

## A Time for Such a Word: On Prophecy and Performance

[Steven Connor](#)

A talk given at [In Imagination: The Future Reflected in Art and Argument](#), a symposium at the University of Sheffield, 4th October 2013, in conjunction with the UK premiere of Forced Entertainment's *Tomorrow's Parties*.

---

At the end of *Waiting for Godot*, Vladimir is asked by the boy who has appeared in a similar way at the end of Act I, but who says he was not there, what message he is to carry back to Mr Godot. Vladimir replies 'Tell him . . . (he hesitates) . . . tell him you saw me and that . . . (*he hesitates*) . . . that you saw me. (*Pause. Vladimir advances, the Boy recoils. Vladimir halts, the Boy halts. With sudden violence.*) You're sure you saw me, you won't come and tell me tomorrow that you never saw me!'

*Waiting for Godot* has the reputation of having put something like pure presence on the stage, making the stage the scene of something less, or more, than a déjà vu, something other than a shadowing-forth of other scenes, seen elsewhere, elsewhere. But the essential feature of presence, or of the present, is its incompleteness. This is why you cannot really seize the day, or live in the moment, as we are bracingly enjoined to do, because the day or the moment are not there to be grabbed or inhabited until they are already over and done with. The present always arrives too late to be any good to itself, which has always already made its excuses and slipped away. Vivian Mercier quothably wrote that *Waiting for Godot* is a play in which 'nothing happens, twice'. But it has to be, if it is to be anything at all, because not even nothing can happen only once. Only that can happen that has happened twice: that has occurred, and then recurred, in the registering of what it can then be seen to have been. So there are no singularities in human history. Anything that simply happens, without ever having been recognised as having happened, sinks into the numb, grey night of never-having-been. What, for instance, has become of all the things that happened, or occurred to you as I have been speaking in the last couple of minutes, in this time and place, so-called, where are they now, those million incipiences and micro-events, shrugs, itches, flickers of association, clutches of understanding, twitches of libido? Either you have just now suddenly tugged them back into memory or awareness, or you have already forgotten them, and so they have vanished without trace. It's double or quits with history; things that happen must happen at least twice, or not at all. What goes around comes around, and it can't get going until it has come back.

It is sometimes said that animals have no past or future, but only an ongoing, unconscious now. But the truth seems to be in fact that that animals can be nothing but their past and their future, since what is missing from their experience

is precisely the experience of a now. For what is the experience of a ‘now’, but the experience of never being able quite to experience it? So what is missing from an animal experience of the now is precisely the experience of being missing from the now in their very experience of it. In this sense, animals cannot be in what we call ‘the present’ because they can only *be* in the present. Nowness – *nunciance*, let’s call it – is just what animals cannot have, because their now is a *nunc stans* and not a *nunc dimittis*. So nunciance has to be grasped as a particular kind of ungraspability or uninhabitability. This is in fact to say that only humans have a now because only humans have a future. Only for humans, or animals that may enter the ecstatic condition of the human (and we are ourselves animals that have only just entered this condition), is the *nunc a nuntius*, a message, only for humans is the now a kind of news, annunciation. The only kind of presence that the now can have is projective – a reaching towards the now that it will have been. The only kind of now there can be is one that depends on being able to be reported in a future (‘tell him you saw me’) that thereby deports the now from itself into that future. Animals, or animals unlike the animals we will have been, cannot have existence in the now precisely because they do not experience that deportation from the present moment, that asymptotic failure fully to be in the present, that being-in-the-present is, and so that gives being what we call ‘here’ its savour and ache. Animals have a now only when they come close to something like the projective sense of human beings, when they are entirely taken up by some imminent aim, stalking a gazelle, building a web, when they are lost from themselves in some project. For the present is always projective, time drawn like a bow by tendency or intention (*tendere* means just this, the bending of a bow). Perhaps the present is taking aim at itself, at what it will have been, its volleys of arrows sent out of sight, somewhere becoming rain. Not to exist in projective time, time brought under tension, but to exist purely moment by moment, would be not to exist in a present at all. Existing is a perpetual exiting from itself. You can only enter the now by absconding from it, and without this spectral diplopia, we are ourselves walking shadows. We are full of the future we are not yet. Without this not-yet, we are ourselves yet to come. We bide our time, the whole time of our abiding, for the time for such a word that there may have been, tomorrow, or tomorrow, or tomorrow.

The present is ahead of itself, the present tense is literally a pre-tense. And the tense structure of English teaches us that the future is split in the same way as the present. For there is the future tense, in which we speak of what is to come, and then, beyond, or before it, there is the future perfect tense, what in French is called the *futur antérieur*, the future ahead of itself, and in German the *Futur II* or *vollendete Zukunft*, the second, or consummated future, the future to the power of two, the future come round fully to itself. We depend on the future because we are only able to be what we will have been. We reach forward to the future that pulls us out of our presence. Not that this future will ever itself simply arrive and be content. It

will itself depend on its never-to-come perfecting by the further future that will double it.

So we depend on the future because the future makes good our here-and-now presence. But the future that gives us that presence must also betray it, cauterising its condition of open ongoingness. The future as perfected, as the being over and done with of the present, is the death of that present as continuance. The future that gives the present to itself must also murder that present by taking away its future. Prophecy and premonition do the work of the death drive, in that they are driven by the need to have been, by the urge to constitute being as being-over, that can perfect our present only by putting it to the death of having been. This is why, if prophecy conjures the future into the present, it must also be in part apotropaic, an aversion or a warding off of the future.

Dreaming is twinned with prophecy. Prophecies have often come in dreams, or, rather, perhaps, human beings have often been drawn to see dreams as prophetic. This may be because dreams themselves have the quality of having no present, or lack the capacity to be experienced in their present. As soon as I can say 'this is a dream' I have started to wake from it. Dreams must always be reconstituted, and subject to what Freud called secondary revision. A dream never coincides with its narration, even though only narration can start to get a grip on its particular quality of ungraspability. A dream calls to be narrated, even though that narration always brings misprision and dissipation. It is not that you have a dream, in some immediate and elementary way, and then subsequently experience difficulty in recapturing it. Rather a dream is the experience of not being able to recapture the dream. The dream dribbles through the sieve of recollection, though only that sieve can lift it out of the turbid ocean of unreclected mental experience. This is because a dream is as close as we can get to pure presence, to something that happens without having happened, though only its groping recurrence discloses this. So the experience of a dream is something like the experience of a pure prophecy, a present shaping of a future that will only be able to be present retroactively. A prophecy is a promise, or a wager, that a future will come which will confirm it as having been a prophecy. A dream is always a kind of open prophecy of what a future will be able to make of it.

Theatre is a little like this kind of looping dream, in which we can, like Hamm and Clov in Beckett's *Endgame*, ask 'What's happening, what's happening?', and receive the answer 'Something is taking its course', meaning, something, one may not yet know what, is going on, that might get to be something that happens to have happened. Theatre, in its so-called present, calls in the future that alone can call it into being, allowing it to be by enabling it to have been.

There is a difference between a prediction and prophecy in this respect. A prediction is tied to a specific possibility in a definite and datable future – the

winner of the 2.30 at Haydock Park, about which I can verifiably be right or wrong. In this sense, death, in its nonspecific necessity, is prophetic rather than predictive – as Beckett observes in *Proust*, ‘Death has not asked us to keep a day free’. All prophecies are in fact self-fulfilling prophecies, since that is the point of prophecy, to ravel with the fabric of space-time (a space-time that is entirely made up of such interferences) such as to make it more likely that it will come to seem prophetic. If you take care to prophesy everything that might reasonably happen (I predict that Boy Racer either will or will not win the 2.30 at Haydock Park), then you increase hugely your chances of cleaning up, or, more likely, someone else cleaning up in your stead. This is why prophesy is so notoriously riddling, traditionally obscure not only to its audiences but also to its utterers, such as the trance-possessed pythia of the Delphic oracle, precisely because its meaning cannot be present in or to it. Prophecy is the performance of a speech act that saith ‘Lo, I hereby predict that something in what I here say, or will later be taken to have said, will come to seem like a prediction’. Or, in short, ‘I predict that this will one day count as a prediction.’ This is why prophesy, or open-ended prediction, always belongs to that class of utterances known as performatives, utterances that do not name or describe things, but rather do things, or act out the doing of them. Perhaps the purest form of performative, theatre, that pretends to be pretending to do what it really is doing, namely pretending, is therefore always in some sense also prophetic, reaching into the open future that alone will establish whether there will have been a time for such a word, as pretending, tending, before its time, toward whatever, when all is said and done, if ever, it may have been.