the precursor loses his 'divinity' and becomes "humanized" (*Anxiety of Influence* 100). At the same time, the successor's 'godhood' is heightened "at the high price of dehumanization" (*Anxiety of Influence* 109); which makes him less of a human but more of a daemon, an elevated, divine 'spirit' (*Anxiety of Influence* 106). Through attempts at "de-individuating the precursor" (*Anxiety of Influence* 107), during this revisionary movement the precursor is dispossessed of his originality; as "the Counter-Sublime is a war between Pride and Pride, and momentarily the power of newness wins" (*Anxiety of Influence* 101). It is important to note that Bloom makes a distinction between the poets' Sublime and what he calls "the readers' Sublime," the latter of which he sees as equivalent to the Sublime concept of Edmund Burke[15] (*Anxiety of Influence* 101).

5) *Askesis* or *purgation and solipsism* are "a movement of self-purgation" through which the successor aspires to achieve "a state of solitude" (*Anxiety of Influence* 15). Liberated by the power of a personalized Counter-Sublime (daemonization), the ephebe in his daemonic ascent and loftiness is "empowered to turn his energy upon himself, and achieves (. . .) his clearest victory in wrestling with the mighty dead" (*Anxiety of Influence* 116). During askesis, the successor encounters (or rather suffers) a kind of "self-curtailing" (*Anxiety of Influence* 15) (a movement distinct from that of the emptying in kenosis)—a sort of "reduction in the poetic self" (*Anxiety of Influence* 121). The successor "yields up part of his own human and imaginative endowment, so as to separate himself from others, including the precursor" (*Anxiety of Influence* 15)—a separation which takes place "within the soul" (*Anxiety of Influence* 120). In his poem, the later poet accomplishes this isolation by

[15] Burke's concept relies on *Sympathy*, which is contradictory to the intentions of the *ephebe*, and to the power-relation between the precursor and the *ephebe*. According to Burke, when someone experiences "the most powerful of all the passions" (33) (viz. *pain* or *danger*), "we enter into the concerns of others; that we are moved as they are moved" (38). Since sympathy "must be considered as a sort of substitution, by which we are put into the place of another man, and affected in many respect as he is affected" (*Sublime* 38).

"stationing [his poem] in regard to the parent-poem as to make that poem undergo an askesis too; [thereby] the precursor's endowment is also truncated" (*Anxiety of Influence* 15).

6) *Apophrades* or the return of the dead is the last revisionary movement, "the decisive ratio" (*Anxiety of Influence* 141) during which the successor poet is in his final developmental stage, already undergone kenosis and become afflicted by the imaginative solitude that borders on solipsism (*Anxiety of Influence* 15). The later poet "holds his own poem so open again to the precursor's work" (*Anxiety of Influence* 15) in such a way that one would think that the "wheel" of his poetic development has returned to its initial state and that the successor poet is back at his "flooded apprenticeship before his strength began to assert itself in the revisionary ratios" (*Anxiety of Influence* 16). However, during apophrades, the poem is "held open" (*Anxiety of Influence* 16) to the forerunner (where it was previously open before the revisionary movements), generating 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 (*Anxiety of Influence* 16). As if "the later poets, confronting the imminence of death, work to subvert the immortality of their precursors, as though anyone poet's afterlife could be metaphorically prolonged at the expense of another's" (*Anxiety of Influence* 151).

Bloom recognizes that "the ratios of revision work in matched or dialectical pairs—clinamen/tessera; kenosis/daemonization; askesis/apophrades—with each pair following the Lurcianic pattern of limitation/substitution/representation" (*Map of Misreading* 95-96). Bloom puts forward that "the succession and alternation" of these three ratio combinations form patterns (*Map of Misreading* 96), which are: A) A first perception of "loss or crisis," focalizing on the problem of "renewal or imaginative survival" (*Map of Misreading* 96); B) A pessimistic or "reductive" response to the inquiry, in which the intellect's capability, appears to be "inadequate to overcome the obstacles both of language and the universe of death, of

outer sense" (*Map of Misreading* 96); C) A more optimistic or proceeding response, "however qualified by recognitions of continuing loss" (*Map of Misreading* 96). Bloom categorizes specific rhetorical tropes, psychic defenses and certain images of poems as "being those of Limitation, and their matching partners as being more largely those of Representation, with the process of Substitution as the perpetual generator of the interplay between them" (*Map of Misreading* 93). Bloom lists the functions of each trope (*Map of Misreading* 95) which were matched with the correlating revisionary movements by Zsolt Farkas as follows:

> As tropes of contraction or limitation, irony withdraws meaning through a dialectical interplay of presence and absence (clinamen); metonymy reduces meaning through an emptying-out that is a kind of reification (kenosis); metaphor curtails meaning through the endless perspectivizing of dualism, of inside-outside dichotomies (askesis). As tropes of restitution or representation, synecdoche enlarges from part to whole (tessera); hyperbole heightens (daemonization); metalepsis overcomes temporality by a substitution of earliness for lateness (apophrades). (21)

Hegyi finds that "in Auster's drama, *kenosis*, *askesis*, and the metalepsis of the 'decisive *ratio*', *apophrades,* becomes the determining performative force" (*Fehér terek* 42) (my translation, italics in the original). These observations will serve as guidance for the discussion of the plays.

After delineating, rather lengthily, the theoretical background of the anxiety of influence it is, however, indispensable to propose a few corrections or refinements. First, the question might arise, justifiably, why utilize a theory of poetry when the research aims to concentrate on the creative development of a playwright, novelist, and screenwriter? As it was formerly introduced, Auster began his career as a poet, playwright, and essayist; therefore it is

essential to mention his poetic history since its ‘desertion’ signals a crucial transformation. Furthermore, his poems already anticipate those elements which can be evinced in his plays and novels[16]. Second, although Bloom constructs his theory in regard to poets, his theorems are based on the workings of the psyche; since each revisionary movement presents a kind of defense mechanism, as a reaction for and liberation from the overwhelming anxieties that any author (whether it be a poet, writer, or critic) encounters when attempting to establish originality. Throughout the thesis, I intend to demonstrate the practice of misreading and reflect on the changes of the authorial self through close textual analyses. Third, as Bloom himself admits, some works and authorial life cycles closely follow the model of the six revisionary ratios, on the other hand, variants and displacements can also be noticed in some cases (*Map of Misreading* 105); suggesting that the inordinately strict insistence on the model might not be profitable.

[16] I deal with those elements which are relevant to the research directly, during the discussion of the plays.

3. Samuel Beckett and the Theatre of the Absurd

This chapter serves as a brief overview of the characteristics of Beckettian theatre, especially regarding those plays to which Auster's works, *Laurel and Hardy Go to Heaven* and *Hide and Seek*, display a strong likeness. First, however, it is necessary to expound the central arguments of Albert Camus's philosophical essay, "The Myth of Sisyphus" (1955). This short detour in the direction of the philosophical background of the absurd and toward the most characteristic features of Beckettian theatre must be taken to provide an outline which, on the one hand, illustrates the close similarities and, on the other hand, presents how and in what ways Auster's plays begin to differ from them.

3.1 Albert Camus: *The Myth of Sisyphus*

Camus's pioneer philosophical discussion reflects on contemporary nihilism[17] as a response to the devastation experienced during and after the Second World War. It contours the nature of the absurd in allegorical form; questions whether life has any meaning and introduces the "one truly serious philosophical problem" (Camus 3), that is, of suicide. One of the main issues the work highlights is the constant human need for knowledge, truth, explanation, reason, and order; however, all efforts to access these prove futile. To inquire about explanation leads to uncertainty: troubled hearts and minds cannot find relief in rationale since one "cannot, for all that, apprehend the world" (Camus 15), a world which in itself is "not reasonable" (Camus 16).[18] This contradiction forms the basis of the absurd

[17] Later, Donald A. Crosby differentiates five types of nihilism: political (9), moral (11), epistemological (18), cosmic (26), and existential nihilism (*Specter of the Absurd* 30). Camus's absurd includes all five types without strict differentiation.

[18] Cf. "What does nihilism mean? *That the highest values devaluate themselves*. The aim is lacking; 'why?' finds no answer" (Nietzsche, *Will to Power* 9) (italics in the original).

worldview, “the confrontation of this irrational and the wild longing for clarity” (Camus 16) to which, it seems, no one has access. In other words: “[t]he absurd is born of this confrontation between the human need and the unreasonable silence of the world” (Camus 21). For the man experiencing the absurd, nothing is clear, and he lives in a state if endless uncertainty and questioning; for him, everything is in chaos, and during this constant conflict, he faces an “unceasing struggle” (Camus 23) to carry on with life.

Camus explains this absurd sense of living through a Greek myth, *The Tragedy of Sisyphus*. Sisyphus was condemned by the gods to eternal punishment: to unremittingly roll a boulder up to the top of a mountain, only to have it fall back down to the foot of the mountain each time. Sisyphus’ labors are thus fruitless; all of his efforts are unavailing, and as such represents “the suspension of any meaningful or purposeful (teleological) action” (Nyusztay, *Abszurd dráma* 31) (my translation). As Camus pronounces, “Sisyphus is the absurd hero” (Camus 89) who accomplishes nothing but relentlessly returns to his suffering. During his return (on his way to the foot of the mountain to once again begin the endless cycle of his torture), he is conscious of his state, which makes the myth tragic (Camus 90). This conscious state would enable him to break out from his eternal, pointless punishment, which proposes the options of rebellion or merely the witnessing his own miserable state.

The Myth of Sisyphus offers those tools, elements, and ‘instruments’ that the Theatre of the Absurd puts into practice; particularly with regard to repetitions (e.g., frequently repeated words, phrases, movements, recurring situations, cyclical scenes and acts, and double characters), a general senselessness, epistemological dilemmas, unanswerable questions, uprootedness, a loss of sense of time, (seemingly never-ending) punishment, and the question of whether to escape the absurdity of life (by either committing suicide or by means of rebellion) or to witness one’s existence in the chaos, but only if one is willing to recognize their own pointless struggle.

3.2 Samuel Beckett's theatre

The amount of literature that deals with the subject of the Theatre of the Absurd (a term coined by Martin Esslin) and Samuel Beckett's plays (separately and in a combined fashion) could fill libraries; therefore, it is beyond the scope of this paper to cover each piece of material. In the present subchapter, I intend to examine only those aspects of the Theatre of the Absurd and those traits of Beckettian plays which are relevant to the focus of the research. I argue that Auster adopts elements that are characteristic of Beckett's drama and uses the tools and devices of the absurd theatre effortlessly. He masters to write Beckett-like plays, while he does not follow and even departs from the underlying, fundamental 'tenets' of "the senselessness of the human condition" (Esslin 24). In order to comprehensively illustrate how and in which aspects Auster resembles and differs from Beckettian heritage, the basic ideas of the Theatre of the Absurd also must be mentioned.

Camus describes the absurd man's experience of existence (the human condition in a disillusioned age and in a world of broken beliefs) as:

> A world that can be explained even with bad reasons is a familiar world. But, on the other hand, in a universe suddenly divested of illusions and lights, [a] man feels [like] an alien, a stranger. His exile is without remedy since he is deprived of the memory of a lost home or the hope of a promised land. This divorce between man and his life, the actor and his setting, is properly the feeling of absurdity. (5)

The absurd world lacks logic and is therefore, unfamiliar to its inhabitants. The bafflement and perplexity that one encounters (due to the inaccessibility of knowledge) causes a parting from the world and an estrangement from one's self. The unbeknown, 'outlaw' entity is

displayed through characters without definite identity, lacking connections and a sense of belonging (e.g., homeless persons, tramps such as Mercier and Camier[19], Vladimir and Estragon; lonely outsiders such as Krapp, Clov, Watt[20]; and disaffected pairs such as Winnie and Willie). The question of identity for the *homo absurdus*, the absurd man, is an epistemological concern; that is, the boundaries of the self are the restraints of cognition (Nyusztay, "Experiment" 30). One way to acquire knowledge is by posing questions, however, since the world is 'not reasonable', 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 of a lost home" (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, which inabilities 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's 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," his "basic verbal practice" (Cohn 96).

The word *absurd* comes from the Latin word-composition '*ab*'—meaning "off," "away from;" and '*surdus*'—meaning "dull," "*deaf*," "*mute*," later meaning "*out of tune*," "discordant," "incongruous," "foolish," "silly," "*senseless*," and after the 1550's it reached its meaning as "plainly illogical" ("absurd") (emphases added). However, these definitions do not seem to be sufficiently equivalent to what Camus tries to express. Esslin draws attention to this phenomenon and provides a more proper description by quoting Eugéne Ionesco's understanding of the term: "Absurd is that which is devoid of purpose (. . .) *Cut off from his*

[19] Character of a novel. Samuel Beckett: *Mercier and Camier* (2012).
[20] Character of a novel. Samuel Beckett: *Watt* (2012).

religious, metaphysical, and transcendental roots, man is lost; all his actions become senseless, absurd, useless" (qtd. in Esslin 23) (emphases added).

On the other hand, the deafness which is inherent in the etymological meaning is clearly one of the most important elements of the absurd. The universe seems to be deaf (and mute) to the query of the human being demanding explanation, to people's wailing, and to their questions about the cause of their suffering; deaf to the humans' need for harmony and restoration of order, and to the efforts of rehabilitating reason (Nyusztay, *Abszurd dráma* 11). Iván Nyusztay makes a vital observation in connection with the 'absurd deafness' and Beckett:

> In Beckett's prose and plays, a desire for music and melody often occurs by which (even for a short period of time) a person tottering in a cul-de-sac tries to forget their suffering. Deafness is not merely an attribute of a *deus absconditus*. On the contrary, this silence does not refer to the hiding of god but directly questions god's existence. (*Abszurd dráma* 11) (my translation, italics in the original)

Similarly, Stanley E. Gontarski emphasizes the importance of Beckett's intent for musicality: "especially in the later, formalist works, [Beckett] tended to impose patterns of music and mathematics as ordering principles, almost as if they reflected pure or universal forms" ("Undoing" 5). These patterns can be noticed in the forms of the rhythmic composition of language (e.g., Lucky's overwhelming soliloquy in *Waiting for Godot*, or the trance-like monologue in *Not I*), of movements[21] (the strict measured pauses and counts between

[21] Cf. Auster's description: "Almost uncannily, the prose of *Mercier and Camier* moves along at a walking pace, and after a while one begins to have the distinct impression that somewhere, buried deep within the words, a silent metronome is beating out the rhythms of Mercier and Camier's perambulations. The pauses, the hiatuses, the sudden shifts of conversation and description do not break this rhythm (. . .)" (*Collected Prose* 347).

speeches or action, as in *Happy Days*), and of sound effects (e.g., the hypnotic noise of the rocking chair in *Rockaby*, or the monotonous friction of steps in *Footfalls*).

Another element that seems to be inseparable from the absurd drama, a tool that it frequently employs, is the grotesque. Philip J. Thomson in his book, *The Grotesque* (1972) [22], reflects on the changes that the term underwent regarding its use and meaning. Thomson finds that the term does not have a definite meaning, only different notions can be distinguished, by which he aims to "move closer to an adequate modern definition" (20). Thomson lists the characteristics and features that can be linked to the grotesque: disharmony, comic and/or terrifying, extravagance and exaggeration, and abnormality, whilst differentiates the satire from the playful grotesque (Thomson 20-27); further, he reflects on the occurrences of the grotesque as part of the comic, irony, satire, parody, caricature, the macabre, the bizarre, and as well as of the absurd (Thomson 32-50). Nyusztay specifies the use of the grotesque in the absurd drama for instances where "the comic is mixed with the tragic, the ridiculous with pity, dignity with misery, elevation with humiliation" (*Abszurd dráma* 12) (my translation); where this mixture takes place simultaneously[23], which simultaneity causes ambiguous psychology of the reader's response and incomprehension (*Abszurd dráma* 12). These grotesque fusions and elements can be discovered in *Krapp's Last Tape* (the name alludes to "crap;" Krapp himself is obsessed with the word "spool" which rhymes with the word "stool;" his repressed sexuality is expressed through his compulsive habit of eating bananas); *Endgame* (Nagg and Nell are like 'inert patients', are sitting in dustbins and empty their 'bowels' into the sand under them; Hamm's bladder is emptied through a catheter by Clov); *Waiting for Godot* (Vladimir's breath, while Estragon's feet stink; Lucky is driven by a rope around his neck,

[22] Cf. Edgar Allan Poe: *Grotesque and Arabesque* (1840). "Poe employs this perspective to picture human cruelty, *deformation*, and perversion, in a *caricaturist* manner. The juxtaposition and combination of those incongruous elements evoke *repulsion* and *fear*" (Bollobás 84) (my translation, emphases added).

[23] As opposed to tragicomedy, Nyusztay argues, where the tragic and comic elements follow each other and show a temporal linearity (*Abszurd dráma* 12). This distinction, I find, is important regarding *Waiting for Godot*, which Beckett labeled as tragicomedy, but retrospectively, is a perfect example of an absurd play.

carries a heavy bag and a "folding stool"). On these occasions, a member of the audience experiences a combination of uneasiness, embarrassment, and ridicule. One cannot decide whether to laugh or cry since these grotesque situations elicit opposing reactions and responses (Nyusztay, *Abszurd dráma* 12). However, this laughter is not caused by humor, does not evoke catharsis; it is not an elevating and liberating act. "The absurd laughter is *risus purus*, pure laughter, the laughing at laughter. The absurd laughs at the longing for purgation, even at the simple possibility of it, and mechanizes the individuals' ambitions toward it" (Nyuszaty, *Abszurd dráma* 20) (my translation, italics in the original). The absurd theatre does not comprehend love, friendship, or empathy; on the other hand, it does realize dependence, subordination and superiority, egotism, and sexual desires (Nyusztay, *Abszurd dráma* 39).

A final remark must be made, linked to the central question of Camus's argument, on the possibility and rejection of suicide. Camus proposes that the first reason one continues living in an absurd world is due to habit; that is, to make the same "gestures commanded by existence" (5). By committing suicide or by "dying voluntarily implies that you have recognized, even instinctively, the ridiculous character of that habit, the absence of any profound reason for living, the insane character of that daily agitation, and the uselessness of suffering" (Camus 5). Vladimir and Estragon inflict the question of hanging themselves onto the only tree nearby. However, this suggestion does not mean a way to escape their suffering nor to find a way out of their habitual day-to-day existence; instead "offers the potential of an erection" (Nyusztay, *Abszurd dráma* 17) (my translation). Likewise, in *Happy Days*, Winnie seemingly lives the same dull day over and over. First, she is buried up to her waist, then after each act, she is covered even more, and the final scene suggests that she encounters her death by being buried alive. Winnie could end her suffering and liberate herself by firing her 'beloved' revolver, Browning, but she never manages to do so.

4. The play that matured into a novel

The most characteristic and prominent motifs of Auster's early art, which weave through his poems, plays, and early novels are the components of stones, walls, and flowers. Throughout his poetry, the frequent but conscious use of these images and their patterned, orderly manner of application enables to constitute a link; which link 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; while the plays *Laurel and Hardy Go to Heaven* and *Hide and Seek*, which can be recognized as an *imitatio*[24] (μίμησις) of Beckett's drama, both employ the symbol of the wall.

Hegyi discovers that in Auster's texts, four aspects of the inherent interpretative possibilities of the symbol of the wall can be contoured; which then, enable to establish new dimensions that maintain a dialogue with Kafka and Beckett (*Fehér terek* 43).These are: 1) Language:[25] the wall that is a part of Auster's poetry is the prefiguration of those walls that later appear in his drama and prose (*Fehér terek* 43). The transference of the wall's physical being is the language itself; words are the stones, and the gap between them is the Self (*Fehér terek* 44). 2) History: in the novel, *The Music of Chance*, Flower and Stone are building a wall (forcing Jim Nashe and Jack Pozzi to assemble it) from the ruins of a 15th-century Irish castle (*Fehér terek* 44). The wall is a simulation of the history of the Old World, a huge barrier that defies the current of time (*Fehér terek* 44). 3) Work: As both *Laurel and Hardy Go to Heaven* and *The Music of Chance* suggest, the building of the wall is forced upon; it is done by the compulsion to meet some sort of invisible outsider force (44). 4) The work of art: the art in

[24] I use the term in the Dionysian sense; not as mimesis but as the imitation of another author's work, to learn, adapt, and rework.

[25] Cf. "and therefore a language of stones, / since he knows that for the whole of life / a stone / will give way to another stone / to make a wall / and that all these stones / will form the monstrous sum / of particulars" ("Disappearances" *Collected Poems*).

progress, which is the expression of the effort of its creation, is no other than a wound, a fissure that cuts through space and separates the creator (or author) from the recipient (audience) (*Fehér terek* 44). As in *Laurel and Hardy Go to Heaven*, at the end of the play, a wall is built which crosses through and abolishes the stage, the reception, and the artwork (*Fehér terek* 45).

The discussion will follow the above-mentioned interpretive concepts and intends to extend and augment these notions by rethinking the contexts and connections of the works at once by expanding the scope of the research.

4.1 *Laurel and Hardy Go to Heaven*

The 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 of the novel, *The Music of Chance*. The clear sight of the bare stage is only disturbed by a "heap of stones," with the exact measurements of thirty inches by thirty inches by thirty inches, eighteen in number. The two characters are a 'pseudo-couple', similar to Beckettian pairs Mercier and Camier or Vladimir and Estragon. Stan Laurel and Oliver Hardy[26] are "builder[s] of walls" and their task is to arrange stones (for which they are provided detailed instructions in the "book") into a wall. They are ordered to do the work by an unknown outside force, although the purpose what their actions serve 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' (Der Doppelgänger [Freud, "The Uncanny" 101]). They can be

[26] Laurel and Hardy were American comedians who started their careers performing in circuses and vaudeville before becoming the celebrated actors of silent comedy films. Also known as "Stan és Pan" among the Hungarian audience.

seen as the counterparts of Vladimir and Estragon, as two "clowns, clochards and music hall comedians who demonstrate the clown's special ability to survive under the worst of circumstances"[27] (Simon 111). Throughout the play, we find those elements which are 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, nonsensical incidents, the fallacy of memory, a sense of lostness in space and time, and many repetitions.

The play begins with a fall (similarly as *Act Without Words I*): in the dimness Hardy crashes into Laurel from behind and both hit the ground groaning. The very first dialogue poses the question of alterity. Hardy touches Laurel's face and inquires: "Is it you?" however, Laurel cannot provide him with a firm, positive answer. He starts touching his own face and ask back: "Is it me?" 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, with the slight differences between their conducts and behaviors: Hardy is more confident, he moves swiftly, with purposeful "great strides," he 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," and expresses himself in a more vulgar manner. As in *Waiting for Godot,* Vladimir is more practical, persistent, more likely to recall previous incidents, gets annoyed by Estragon's jokes, he conducts the interactions, while Estragon is "volatile," prefers to share funny stories, and appears to be more defenseless (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" (maybe something other than stones), while Laurel states, "as

[27] Richard Keller Simon describes the two characters Vladimir and Estragon—a likewise fitting portrayal of Laurel and Hardy.

if you didn't know already." 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 to arrange stones is the central theme of the play, which cyclical movement rhymes with *The Myth of Sisyphus*[28] and the absurd worldview that Beckett exceedingly portrayed and inhabited in his works—although, by the end of the play a wall is built and remains standing. However, the following lines disturb that 'calm' nothingness. 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." To say anything is possible means that anything can happen[29]; the options are endless so are the outcomes, and there might be an outer force (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." The phrase, according to the Collins Dictionary, means that "there are a number of different *influences, reasons*, and *actions* which together make a situation complicated and difficult to understand" ("wheels within wheels") (emphases added). Furthermore, the word "wheel" bears various connotations which may be considered. To spin the wheel results in randomness; this is the law of the 'wheel of fortune'. There is an equal chance for a lucky, positive outcome as for an ill-starred, negative one. On the other hand—in advance to the discussion of *The Music of Chance*—,"wheel" is a commonly used slang in the game of poker, where it means "the best possible low hand," a set of cards of "A-2-3-4-5" ("wheel"). In light of this, it is clear that Auster, although utilizing the tools and devices of the Theatre of the Absurd (tessera), aims to distance his work (and himself) from

[28] Although the reason is not revealed in the play, why are they forced to build a wall; the idea of punishment arises retrospectively by approaching from the perspective of the novel *The Music of Chance*. More on that later.
[29] In 1992 Auster describes: "If my work is about anything, I think it's about the unexpected, the idea that anything can happen. You never know what's looming up ahead" (*Art of Hunger* 333).

the hold of his literary father (kenosis, askesis), while the play anticipates those 'terms' and elements (already meant in a different sense than his forerunner's) which recur in his novel(s) (in this case the building of the wall and repeated manner of labor; the diversions are chance[30] and the poker game).

They are about to begin reading the day's orders, when Laurel turns to Hardy: "Do you remember what day it is?" but Hardy cannot remember, they have to consult the book for that. After specifying the date (which remains unknown to the readers), Laurel states that it is his turn to study it (their book of orders, their calendar, their book of memory); however, Hardy does not remember their agreement, and they start an infantile quarrel. Finishing their brabble they "turn their backs on each other, fold their arms, and pout" childishly. Hardy tries to reconcile Laurel by offering him the 'manual', Laurel rejects the offer saying that "*it* doesn't matter." When Hardy extends the book toward Laurel, he drops it, and the book falls. They simultaneously bend down pick it up and they "butt heads." Laurel tumbles, while Hardy circles around the stage in pain "emitting loud, astonished noises"—an example of a silent comedy film-like situation.

They begin to examine the orders of the day, starting with the "physical exercises;" consisting of basic stretches and elementary gymnastic movements, which they are unable to perform properly. Then, they move on to the "spiritual exercises," and lastly they inspect the instructions to the arrangement of the stones into a wall, which consists of three rows, six item each; however, they must wait for the sound of the bell to begin the construction (as in *Happy Days*, the sound of a bell dictates Winnie's actions during the day).

When the bell rings they commence to work. "Each approaches a stone, and after many preparations—in the manner of weight lifters—they lift the stones. Grunts and groans,

[30] 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, that action is futile: the coin always lands on the same side, it is stuck into the 'absurd habit'—even according to probability theory, there should be diverse outcome at least once.

the strain of total exertion. Tottering under their burdens, they painfully make their way to (. . .) the 'wall line'" (like the actor in *Act Without Words II*: "picks up two sacks, carries them bowed and staggering"). Both exhaustedly and motionlessly lie on the ground, considering giving up, yet, Hardy proves to be more reasonable. He reflects on why they should not suspend their labor. He tries to find an explanation, 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 a search for answers and for an understanding of the energy transformations, i.e., how inanimate objects extract power from an animate subject. It tells about the effort to learn, remember, and master his task. At once, it elevates the stone to the rank of a monument, as a memorial which, with its power is beyond the mortal human, stands against time; it is history which bears the memory of the past. On the other hand, if the stones are the words and the wall is the language (see above), it may be read as a self-reflexive confession about the hardships and the act of writing.

Laurel is unimpressed by Hardy's monologue. Instead, he tells a trivial 'funny' tale about "the two men" (which may recall Vladimir's story of "the two thieves"). Laurel asks,

"What time is it?" to which Hardy always gives the same answer, "It's late"—a dialogue that is repeated several times throughout the play. Hardy starts another soliloquy (unlike Lucky's tirade, Hardy's talks are 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" during which Laurel falls asleep. By the end of his speech Hardy wakes him up, then "Laurel stands up slowly, parodying a somnambulist," approaches the heap and lifts a stone with unexpected ease. Hardy follows him and he, too, is able to carry one with airiness. The *mysterious* lightness is inexplicable: all stones are identical with the exact same measurements; therefore, their weight should not differ. "Anything is possible," as Hardy stated at the beginning of the play which proved to be true, and they see this instance as a "miracle."

Contrary to their relief and delightful expectations, the following rocks are just as heavy as the earlier ones. Laurel "cannot advance in a straight line" under the weight of the stone and he "begins circling and weaving around the stage." The subsequent parts portray their comic struggle to keep Laurel in lane while Hardy conducts him; (according to the rules of silent films) Laurel mistakes the directions ("to *your* right', "no, the other way"), after all, they manage to place the rock to its assigned position. What should be noted here is that Laurel and Hardy, as characters, start to veer away from the grotesque: the comic is no longer mixed with the tragic, the ridiculous is not combined with pity, the humiliation is re- and misinterpreted. Their 'suffering' is due to their clumsiness and awkwardness. A member of the audience laughs at them; however, that laughter is distinct from the absurd uneasiness and ridicule. One starts to root for them to succeed and experiences cathartic relief in their recovery. In my reading this instance can be corresponded with the Bloomian revisionary movements clinamen and tessera: meaning that Laurel and Hardy seemingly fit among the Beckettain 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, then, they gradually start to veer away, depart from those. They rather start to resemble the original comic duo, the silent-film comedians: where the 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[31] between Beckettian 'aftershocks' and between the exertion to escape those; between the absurd drama and between something dissimilar to it. After their ludicrous interplay, Laurel and Hardy collapse showing the physiological signs of extreme exhaustion, they feel sick. Laurel thinks he is "going to throw up," while Hardy says he is "going to crap in" his pants, and both agree, while sniffing, that maybe Hardy already did. This setting strongly echoes Beckett: 'bowel movements' or more precisely the lack of bowel movements (constipation) are a common trait of the Beckett-figures, e.g., Krapp in *Krapp's Last Tape*, or the protagonist in *First Love* (Nyusztay, *Abszurd dráma* 71). The presence of odors can also be found in *Waiting for Godot*: Vladimir's breath while Estragon's feet stink.

Hardy notices two trees standing in the distance (reminiscent of the tree from *Waiting for Godot*; however, they do not consider hanging themselves), which are hard to see; therefore, Hardy pulls out a pair of binoculars from his satchel. Two observations must be mentioned: the first one is about the origin of 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, who they believe to be the "inspector," coming to supervise their work. This position is filled by Calvin Murks, who oversees the work (building of a wall) of the two captives (Jim Nashe and Jack Pozzi) in *The Music of Chance*.

[31] I imagine this oscillation performed by an asymmetrical pendulum, where the two endpoints are the Beckettian influence (plays) and the authorial voice (the break from the strong hold of the precursor). The 'bob' gravitates toward and eventually completely swings over to the authorial voice, departing the precursor's influence.

Approaching the end of the play, they gradually grow weary of their labors and the idea of rebellion occurs several times. They sympathize with the thought of fighting their unknown employers, going on a strike, simply giving up the work, or finishing the wall, only to later "kick it down." During these outbursts, occasionally, their behaviors become violent; they use swear words and are willing to employ physical force if needed. At one time, Hardy tries to convince Laurel to stop his resistance and continue to work for their "friendship's sake;" then Laurel's bitterness slowly turns into "compassion." As it was formerly introduced, the Theatre of the Absurd does not comprehend love, friendship, or empathy and does not know compassion. The conclusion can be drawn, as it was indicated, that the play, although, shows signs of derivation of the absurd drama, departs from its underlying tenets (tessera, kenosis).

They finally come to the agreement to finish the wall. Before adjusting the last, the eighteenth stone, Hardy goes behind the wall and "pokes his head through the gap" and they enjoy a childish play, a brief game of peek-a-boo. Before drawing the final conclusion of the drama, it is important to emphasize the infantile attitudes and actions of Laurel and Hardy, and their worrying of an outsider but superior, (parent-like) governing force—since (in allegorical and visually illustrative form) it could be read as the attempt of the '*ephebe*' to break away from the governing precursor and his influence, to step out of the footprint already made. "Infantilism—in other words, regression to childhood—what a role this genuinely psychoanalytic element plays in all our lives" (426), declares Thomas Mann, "What a large share it has in shaping the life of a human being; operating, indeed, (. . .): as mythical identification, as survival, as a *treading in footprints already made*" (426) (emphases added).

The idea of infantilism, regression to childhood and the peek-a-boo play points toward Freud's findings of the game '*Fort-da!*' *['gone-there']*. Freud states that one of the central working concepts of an individual is that one tends to avoid displeasure by "the production of

pleasure" (*Beyond Pleasure* 3). After experiencing a severe concussion, a condition occurs called "traumatic neurosis" (*Beyond Pleasure* 10), during which the dreams emerging tend to be nightmares, through which one re-experiences the traumatic event (Freud, *Beyond Pleasure* 11). Freud deduced this behavior to the earliest "normal" (mental) activities of children's play as one of the most dominant aspects of character formation (*Beyond Pleasure* 12). Monitoring a child's habit of throwing his toy ("a wooden reel with a piece of string tied around it") away from him into a corner or under the bed (somewhere out of sight), Freud notices that it was accompanied by a long "o-o-o-o" expression which "represented the German word 'fort' [gone]" (*Beyond Pleasure* 13-14). Then, the child would pull 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 accustomed himself to the trauma of her absence by symbolically 'losing her', letting her out of sight, while producing the joyful pleasure of seeing her again (*Beyond Pleasure* 15).

The divorce from the mother is a topic that Donald Woods Winnicott discusses, too. According to Winnicott, during the phase when infants start to separate from their mothers, approaching the "not-me" realization, they substitute the attachment to the mother with "a teddy, a doll or soft toy" with a so-called "transitional object;" however, the use of this transitional object does not mean complete liberation from the mother (Winnicott 1-3), but a movement of departures and returns.

As a prolepsis, I consider the three plays 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), which temporarily holds him back from sovereignty, on the other hand, enables the course of separation from the strong hold of the literary father. Laurel and Hardy are in flux between the absurdist and between the non-absurdist elements: their

appearance is tramp-like; their forced upon labor may be seen as a punishment; their actions and speech 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 the 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 'not me' (Beckettian influence)—as an intermediate state of kenosis, where the successor reaches a liberating discontinuity from the precursor.

As it was indicated at the beginning of the thesis, 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 as two infantile eccentrics (Flower and Stone). Although Auster's interest in silent films and their characters remains unrelenting (see Hector Mann in *The Book of Illusions*), one has to wait until the 2017 novel, *4321*, to see the characters of Laurel and Hardy revive where they are completely freed from the grotesque elements.

4.2 *The Music of Chance*

"A wanderer stumbles onto an opportunity to make his fortune; he travels to the ogre's castle to test his luck, is tricked into staying there, and can win his freedom only by performing a series of absurd tasks that the ogre invents for him" (*Art of Hunger* 326)—describes Auster *The Music of Chance* through the semblance between its structure and of a fairy-tale. Or, to put it another way, it is "a book about walls and slavery and freedom" (*Art of Hunger* 294). However, the novel is more complex and more immersive than that. The story starts with the protagonist, Jim Nashe, who has inherited an extraordinary amount of money—which changes the course of the events. With the sudden gain of the fortune, he arranges his debts, cashes in a vacation time of four years, buys a "red two-door Saab 900"[32] (*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 traveling in the opposite direction. That was because he missed the ramp to the freeway—a common enough mistake . . ." (*Music of Chance* 6). Nashe's life takes an irreversible arch due to a 'wrong turn', just like Quinn's[33] life changes 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. But that was much later" (*City of Glass* 3). It shows that *chance* (to which *Laurel and Hardy Go to Heaven* can be seen as an early reference) is one of the central organizing forces of Auster's novels.

Nashe, without any responsibility to hold him back, explores the limitlessness and the liberating sensation of the open routes. This kind of narrative (road novel [Herzogenrath 160]) is characteristic of the American sense of living and literary traditions, which are vivid parts of Auster's novels as well as, for example, Walt Whitman's poetry: "Afoot and light-hearted I take to the open road, / Healthy, free, the world before me, / The long brown path before me

[32] The red Saab serves as a symbol of Nashe's liberty and the instrument of his freedom.
[33] See *The New York Trilogy: City of Glass.*

leading wherever I choose" (Whitman, "Song of the Open Road"). Nashe decides to continue his journey until his money runs out. That time finally approaches and his fortune declines, yet, another unexpected twist takes place that seals his fate: he meets, a beaten up hitch-hiker, the poker 'wizard' Jack Pozzi. The pair eventually wind up at the mansion of the two millionaires Flower and Stone to compete in "the chance of a lifetime" (*Music of Chance* 30) poker party. "These guys are millionaires. And they don't know the first thing about cards (. . .) it's like playing with Laurel and Hardy" (*Music of Chance* 30)—describes Pozzi. "That's what I call them (. . .) One's fat and the other's thin, just like old Stan and Ollie. They're genuine pea-brains, my friend, a pair of born chumps" (*Music of Chance* 30). Nashe and Pozzi arrive to the residency of their poker competitors. They "expect to have a lavish dinner, and they're given a crazy little meal, a kiddie banquet. Flower and Stone are eccentrics, latter-day version of Laurel and Hardy. And if there's one thing that distinguishes Laurel and Hardy, it's their infantilism" (*Art of Hunger* 333)—describes Auster in an interview. 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. Furthermore, the power relations changed: Flower and Stone became the (un)known authority that forces the labor upon the two builders (Nashe and Pozzi).

They begin the card game: Flower and Stone against Pozzi, Nashe remains an observer, a "lucky charm" (*Music of Chance* 97). Pozzi seems to have a lucky hand and stand his place, even though Flower and Stone prove as 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 (*Music of Chance* 79). It is an "autobiography" of Flower and Stone's lives (displaying the past selves and relatives of Flower and Stone), a utopia, "where the past and future come together, where the good finally triumphs over evil" (*Music of*

Chance 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" (*Music of Chance* 80). As the title would suggest, *Laurel and Hardy Go to Heaven*, may be seen as a pre-version of that prison, where Laurel and Hardy are the punished convicts. Heaven is usually attributed with clearness, 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" (*Hand to Mouth* 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" (*Music of Chance* 81) which construction would continue forever. Through this composition, Stone would create an even more minuscule replica of the previous model *ad infinitum*; an instance of the "mise en abym" (Hegyi, "Continuity" 92). Nashe steals two miniature figures of Flower and Stone (see the theft of the binoculars in the play), to which later Pozzi refers as the decisive movement towards the decline of their luck.

Pozzi loses the game and they amass an incredible amount of debt—which to repay, 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," and had been "reduced to the level of hired hands, tramps" (*Music of Chance* 112). Their freshly imposed status and their 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 reverberate Beckett's figures to a certain extent. They may appear to be similar to the precursor's terms; however, they are distanced from

those and completed (tessera) into true characters with identity, past, and memories in which shaping fate and chance (aleatory) equally contributes.

On the other hand, the stones of the wall are also transformed: they will not only continue to exist when one's dead (as the play *Laurel and Hardy Go to Heaven* stated), but seem to have been existing since prehistoric times, and constitute some kind of elevated, beyond-human unit—"a wailing wall" (*Music of Chance* 86). The following passage illustrates Nashe and Pozzi's sublime encounter of the stones when they first witnessed those from a close distance:

> 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. They felt too old for that—as if they had been dug out from the deepest layers of the earth, as if they were *relics* from a time before man had ever been dreamt of. (*Music of Chance* 118-19) (emphases added)

Nashe describes the sublime aesthetic value 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 to the dichotomy of feelings of awe and fright evoked by the 'gray blocks'; while their primordial nature aroused an experience of transcendence, since the 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 daemonization, as an act of a Counter-Sublime (in relation to the precursor's Sublime) achieved through a heightening hyperbole.

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

To conclude, the two figures of the play *Laurel and Hardy Go to Heaven* are completed into four distinct, real characters with identity, past, and memories (which aspects the absurd lacks), during which they lost continuity from the tradition of the Beckettian pairs as well as from the play's Laurel and Hardy. Meanwhile, the instrument of the punishment, the subject of the hard labor, the wall and its building blocks are transformed in the novel into an elevated, beyond-human unit.

5. Familiar seclusion

The present chapter aims to reflect on the unique as well as on the mutual elements of *Hide and Seek* in comparison to *Happy Days*, *Endgame*, and the relevant aspects of *Play*. Concentrating on the 'intimate separation' between characters and the familiar seclusion that the wall motif signifies, this section aspires to expand the interpretative possibilities of that barrier. At the same time, this unit seeks to reflect on the author's tendency, in Wittgensteinian terms, to create his "private language" (96).

5.1 *Hide and Seek*

The two characters Man (Jimmy) and Woman sit in rectangular boxes separately, like Nagg and Nell in the two ashbins in *Endgame* or the figures in the urns of *Play*. The two boxes are placed at center of the bare stage enabling a harmonious, proportional arrangement, which might recall the instruction of *Happy Days*' interior: "maximum of simplicity and symmetry," and the "bare interior" of *Endgame*. The boxes have four walls and only the front panels are open from waist level restricting what the audience can capture of the actors, similarly in *Happy Days* where Winnie is imbedded up to above her waist, while Willie remains hidden behind the mound for almost the entire duration of the play, or as in *Endgame* and *Play* where only the actors' heads and faces are shown. *Hide and Seek*, on the other hand, further limits the characters' visibility by utilizing "dark velvet curtain[s], theater style;" thereby not only the interaction between the two characters is restricted, but what the audience can perceive of them (they are walled off from the audience like Laurel and Hardy by the end of the play).

The use of the curtains serve various purposes: first, it enables what the title suggests, the hiding of the actors and the seeking of the audience. Since the visual experiences are strictly limited due to the minimalistic installation, the audience's attention seeks the smaller motions (facial and hand gestures), verbal expressiveness, and the rhythmic composition of sounds, language, silence, and movements. Furthermore, the two figures can be regarded as 'actors' or human puppets (in the play there are references to their singing and dancing past; interesting to compare with Winnie's obsession with the music box and the singing or humming of the song *The Merry Widow*). It is instructed that "the opening and closing of the curtains must be audible: a hard distinctive grating sound" (*Hand to Mouth* 195), which fits the observation that in Beckett's "more recent plays, sound effects are linked with time—[e.g.,] the bells of *Happy Days*" (Cohn 34). The harsh noise produced by the curtains alongside with the proper measurements of seconds assigning the timing of each movement (like a metronome ticking) heightens the musicality and the melodious sequence of the play.

The loss of sense in time, the fallacy of memory, and the search of the mutual past and history is likewise present, and the cyclical nature of the play is attained by the sequential use of the curtains, the recurring expressions, the repeated sentences, including language games and non-sequiturs. A final notion about the apparent alikeness between the plays is that there is a "shelf at thigh level for props within" (*Hand to Mouth* 195); like in *Happy Days* Winnie's "capacious black bag" which consists of from ordinary items to toiletries—just like in *Hide and Seek* (pocket mirror, magazine, newspaper, a pair of binoculars). The play suggests that the relationship between the two characters is a partnership: an old fashioned, 'accustomed' marriage (like Winnie and Willie's or Nagg and Nell's); they appear almost as a younger and earlier version of the Beckettian pairs. I read this instance as the revisionary movement of apophrades since the play creates a sense of newness in relation to the precursor's works as if the temporality of the plays (by the two authors) were interchanged through the substitution of

earliness and lateness—as if uncannily Auster had written even Beckett's plays (*Happy Days* or *Endgame*), earning him the sense of priority and originality.

It is more than clear that the play bears a strong resemblance to the Beckettian heritage; therefore it is beneficial to turn toward one aspect that clearly distinguishes the play from Beckett's drama and display a tendency in Auster's works (a tendency which falls outside of the realms of the Bloomian model), which nevertheless tell about his originality and the establishment of the authorial voice: the interest in the philosophy of language. Throughout the play the two characters are engaged with language philosophical ideas about the signification of words, their referring, application, and questions similar to what Ludwig Wittgenstein poses.

> MAN: *(Sadly.)* It's all just words.
>
> WOMAN: Of course it is. What else would it be? Words. That's what we're talking about.
>
> MAN: You can't just say "words." That doesn't mean anything. You have to say one word or another. This word or that word. *(Hand to Mouth* 200)

These lines from the play may answer to the description of Wittgenstein's following statement: "The word has no meaning if nothing corresponds to it.—It is important to note that the word 'meaning' is being used illicitly if it is used to signify the thing that 'corresponds' to the word. That is to confound the meaning of a name with the bearer of the name" (20). Man and Woman realize that to talk about words in a sense of words may prove futile, pointless, or 'meaningless'; thereby they start to contemplate about the word "blue."

> MAN: How about "blue"?
>
> WOMAN: Ah, yes, blue. *(Closes eyes, smiles.)* That's a very nice word.

MAN: Do you see what I mean?

WOMAN: Yes. *(Smiles with inward pleasure.)* I see . . . blue. (*Hand to Mouth* 200)

Wittgenstein asks: "What is the relation between name and the thing named?" (18), to which he provides the answer that the relation between 'name' and the 'thing named' lies in "the fact that hearing the name calls before our mind the picture of what is named" (18). It can be noticed that through the homonymy of the word 'see' (which was meant in the sense of to understand, to comprehend) illuminates both the function of the language-games in the play and the nature of the signification of words.

WOMAN: Me too. *(As if seeing it: contemplative, rapturous.)* A very blue blue. A blue bluer than the blue that is blue. The bluest of blues, a blue so blue it is beyond blue. A blissful, beautiful blue.

MAN: A blue that would be blue even if there were no blue.

WOMAN: A blue that would be blue even if there were no word for blue.

(. . .)

WOMAN: A blue that is green. A blue that is red. A blue that is green and blue. (*Hand to Mouth* 201)

Wittgenstein declares that the meaning of a word depends on its use in a language (21), and when one tries to decode meaning, e.g., of colors, one tends to rely on the image it occurs in one's mind at the hearing of the word (88). However, the language user seems to be dependent on empirical experiences (Wittgenstein 90); therefore, "the individual words of this language are to refer to what can only be known to the person speaking: to his immediate private sensations" (Wittgenstein 89). In connection of color, Wittgenstein further reflects:

"What am I to say about the word 'red'? Or is it like this: the word 'red' means something known only to him? (Or perhaps rather: it refers to something known only to him)" (95). The preference to capture 'private sensations' (especially colors) can be detected in Auster's later works as well, as if 'pointing into himself', naming the sensation of his own "private language" (Wittgenstein 96):

> The sky is blue and black and gray and yellow. The sky is not there, and it is red (. . .) The sky is white. It smells of the earth, and it is not there. The sky is white like the earth, and it smells of yesterday (. . .) The sky is lemon and rose and lavender. The sky is the earth. The sky is white, and it is not there. (*The Invention of Solitude* 172)

This passage illustrates the personal perception of the 'ordinary blue sky' through which Auster creates his 'private language', enabling him (and his audience) to grasp his 'private sensations'.

As a final note, it is necessary to mention the wall. The two characters realize their enclosed positions: "Have you noticed that you're boxed in?" asks the Woman after they recognize that, in each direction, they are surrounded by walls. The Man reasons that "We are in the boxes for a reason"—however, this cause in not revealed, therefore they attempt to come up with an explanation. "How about . . . We are all alone, walled off from each other in darkness . . . *(waxing eloquent)* . . . in the darkness of an unappeasable solitude?" (*Hand to Mouth* 209)—the Man reaches to the conclusion. The wall (in either physical or mental forms), thus, is a barrier between individuals, between the male and female, it is the habit that dims intimacy between the married, it is the membrane that delimits the author and the work that sentence both the writer and his art to solitude. The recurrence of this separated existence,

isolated presence can be evinced in Auster's later works such as *The New York Trilogy*; *Oracle Night* (2003), and in the movie *The Inner Life of Martin Frost* (2007).

In closing, although the play bears strong resemblance to the dramatic works of Beckett, it creates the uncanny effect as if Auster had written his precursor's characteristic works as well. Furthermore, *Hide and Seek* displays one of the main determinative trends in the author's creative development: to capture his 'private sensations' and to create his 'private language'.

6. A slightly different impulse

Although the three plays were written in a short period of time (between 1976 and 1977), *Blackouts* can be located as a different impulse: different from Auster's other two plays and something unique in the author's *oeuvre*. *Blackouts* bears little (if any) resemblance to Beckett's plays; meanwhile it displays the framework of the novel *Ghosts*. Therefore, the aim is to introduce *Blackouts* by unraveling the 'skeleton' of *Ghosts*, and placing the play on the borderline between the influence of the literary father and between the authorial voice as the work of division.

6.1 *Blackouts*

There are three characters, Green, Black, and Blue, whose attributes (or signifiers) are their equivalent-colored suits (green, black, and blue)—one can notice the break from the typical Beckettian pairs. The theme and the characters' manners are distinct from those of the other two plays (*Laurel and Hardy Go to Heaven* and *Hide and Seek*). Throughout this piece, one can notice a shift: Green, the seventy years old 'assistant' who is ordered to "make a record," first appears as an infantile, Laurel-and-Hardy-like clown, resembling almost a mentally weak or senile person. He constantly disrupts Black's concentration and their conversation with Blue by fidgeting and noise making. Black, who is superior to the other two, seems to have defective memory; he needs reassurance of the past events (however, this shifts, and by the end of the play it is no longer meaningful to him and no affirmation is needed). Blue is an outsider, an investigator (a private eye) employed by Black; he may be seen as the archetype of every detective figure Auster has written.

The whole play is mysterious and obscure: the identities and the positions (or roles) of the characters are unclear, they are almost like ghosts—semi-transparent beings that cannot be grasped or defined by ordinary terms, and whose tasks are only implied. The action and the stakes of the play are vague, too. All that is stated is that 'today' is a momentous day and as Black puts it: "A man will walk through that door, sit down in that chair across from me, and we will talk. By the time we have finished, there will be nothing left" (*Hand to Mouth* 175)—on one hand, it could be read as the premise of the play; while the three sitting characters could be linked to Beckettian sitting figures, as if Krapp was provided with the reports of his past. At the same time, it seems that they are all searching the answers for the same questions: "Did the little boy really die?"; "Did White really disappear?"; "Did Gray really disappear?" (*Hand to Mouth* 176).

Like the title suggests, throughout the play three 'blackouts' take place, which signals the advancement of the happenings and intensifies the tension between the characters. The first happens right before the arrival of Blue, who brought the "report." As the play unfolds, retrospectively one learns that Blue was hired by an unknown employer to follow and watch a person's every move, to write reports about those, and received weekly checks as payment. He had this job for several years during which he lost his family: his wife walked out on him with their son—it can be noticed that the play propose the core elements and themes of the novels of *The New York Trilogy* (the theme of the lost family is also a recurring element of the novels, e.g., *The Book of Illusions* or *Moon Palace*).

Blue expounds his reports and experiences of the work, which experiences either in an identical or transformed form recur in the author's early novel *Ghosts* (e.g., Blue's attempts to make contact with the subject of his inspection by camouflaging himself as a beggar, businessman, or as "the Fuller brush man"). Blue describes his suspicion that the subject of the inspection is the same person as his employer and reasons that "(. . .) he needed me. There

was something he wanted me to know, and little by little he was letting me in on his secret" (*Hand to Mouth* 187). The overseen man was a writer (a ghostwriter, similarly as in *Ghosts*) who had been working on a book for a long time. Although Blue supposedly stole the manuscript, its content is not stated. Blue's last encounter with the subject of his inspection ended in a violent confrontation: the man, the subject of his inspection had a gun, however, Blue overpowered him and beat him half-dead. By the end of the play Blue receives the answers for his questions about the little boy, White, and Grey—they are all dead. Green, who's task was to record the dialogue between Blue and Black, begins to destroy his notes page after page, tearing them into little pieces. By that time they all are "finished," they are ready "to begin" (*Hand to Mouth* 194)—but to begin what is never stated. The lights go out for the last time and the play ends with a 'cliffhanger'.

It can be concluded that the play hardly shows resemblance to the Beckettian drama: as if during kenosis the successor (Auster) reached the liberating discontinuity from his precursor (Beckett) and the play was completely emptied out of the precursor's influence; while by means of askesis, as a self-curtailing movement, the successor (Auster) yielded up a part of his own creative endowment by forever turning away from writing drama. Indeed, *Blackouts* may be seen as prose fiction applied to the form of drama and projected on the stage—the play may be considered as a link which maintains connection with the author's dramatic works and his early prose.

6.2 *The New York Trilogy: Ghosts*

Auster describes his experience of completing *Blackouts* that he was "wondering if this [drama] wouldn't be the proper medium for these new urges that were growing inside me (. . .) Six years later, I went back to it and reworked into a piece of prose fiction. That was

where *Ghosts* came from, the second novel of *The New York Trilogy*" (*Art of Hunger* 301). Since the previous subchapter illustrates the basic outline and the core elements of *Ghosts*, this section aims to complete and substitute with those aspects that are additional to the novel and that introduce another essential shift in the author's creative development.

The location is New York, Brooklyn Heights. The novel's Blue is a private detective who was employed to inspect and give reports of a man, named Black. Blue devotes himself to the job to such an extent that it develops into an obsessive, almost compulsive behavior: he starts to mimic everything what Black does, he synchronizes his life according to Black's, he repeats his actions, and becomes his reflection, his shadow lurking at his heels. Blue even starts to read the same book as Black: *Walden* by Henry David Thoreau. Blue wanders around the bronze statue of Henry Ward Beecher, watches baseball games, mentions Ralph Waldo Emerson (strictly American topics, scenes, persons).

Similarly to the play, the "future Mrs. Blue" (*Ghosts* 164) moves on, walks out on Blue since he became absent; therefore Blue dedicates himself entirely to the work. At a certain point, Blue decides to 'stumble upon' his subject of inspection: just like in the play, he masks himself first as a tramp, who "look[s] just like Walt Whitman" (*Ghosts* 172). The novel evolves accordingly and parallel to the play: Blue meets Black two more times undercover, and later even steals Black's manuscripts to read them. However, the endings for the two Blues (one from the play, the other from the novel) differ. The novel's Blue realizes that Black was writing about him the whole time and that he was also a subject of inspection. Eventually, Blue lets everything slip away from his grasp: loses his family, his job, his own self, probably, even his sanity, and "the drama is Blue's alone" (*Ghosts* 190).

Lastly, the novel follows the outline of the play *Blackouts* with one important innovation that defines the author's later works as well: with the preference toward American themes, locations, and historical and cultural references (as in *The Music of Chance*).

7. Conclusion

The present paper sought to highlight the early phases of the author's creative development and maturation by positioning the three plays as the central items of the comparative analyses of the works by the two authors. Utilizing the theorems of Bloom's concept the paper attempted to illustrate how Auster adopts Beckett's texts into his writings overturning the anxiety of influence. It can be concluded that Auster overturns the anxiety of influence by yielding up a part of his creative endowment at a high price of breaking away from writing drama (and poetry) and finding the proper medium in prose. At the same time, another important shift takes place in the author's development as a writer: the turn from European modernism and avant-garde conventions (thereby also from the Beckettian influence) toward a strictly and consistently American, "pre-modern" direction (Hegyi, *Fehér terek* 46) with an ontological and metaphysical interest that is related to the tradition of humanism (Hegyi, *Amerikai Fenségesről* 128).

Laurel and Hardy Go to Heaven serves as an excellent example of Auster's ability to write Beckett-like plays: it displays a comic pair involved in cyclical action, and who seemingly were sentenced to an absurd 'punishment'. The two figures are affected by a sense of lostness in space and time, accompanied by the fallacy of their memory. Although Auster utilizes the elements of the Theater of the Absurd, those already show dissimilarities. The play oscillates between Beckett's influence and the attempts to break away from those; 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 the separation. Simultaneously, the play anticipates the main ideas (viz. chance, aleatory) and the central elements of *The Music of Chance*. The 'road novel' displays American values as the freedom

of the open road; while the figures of Laurel and Hardy are completed into distinct characters, furthermore, the wall and the stones are transformed.

Hide and Seek bears close resemblance to *Happy Days*, *Endgame*, and *Play*. The two figures, Man and Woman, are akin to the married couples Winnie and Willie, or Nagg and Nell; they appear almost as a younger, earlier version of the Beckettian pairs. Meanwhile, the engagement with the philosophy of language reflects the author's tendencies, in Wittgensteinian terms, to create his "private language" (96). Furthermore, the reinterpretation of the motif of the wall (physical and mental) generates another line that point toward the author's later works: the membrane that stands between the (fictitious) author and his work (*Oracle Night*, *The Inner Life of Martin Frost*).

Blackouts is a slightly different impulse which bears little (if any) resemblance to Beckett's drama; meanwhile displays the framework of the novel *Ghosts*. The play is in flux: changes and develops through the course of the happenings, while resembling the precursor's work less and less. The play may be considered as a link which maintains connection with the author's dramatic works and early prose.

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