

## SAMUEL BECKETT'S DEBT TO MAURICE MAETERLINCK

*First Blind Man*      *Is he not back yet?*  
*Second Blind Man*    *You woke me up!*  
*First Blind Man*      *I was sleeping too.*  
*Third Blind Man*     *I was sleeping too.*  
*First Blind Man*      *Is he not back yet?*  
*Second Blind Man*    *I didn't hear anything.*  
*Third Blind Man*     *It must be time to go back.*  
*First Blind Man*      *We need to find out where we are.*  
*Second Blind Man*    *It's turned cold since we left.*  
*First Blind Man*      *We need to find out where we are.*

An early draft of *Waiting for Godot*? Yes, in a way. *The Blind*, of which these are the opening lines, was written in 1890. Maeterlinck's *Les Aveugles* had its first performance, at a small theatre in Paris, sixty years before Beckett's *En Attendant Godot*.

Maurice Maeterlinck, Belgian playwright and essayist, is remembered now, if at all, as the author of *The Bluebird*, a play for children, and of *Pelléas et Mélisande*, the play that Debussy made into an opera. But even to say that much about him is misleading. Of those who know the opera, probably only a few would be able to name the author of the original play. (It is the same with the forgotten authors of *Carmen*, *Cavalleria Rusticana* and *Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk*.) And Maeterlinck did not write *The Bluebird* for children, he wrote it for grown-ups. It was later adapted for children by his wife.

All the characteristics of Beckett's plays can be found, not merely in embryo but fully developed, in Maeterlinck's. This is not intended as a criticism of Beckett or to imply that he was in any way a plagiarist, but simply to point out that, for all that he seemed to British theatre-goers in 1953 to be completely new and to represent a complete break with tradition, he was in fact part of a literary and theatrical tradition that went back already more than half a century.

Maeterlinck wrote an essay called *The Tragical in Daily Life* (*Le Tragique quotidien*, 1898) which was in effect his manifesto. 'There is a tragic element in the life of every day,' it begins, 'that is far more real, far more penetrating, far more akin to the true self that is in us than the tragedy that lies in great adventure.' There is no great adventure in Beckett, just tramps sitting under a tree, discussing the human condition, and none in Maeterlinck's plays either.

What Maeterlinck wishes to do, he says, is 'to hush the discourse of reason and sentiment, so that above the tumult may be heard the solemn, uninterrupted whisperings of man and his destiny'. This seems like an echo of Wordsworth's 'soothing thoughts that spring out of human suffering'. There is much in common between Maeterlinck's essay and Wordsworth's Preface to the *Lyrical Ballads*. 'The invaluable works of our elder writers,' says Wordsworth, 'are driven into neglect by frantic novels, sickly and stupid German Tragedies, and deluges of idle and extravagant stories in verse.'

Maeterlinck takes the argument a step further. 'Is it beyond the mark,' he asks, 'to say that the true tragic element of life only begins at the moment when so-called adventures, sorrows and dangers have disappeared?' The real drama begins, he suggests, when the action stops. 'Is it not when we are told, at the end of the story, "They were happy," that the great disquiet should intrude itself?'

He compares drama with other, more contemplative art forms, in which action plays no part, in which time itself is irrelevant. 'Far different is it with the other arts – with painting and music, for instance – for these have learned to select and reproduce those obscurer phases of daily life that are not the less deep-rooted and amazing.' This leads him to the idea of what he calls 'static theatre', theatre that is still and timeless, like a painting or a piece of music.

Of all the labels that have been applied to Beckett's theatre, this seems the most apt. Of all Maeterlinck's plays, those that best fit the description are two of his early short plays, *Interior*, in which two men look through the window of a house at the family inside, knowing that their daughter has been drowned and putting off the moment when they have to tell them, and *The Intruder*, in which another family waits, in the best traditions of Greek tragedy, for a death to occur off-stage. Even the titles suggest paintings rather than plays.

Opportunities to see Maeterlinck's plays in performance are, at least in Britain, rare. Three of his short plays were broadcast on BBC Radio 3 a few years ago, in a new translation by Katie Hims, with a cast that included the marvellous John Rowe, a survivor of the old BBC Radio Repertory Company. Maeterlinck was suspicious of actors (perhaps because his wife was one) and thought that his plays would be better performed by marionettes. He anticipated radio plays, much as he anticipated Samuel Beckett, before either of them had been invented. A repeat of *Beyond Words*, as the BBC broadcast was called, is long overdue.

So are new translations of Maeterlinck's plays. To read them in French, after reading English translations done in the early 1900s, is like seeing an old painting after it has been restored. The author's reputation for being a mystic encouraged his English translators to dress up his everyday French in medieval costume, making him sound like a Belgian William Morris.

Which leaves us, until publishers and producers wake up to the importance of this neglected Nobel Prize winning playwright, with *The Bluebird*, a play about children, not for them. It is impossible to stage. There are well over a hundred characters. The set designs can only be imagined, which is, I think, the point. Take, for example, 'The Kingdom of the Future' in Act V.

*The immense halls of the Azure Palace, where the children wait that are yet to be born. Endless perspectives of sapphire columns supporting turquoise vaults. Everything, from the light and the lapis-lazuli flagstones to the shimmering background into which the last arches run and disappear, everything, down to the smallest objects, is of an unreal, intense, fairy-like blue. Only the plinths and capitals of the columns, the keystones, a few seats and a few circular benches are of white marble or alabaster. To the right, between the columns, are great opalescent doors. These doors, which Time will throw back towards the end of the scene, open upon Real Life and the quays of the Dawn. Everywhere, harmoniously peopling the hall, is a crowd of children robed in long azure garments.*

And so on. Puppets, or better still radio, are the only answer. The whole play is an elaborate parody of a fairy tale, written to illustrate a paradox: what we take for real is unreal, what we take as unreal is the only reality. That may be something that children know instinctively, but it needs spelling out for the rest of us. Someone should put it on, using real actors and puppets, like *War Horse*, as the climax of a Maeterlinck season to celebrate his sesquicentenary, which unfortunately was last year. Someone should do it anyway.