



IDEIAS E CRÍTICAS

NOTHINGNESS IN WORDS

ENCLOSED: **WAITING FOR GODOT**

**Stanley Gontarski**  
Florida State University  
E-mail: [sgontarski@fsu.edu](mailto:sgontarski@fsu.edu)

## ABSTRACT

In this paper, we discuss basic subjects that are present in Beckett's **Waiting for Godot**, such as intertextuality, questions of identity, and metaphysical subjects.

Keywords: Samuel Beckett, **Waiting for Godot**, Herbert Blau, Jan Johnson, Silence.

## RESUMO

Neste artigo diversas formas de acesso e fruição de **Esperando Godot**, de Samuel Beckett são apresentadas, tais como relações intertextuais, questões identitárias e metafísicas

Palavras-chave: Samuel Beckett, **Esperando por Godot**, Herbert Blau, Jan Johnson, Silêncio.

**A**lmost hidden amid the addenda to Samuel Beckett's second novel, **Watt**, scraps which "Only fatigue and disgust prevent its incorporation" into the body of the text, sits one of Beckett's most emblematic poems:

who may tell the tale  
of the old man?  
weigh absence in a scale?  
mete want in a span?  
the sum assess  
of the world's woes?  
nothingness  
in words enclose?

This untitled, eight line interrogatory offers a fundamental challenge to anyone tempted to verbalize his or her insights about the work of Samuel Beckett. The most profound response to the nothingness enclosed in words, that is, the entire Beckett canon, may finally be silence (a strategy which might find more sympathy among oriental rather than occidental critics). And so the most valid way to write about about **Waiting for Godot** might be not to; the perfect lecture might be the one where the lecturer stands silently before an audience for — say — an hour. That audience would then grow conscious of its own *waiting* — for something to happen, for something to relieve the silence, the boredom, the emptiness of the present condition. After a while its members might begin to look for ways to fill time, to amuse itself. Individuals might begin to read, talk, doodle, play little games, but basically the spectators would wait. Audiences generally enters theaters, lecture halls, classrooms,

bookstores with expectations, preconceptions about the rituals and even the contents of plays, lectures, books; that is, we've all internalized cultural codes and conventions which shape our expectations, and an hour's silence rather than an hour's worth of random background noises, since even John Cage's pioneering composition, 4' 33", during which a musician sits before a piano for *precisely* that length of time playing *nothing*, is not full of silence (and the phrase "full of silence" strikes at the heart of the paradox). The audience coughs, shifts about in its seats, gets up and walks out, often noisily an hour's worth of nonlecture or antilecture would certainly disrupt expectations. Or one might begin the lecture, then leave the room for a bit, to go to the toilet, say, as Vladimir does; that too would upset expectations and certainly cause some tittering. Perhaps the most profound lectures on or performances of **Waiting for Godot** are those that never take place. The most significant production of **Waiting for Godot** may not have been Herbert Blau's 1957 version with the San Francisco Actor's Workshop which played in San Quentin prison to an audience of condemned murderers, or even Samuel Beckett's own mounting of the play performed at the Schiller Theater in Berlin on March 8, 1975, but the production Jan Jonson directed in Stockholm in April of 1986 with "five inmates of the country's top maximum security jail... Four out of five, all drug offenders, absconded through an open dressing room window just before the first night at the City Theatre in Göteborg." For all we know that audience is still waiting.<sup>1</sup> Beckett may have anticipated Jonson's performance (and Cage's 4'33") as early as his unpublished 1938 novel, **Dream of Fair to Middlin Women**, where the narrator suggests that "the best music... was the music that became inaudible after a few bars..."

Having myself, to borrow one of Samuel Beckett's metaphors, already stained the silence, it seems clear to me that I would not have the courage to repeat Jonson's most appropriate and profound production of **Godot** even as I celebrate it. Given the opportunity to direct the play, I would no doubt bow to convention and dutifully raise the curtain at the appointed hour and hope that the actors actually appeared. With an absence of occurrence, or rather an occurrence of absence, we might have approximated something of the early audience experience of **Waiting for Godot**, a play in which, as the critic Vivian Mercier so wittily observed, nothing happenstwicely. We come to theaters prepared for action, so to speak, to watch *something* happen. Watching nothing happen no less twice — can be profoundly unsettling.

The trick is in how we read Mercier's aphorism. What *happens* is nothing. Certainly no one leaving City Theater in Göteborg that April evening in 1986 felt that *nothing* had happened, but rather that nothing had *happened*. That is,

<sup>1</sup> "Audience Wait and Wait for Prison Godots," **The Times** (31 April 1986).

that audience experienced not an *absence* of happening, but the *happening* of absence, the intense dramatization of nothing, a theme announced in the play's opening line: "Nothing to be done." That is, not only is there no solution to problems of tight boots, and by extension the plight of man in the universe (i.e., in the words of mad Lucky that "in spite of strides in alimentation and defecation [man] wastes and pines") but what needs to be done during an hour's silence, or the days of our lives, is nothing, the nothingness that is daily life, the nothingness of filling up time while we wait, the nothingness which keeps the nothingness within at bay.

When asked by Colin Duckworth about the sources of **Godot**, Beckett suggested his English novel **Murphy**. He might have suggested **Watt** as well. The full implications of Beckett's suggestion have unfortunately yet to be explored by critics who find more immediate links to **Godot** in Beckett's first extended piece of French prose fiction, **Mercier et Camier** (1946). Certainly, one link between **Godot** and **Murphy** is the direct allusion in the latter to the Greek philosopher Democritus the Abderite, the laughing philosopher, who proclaimed in his version of atomic theory that air is not mere absence. The phrase he used which has become so appealing to Beckett is that "Nothing is more real than nothing." It is after Murphy's chess game with the potential apneist, Mr. Endon, that he can find some temporary solace in the nothingness:

"Murphy began to see nothing, that colorlessness which is such a rare post-natal treat, being the absence (to abuse a nice distinction) not of *percipere* [perceiver] but of *percipi* [being perceived]. His other senses also found themselves at peace, an unexpected pleasure. Not the numb peace of their own suspension, but the positive peace that comes when the somethings give way, or perhaps simply add up, to the Nothing, than which, in the guffaw of the Abderite, naught is more real" (246).

Murphy's solace in his nothingness is short lived. Even he recoils from an emptiness, from the microcosm he so assiduously sought, drawn back to the music, Music, MUSIC of the macrocosm and Celia. Chance, however, intervenes and Murphy is atomized into superfine chaos. Didi and Gogo, sobriquets for Vladimir and Estragon, on the other hand, find not even temporary solace but terror in the possibilities of nothing. As Estragon suggests, "Nothing happens, nobody comes, nobody goes, it's awful!" Phrases like "Nothing happens" are, of course, double edged. What the tramps witness is the happening of nothing, and their one hope against it is Godot, ironically the primary, informing absence of the play. In the novel **Watt** the terror is expressed in a phrase which might itself gloss **Godot**: "Nothing had happened, a thing that was nothing had happened, with the utmost formal directness" (p. 73).

Refusing to accept the very indeterminacy and contingency of their plight, and by extension that of all of human existence, Vladimir and Estragon find that there is nothing to be done, nothing these two tramps who resemble the tragic comedians of American silent film like Laurel and Hardy, Buster Keaton, and the character whom the French call Charlot, Charlie Chaplin can do about tight boots, or hair lice, prostrate problems, about their day to day lives, about their place in the universe, about an empty universe, about their having been born into it.

Vladimir (Didi) picks up the cosmic implications of Estragon's (Gogo's) complaint about being unable to remove his boot: "I'm beginning to come around to that opinion. All my life I've tried to put it from me, saying, Vladimir, be reasonable, you haven't yet tried everything. And I resume the struggle" (7).

The play is now nearly forty years old, having had its première at the Théâtre Babylone in Paris in January of 1953, and it seems almost tamed by its official designation as a modern classic (whatever that oxymoron means) and by its inclusion on the lists of set texts in international universities. Those early audiences, however, were at least divided. Some found it boring, irritating, and incomprehensible. But the play had its early defenders too. The perceptive French dramatist and critic Jean Anouilh compared the première of **Godot** to the opening of Pirandello's **Six Characters in Search of an Author** three decades earlier in 1923, and he described this new work as "a music hall sketch of Pascal's *Pensée* as played by the Fratellini clowns." In France and England the play received respectful reviews, if rather small audiences. The American première, however, was pure farce. It opened at the Coconut Grove Playhouse in Miami Beach, Florida, and it was billed as "the laugh hit of two continents." The audiences of vacationing sun worshippers looking for easy diversion were, to say the least, not amused. But America was also the scene of an amazingly apposite early performance. The San Francisco Actor's Workshop took Herbert Blau's production into San Quentin prison in November of 1957. While the rest of the world puzzled over the meaning of Godot? God? Happiness? Eternal Life? Christian salvation? Any sort of salvation? The future (which by definition is never *present*) the inmates of San Quentin prison, who in a painfully Beckettian phrase, were "sentenced to life," or "got life," understood the play immediately, on an immediate, primary, visceral level. For them **Waiting for Godot** was straight realism. Those convicts might not comprehend critical theory, Surrealist or Dada manifestoes, Existential philosophy, or phenomenological aesthetics but they knew well the waiting gamewaiting for change in their condition, waiting for the mail, for appeals, for pardons. Waiting and having nothing

happen, and so having to fill the time. As the inmate reviewer for the **San Quentin News** of 28 November 1957 wrote: "We're still waiting for Godot, and shall continue to wait. When the scenery gets too drab and the action too slow, we'll call each other names and swear to part forever but then there's no place to go." "That's how it is on this bitch of an earth," says Pozzo.

The conventions of the theater have never been the same since **Godot**. It is one of those culture altering artworks that changes the way we perceive or construct reality. It was so unexpected a play, and yet now it now seems so inevitable, so necessary. It captured something which perhaps had never been staged before, even as there was nothing new about it. Its elements have been a fundamental part of our JudeoChristian, western culture for thousands of years, if unrealized in art. As Vladimir says early on, "Hope deferred maketh the something sick, who said that?" The allusion is to the wisdom literature of the Old Testament traditionally attributed to Solomon, **Proverbs XIII, 12**: "Hope deferred maketh the heart sick; but when desire cometh, it is a tree of life." The tree stands before us on stage, leafless in the first act, but with "four or five leaves" in the second. The tree of life looks suspiciously like the tree of death, especially as Vladimir and Estragon plan to commit suicide by hanging themselves from its boughs. The tree, however, does sprout leaves in the second act, perhaps even overnight. It represents at least a minimum degree of vitality in a place or space otherwise arid. Where trees sprout leaves, that is, when life still changes, when time passes, hope remains. To Vladimir's "Time has stopped," Pozzo replies almost brutally, "Don't you believe it, Sir, don't you believe it... Whatever you like, but not that." In his 1981 prose work, *Company* Beckett returns to the quotation from Proverbs with a bit more optimism, "Better hope deferred than none." The statement is immediately undercut, however, with, "up to a point" (p. 26). But as Beckett suggested in the opening of his study of the French novelist Marcel Proust, time is "a double headed monster of damnation and salvation." The passing of time may fuel hope, but in that passing man deteriorates, physically wastes and pines.

But let us focus on one head at a time. In **Lamentations III, 26** we are told, "It is good that man should both hope and quietly wait for the salvation of the Lord." In **Romans VIII, 24-25**, however, we learn that the process of waiting in order to have meaning must be elusive, irresolute, nothing; salvation and hope remain must remain out of reach like water from the parched lips of Tantalus: "We are saved by hope: but hope that is seen is not hope; for what a man seeth, why doth he yet hope for? But if we hope for that we see not, then do we with patience wait for it." "We are saved by hope," says the author or authors of *Romans*; in **Molloy** Moran calls it "hellish hope." Beckett's two tramps waiting

on stage may have initiated a fundamentally new sort of drama, but its concerns, its themes are at least as old as the western JudeoChristian tradition.

**Psalm** 40 begins, "I waited patiently for the Lord; he inclined to me and heard my cry. He drew me up from the desolate pit, out of the miry bog and set my feet upon a rock, making my steps secure." In fulfillment of that prophecy in the New Testament, the rock was Simon Peter, the foundation of the Christian church, the first in line of the Apostolic succession. Beckett parodies this imagery in Lucky's speech where the labors of two rocks, Steinweg (stone road in German) and Peterman (Rockman), are "lost." The rock upon which the hope of the world was to be built has become a waste land as in the third section of Lucky's speech the theme "earth abode of stones" is repeated four times and alluded to at least twice more. But the theme of waiting is not only biblical. It has as well entered our popular culture. An advertising campaign for a popular brand of chewing gum dispensed through machines in the Paris Métro was visible at every Metro stop. It said simply, "En attendant..." One could easily picture a traveling Beckett confronted by the elliptical slogan stop after stop after stop, and wondering, "while waiting for what?"

One interpretation of **Waiting for Godot** sees the play as an autobiographical account of Beckett's and his future wife Susanne's flight from Paris to the Vaucluse, during which journey they slept by day in haystacks and walked all night, tired, hungry and without food. The autobiographical reading is plausible since **Godot** contains at least one allusion to the Rousillon exile, a man called Bonnelley, from whom Beckett occasionally got food, but the play is fundamentally about stasis, not an arduous journey. Some of the dialogue and the strains of hiding from the Nazis may have been borrowed from the escape to unoccupied France, but the core of the play, the stasis, the uncertainty, the emptiness, the difficulty of filling time, indeed the waiting, must have come from another source. A more plausible possibility is the one suggested by Beckett's close friend and English publisher, John Calder, who offers an alternate autobiographical interpretation. Despite his fluent French, Beckett would be easily identified as an alien during his exile because of his Irish accent, and even if Beckett had little to fear from the local representatives of the Pétain government, Hitler violated his agreement with the Vichy government in order to help protect his southern flank from an expected allied invasion and ordered the seizure of unoccupied France on 10 November 1942. From then until the Americans entered Rousillon on 24 August 1944 Beckett was in considerable danger. The threat of German patrols passing through the region would send Beckett and perhaps Susanne, or more likely another alien like Henri Hayden, a Polish jew who would be in danger even from local



collaborators sympathetic to Hitler's Jewish policies, to hide in the forest and wait, sometimes for days, for word to return. Hiding in the woods and fields, confused about potential rendezvous sites, perhaps even forgetting code words whispered during a lunch break or across café tables, they never knew when they heard someone approach whether it would be a Nazi patrol, French collaborators or friendly villagers. But finally what is of most concern to us is less the character of the author than the characters of the author.

What finally are we to make of our waiters? Are they simply foolish, maintaining hope in the face of overwhelming evidence to the contrary? Or, quite the contrary, are they the very epitome of Christianity, the imagery of which permeates the play, maintaining at least as much faith as Job, maintaining hope in the face of overwhelming evidence to the contrary? To each of those questions Beckett might simply answer, "perhaps," the most important word in his plays, he told one interviewer. And the questions are further complicated by other developing themes. Even if salvation were available its dispensation seems arbitrary, depending more on chance, the opportunities of the moment, than on anything like a lifetime of commitment. Vladimir refers to the Gospel according to Saint Luke XXIII, 39-43 when he suggests that one of the thieves crucified with Christ was saved. "It's a reasonable percentage," he concludes; i. e., 50/50. In **Murphy**, it is Neary who suggests the myth of the saved thief as some solace, "and do not despair... Remember also one thief was saved" (213). Yet the more reflection Vladimir gives the matter the more he realizes that the odds are considerably slimmer. Only one of the four Gospels mentions the saved thief even though all four of the Apostles were there, or thereabouts. Now it's 50/50 of only 25%. Even when salvation appears possible, its dispensation seems arbitrary. Was one thief saved or not? One Gospel says yes, one says no. Were any thieves at all crucified along with Christ? Two Gospels say yes, two suggest perhaps not. This salvation business seems very much a crap shoot, as chancy as one of Estragon's feet being in pain, the other being fine. Of this dilemma Beckett has said, only half jokingly, that one of Estragon's feet is saved, one is damned. And if one thief was saved, why? Was salvation dependent on a chance remark issued forth in the midst of torture, which is after all what crucifixion was, a means of slow strangulation. The pattern of reward and punishment seems very arbitrary throughout the play. Estragon spends the night in a ditch where he is beaten evidently regularly for unspecified offenses. Further, near the end of the first act Vladimir asks what appears to be Godot's messenger about his master. "He doesn't beat you?" "He beats my brother, Sir," the boy replies. In Beckett's inversion of the biblical story, it is the minder of the goats who is spared, the minder of the sheep who

is punished. In the traditional version in the "Gospel According to St. Matthew" XXV, 3233, it is the shepherd who is saved, the goatherd who is punished. Beckett's reversal again throws into high relief the arbitrary nature of the whole system of rewards and punishment, salvation and damnation. Even if Godot arrived, his actions would be problematic. "And if we dropped him?" Estragon asks. "He'd punish us," Vladimir replies. A few lines later, to Estragon's, "And if he comes?" Vladimir replies, "We'll be saved." But saved from what? When Vladimir suggests that they might repent, the tramps are confused about what to repent except "Our being born." But, of course, it is too late for that. That sort of deep existential pessimism, if not nihilism, is not, however, peculiar to modern man's alienation and angst. The comment is simply a restatement of the traditional Christian view of this world as a place of suffering, a vale of tears, a *via dolorosa*. But it is also the dark side of Hellenic culture, an element of what Nietzsche would call its Dionysian quality. In **The Birth of Tragedy from the Spirit of Music**, Nietzsche quotes the exchange between Midas and Silenus, companion to Dionysus. To Midas's question, what was "best and most desirable of all things for man," Silenus answers: "oh wretched ephemeral race, children of chance and misery, why do ye compel me to tell you what it were most expedient for you not to hear? What is best of all is beyond your reach forever: not to be born, not to be, to be *nothing*. But the second best for you is quickly to die." Such a view is not only a theme in *Godot*, it is Beckett's view of tragedy.

But **Waiting for Godot** is not only somber tragedy. Beckett calls this work a tragicomedy. Its sources are the tradition of harlequin in tears, **Il Pagliacci**, Charlie Chaplin's sad clowns. It is also the view of life proposed by Schopenhauer. "The life of every individual," Schopenhauer tells us, "if we survey it as a whole and in general, and only lay stress on its most significant features, is really always a tragedy, but gone through in detail, it has the character of a comedy. For the deeds and vexations of the day, the restless irritation of the moment, the desires and fears of the week, the mishaps of every hour, are all through chance, which is ever bent upon some jest, scenes of a comedy. But the never-satisfied wishes, the frustrated efforts, the hopes unmercifully crushed by fate, the unfortunate errors of the whole life, the increasing suffering and death at the end, are always a tragedy. Thus, as if fate would add derision to the misery of existence, our life must contain all the woes of tragedy, and yet we cannot even assert the dignity of tragic characters, but in the broad detail of life must inevitably be the foolish characters of a comedy" (PS 59, p. 261).

Yet, in the face of such insufficient justification for man's suffering, amid suggestions of the arbitrary nature of salvation, Vladimir, at any rate, retains

his hope, his faith in a rational world. To Estragon's insistence that he "wasn't doing anything" and yet was beaten, Vladimir play's Job's comforter, "But it's the way of doing it that counts, the way of doing it." Vladimir insists that Estragon's beatings are caused by some offensive behavior. For him, the world must make causal sense.

The odds against salvation are further increased through the uncertainties of identity. What exactly would Godot look like if he did arrive? Would he recognize Didi and Gogo? He would certainly not simply identify himself to every stranger he met along the road like a parody of a contemporary politician. Might it not be possible for him to arrive and depart without our knowing it. After all, few recognized the face of salvation when it appeared some nineteen hundred and ninety-two years ago. And Beckett himself entertained the possibility in an early draft of the play that Pozzo might himself be Godot. But even in the published text some hints to Godot's identity can be teased out of the shroud of uncertainty which envelopes the play. When Pozzo first appears, for instance, his name sounds enough like Godot for Estragon to say, "He said Godot." And Didi and Gogo are quite capable of mishearing names. Even Vladimir is unsure if the name of the visitor is "Pozzo or Bozzo?" And it is Pozzo who admits, "I am perhaps not particularly human." (Again, *perhaps*.) Does he mean only that he is a slave master, or something more divine? And once Pozzo and Lucky leave, Vladimir notes, as if he knew them, "How they've changed!" and insists to Estragon, "Yes, you do know them... We know them, I tell you. You forget everything... Unless they're not the same." Estragon is curious as to why Pozzo and Lucky did not recognize them. "That means nothing," Vladimir replies, "I too pretended not to recognize them. And then nobody ever recognizes us." Shortly thereafter, in an apparent development of Vladimir's insight, a boy appears, and Vladimir answers to the name of Mr. Albert. Is he indeed Vladimir Albert or Albert Vladimir? Did the boy mistake him for someone else? Does Vladimir know himself who he is? Perhaps he is finally more representative than individual. He may be Man and so can answer to any name. To calls for help from Pozzo in the second act Vladimir intones "Vehemently," "To all mankind they were addressed, those cries for help still ringing in our ears! But at this place, at this moment of time, all mankind is us, whether we like it or not." Further, to Pozzo's "What is your name," Estragon answers, "Adam."

The vessel of personality here seems fractured as being seeps, oozes beyond traditional containment. When after their second encounter with Pozzo and Lucky, in Act II, Estragon asks, "Are you sure it wasn't him?" [i.e., Godot], Vladimir answers, "Not at all! (*Less sure*.) Not at all! (*Still less sure*.) Not at all." And we are

not always certain that Vladimir and Estragon themselves are independent entities. Each act ends with "Yes, let's go," followed by the stage direction, *They do not move*. Vladimir and Estragon are tied to each other as securely as they are tied to Godot, as tightly as Lucky to Pozzo. Admittedly, they move about the stage more or less freely, but they enjoy only the freedom of two arms attached to a single trunk. The phrase which Beckett used to talk about Mercier and Camier applies here too, "a pseudo couple." Vladimir and Estragon might be seen as two aspects of a single self, the mental and the physical, for instance, a dichotomy in keeping with Beckett's early interest in Cartesian dualism. Personality is as problematic in the play as the identity of Godot.

We've moved in our discussion from the problematics of salvation to the problematics of identity and personality, and yet they are sides of the same epistemological coin. They both entail the search for core realities, the absence of which destroys so many of Beckett's characters like Watt and Moran, who cannot face the fact that reality may be, like the core of the onion or the center of a whirlpool, an absence. In fact, the line separating dream from what we commonly call reality (if indeed there is a distinction) is not always clear. Vladimir suggests the problem near play's end: "Was I sleeping while the others suffered? Am I sleeping now? Tomorrow, when I wake, or think I do what shall I say of today? That with Estragon my friend, at this place, until the fall of night, I waited for Godot? That Pozzo passed with his carrier, and that he spoke to us? Probably. But in all that what truth will there be?" (58). The line is remarkable for questioning the veracity of what we have just witnessed on stage. In fact the whole landscape has a dreamlike quality to it. The Moon rises "in a moment"; trees sprout leaves overnight. Pozzo and Lucky go blind and dumb respectively, overnight! To Vladimir's insistence that they were in the same spot yesterday, Estragon replies, "I tell you we weren't here yesterday. Another of your nightmares" (42b). If nightmare, however, it seems to recur nightly. In act one, Estragon falls asleep and dreams. When Vladimir wakes him, Estragon wants to relate his dream, but Vladimir insists, "Don't tell me!" Estragon's reply as he "gestures toward universe," is, "This one [i. e. this dream] is not enough for you?" (p. 11) To Vladimir's, "Do you remember [the tree]," Estragon replies, "You dreamt it" (p. 39).

But this dream world of **Godot** is no simple hierarchical dichotomy between dream and reality. Neither of those terms is privileged. Nor is the dream single, but we have dreams within dreams suggesting an infinite regression and progression as the two acts of the play are only two days of a potentially infinite series. Asked why two acts for **Godot**, Beckett replied that one would be too few, three too many. Vladimir looking again at the sleeping dreaming

Estragon can say, "At me too someone is looking, of me too someone is saying, He is sleeping, he knows nothing, let him sleep on" (p. 58b). Instead of a simple dream/reality dichotomy we have a multiplicity of interpenetrating dreams, all of which displace our epistemological certainty.

Moreover, the nightmare motif also helps explain the fluidity of time, which at times appears almost to have stopped, but at other times races forward so that Pozzo, having lost his watch, can scream, "Have you not done tormenting me with your accursed time! It's abominable! When! When! One day, is that not enough for you, one day I went blind, one day we'll go deaf, one day we were born, one day we shall die, the same day, the same second, is that not enough for you. They give birth astride of a grave, the light gleams an instant, then it is night once more" (p. 57b). Shortly thereafter, Vladimir resounds the theme: "Astride of a grave and a difficult birth. Down in the hole, lingeringly, the grave digger puts on the forceps" (p. 58). In **Godot**, time seems much more subjective than objective, much more personal and psychological than chronological.

And still they wait; they remain faithful. For Kierkegaard, reason could only take us so far, to the edge of the precipice. Then what was necessary was a great leap of faith. That leap toward belief is unsupported by any empirical evidence. It is a reasontranscending leap, and one must choose to leap or not. It is, as the title of one of Kierkegaard's books suggests, *Either/Or*. That leap by definition is irrational, absurd. Likewise, the empirical evidence of the play suggests that waiting is absurd, irrational. The tramps don't really know what Godot looks like. They are to meet him by "the tree," but is the plant which sits conspicuously mid-stage a tree at all and not rather a shrub or a bush. Vladimir asks, "What are you insinuating? That we've come to the wrong place?" "He should be here," Estragon replies, and Vladimir is forced to admit, "He didn't say for sure he'd come." The tramps have apparently been waiting for days, at least the two acts, the fact that nothing happens twice, suggests that they are caught in a cyclical existence, and yet no Godot perhaps, no Godot yet. There seems no rational reason for their continued waiting, and yet they wait, for this is what faith means: to hold a belief when empirical evidence is insufficient to support that belief. Doubting Thomas had no faith. If evidence were available, there would be no need for faith. We would have knowledge. Vladimir and Estragon have made the great leap of faith into absurdity, into unreason, not that they have many alternatives, and that leap is spine chilling. Amid all the epistemological uncertainties of the play, the one certainty seems their faithfulness: "What are we doing here," Vladimir intones, a bit too poetically, "that is the question. And we are blessed in this, that

we happen to know the answer. Yes, in this immense confusion one thing alone is clear. We are waiting for Godot to come." And then he immediately halves his certainty, "Or for night to fall... We have kept our appointment and that's an end to that. We are not saints, but we have kept our appointment. How many people can boast as much?" The apparent seriousness of Vladimir's assertions is immediately undercut with Estragon's "Billions." That is, they are not so very exceptional. Is this faith, this persistence of belief in the face of evidence to the contrary heroic or foolish? Do our tramps embody a Christian ideal or an existential foolishness? Are the two tramps to be admired or derided? The play has no more answer to those questions than does life itself.

But the play does contain strong elements of satire. Vladimir's speech on their faithful waiting is delivered while Lucky and Pozzo are crying for help. The longish speech begins with the advice, "Let us not waste our time in idle discourse!" And yet he does. Cries of help, of humanity in distress, punctuate Vladimir's pronouncements: "All I know is that the hours are long, under these conditions, and constrain us to beguile them with proceedings which how shall I say which may at first sight seem reasonable, until they become habit." What we have here is another example of the inability of the intellectual to act, a fault which may in part also account for Lucky's imprisonment. What finally entices Vladimir to action is not reason nor any concern for humanity, but the promise of payment. Vladimir's deliberations in the face of immediate appeals from a suffering humanity finally reinforces again the problematics of salvation and satirize the impotence of the intellectual. The other ineffectual thinker in the play, the other obviously impotent character, is Lucky a strange name for a slave, and yet appropriate. Within the epistemological uncertainties of the universe where an apparently personal God "loves us dearly with some exceptions," where, as Beckett himself describes the first part of Lucky's speech, it is about "the indifference of heaven, about divine apathy." The second part is, he tells us, about "man shrinking... man who is dwindling." The third is "earth abode of stones." If Vladimir and Estragon are "blessed" in their knowledge that they are waiting for Godot, Lucky too is "blessed," blessed as perhaps only one could be blessed in an absurd world, he is "blessed" or "lucky" that amid an uncertain, indifferent universe where God functions "from the heights of divine *apathia*, "where human reason has made no progress in solving the fundamental questions of human existence like who are we and what are we doing here? that is, incidentally, why we euphemistically call the themes of the Greek drama "universal"; we simply have not been able to solve those fundamental human problems within a universal flux and social chaos Lucky is lucky to know that he has a place, a definite function: to carry the

bags and obey the orders of Pozzo, even if the bags are only filled with sand. And he is "lucky" that Pozzo will have him at all. "The truth is," says Pozzo, "you can't drive such creatures away. The best thing would be to kill them."

Despite the play's questioning of the nature and purpose of human existence, it is fundamentally not an existential play rather, it is existential miniscule not majuscule. One of the tenets of Existentialism, at least as it is defined by Jean-Paul Sartre in his essay "Existentialism is a Humanism," is freedom. Man enters the world without essence and is free to define himself. But Beckett's play is about imprisonment and impotence, not about the power of self to create itself. **Waiting for Godot** is about being tied, sometimes visibly with a rope as Lucky to Pozzo, but also Pozzo to Lucky, sometimes invisibly but just as firmly, by cosmic and/or cultural forces as Didi to Gogo, as both to Godot. Moreover, the theme of restriction, of restraint is sounded as well in the minor key also. Estragon who is firmly tied to Vladimir but less so to Godot rejects the restrictions of having his shoes laced. "No, no, no," he shouts, "no laces, no laces!" (p. 44) And the theme of Lucky's dance is the net. "He thinks he's entangled in a net," says Pozzo. Vladimir and Estragon are the victims of expectations, victims of hope, but hope in others not in themselves. And so they are tied. And yet perhaps they choose to be helpless, choose to make the existential leap of faith, choose freely their own lack of choice and freedom. Are these characters existentially free or determined, biologically, socially or theologically? Again the play has no firmer answer than does life itself.

One way out for our trapped characters might be death. "What about hanging ourselves?" asks Estragon, and he is excited to hear that hanging might give them an erection. Freud makes a similar point in the **Interpretation of Dreams** analyzing the "MayBeetle Dream" where he notes that a female patient has told her husband "'Go hang Yourself.' It turned out that a few hours earlier she had read somewhere or other that when a man is hanged, he gets a powerful erection" (p. 236). But what was finally a life-affirming dream in Freud, becomes another inevitable disappointment in Beckett. Even if that were the case, the result would also be sadness, a post ejaculatory depression. Of Estragon's excitement about the possibilities of erection, Vladimir says, "With all that follows. Where it falls mandrakes grow. That's why they shriek when you pull them up." Vladimir's associations with sexuality hardly suggest joy or the affirmation of life.

There are practical problems with suicide, moreover. The bough of the flimsy tree would never support them. The rope would surely break. They could not even jump, "Hand in hand from the Eiffel Tower," for now, looking like bums, they would not even be allowed up. Moreover suicide, as Schopenhauer

reminds us, is a useless act. "Suicide, the willful destruction of the single phenomenal existence," Schopenhauer observed, "is a vain and foolish act, for the thing in itself, the species, and life, and will in general remains unaffected by it" (I, 515).

I have been suggesting here a number of themes through which one might approach **Waiting for Godot**: the problematics surrounding salvation, epistemology, time and being itself. Let me close on a theme not often discussed in regard to Beckett: politics. Beckett is rarely thought of as a political writer, and rightly so. He is not political the way, say, Jean-Paul Sartre or Bertolt Brecht are, but there is a power struggle going on in **Waiting for Godot**. Making people wait is an exercise in power. When the telephone company puts you on hold when you call, when the doctor or professor, is a half hour late for an appointment, they are exercising their power. It is the waiter who is powerless, the menial. The assumption within this power paradigm is that the waiter's time is valueless. The words themselves, waiters, attendants, what used to be ladies in waiting, are ideological.

Finally, what are we to make of this Samuel Beckett. Is he merely the poet of doom and depression, of human worthlessness, of pure pessimism, pure darkness? Is Beckett a poet without alternatives? He is perhaps finally no more pessimistic than the late Beethoven or the brooding Brahms whose pessimism is expressed within the harmonious formal structures of music. If there is some hope in Beckett, some cause for optimism and these are words that admittedly one does not often use in regard to Beckett's work it is found not within the systems man has traditionally used to order his life: religion, law, any political system or even language itself but in the formal, essential, transcending artwork. Despite the epistemological uncertainties and pessimism of *Godot*, we have the play itself, a sublime transcendence of its own themes. Played against the epistemological and existential uncertainties in the text is the text itself, a formal balanced exposition of absence and chaos. If the play is a nothing, it is a beautifully shaped nothing, in nearly symmetrical halves. Beckett's view of art may be close to that expressed by Nietzsche in **The Birth of Tragedy out of the Spirit of Music**: "when the will is most imperiled, art approaches, as a redeeming and healing enchantress; she alone may transform these horrible reflections on the terror and absurdity of existence into representations with which man may live. These are the representations of the *sublime* as the artistic conquest of the awful, and of the *comic* as the artistic release from the nausea of the absurd."