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Author(s): George Watson
Source: *The Maynooth Review / Revieú Mhá Nuad*, Vol. 1, No. 1 (Jun., 1975), pp. 17-35
Published by: Faculty of Arts, Celtic Studies & Philosophy NUIM
Stable URL: https://www.jstor.org/stable/20557940
Accessed: 22-03-2020 13:02 UTC

George Watson

Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*: A Reappraisal

It may well be an act of supererogation to write anything at all about Beckett's work in view of the massive output of the critical industry which has grown up around it. It may seem especially foolish to dig in the well-manured garden of *Waiting for Godot*. However, in the twenty years since the first English translation of *En Attendant Godot* certain critical emphases have, in my opinion, hindered rather than helped the appreciation of this great play by intelligent readers and audiences who do not claim to be – or want to be – Beckettomanes. (Part of the problem is the play's effortless and elegant bilinguality. This means that we have to cope with fiercely learned French criticism as well as with British and American.) In this essay I should like to offer a corrective, however incomplete, to some of these critical emphases which have so unfortunately obscured the play's accessibility and humanity.

First of all, there has been the damaging and daunting proclamation of Beckett's difficulty – 'perhaps the most difficult writer of his generation' says one of his chief proselytizers with lip-smacking relish,[1] and A. Alvarez in a recent study speaks of Beckett's work as being 'forbiddingly difficult and certainly becoming more difficult'.[2] It is certainly true that Beckett's work is not facile, and does not have an easily grasped social context as do the dramas of John Osborne, John Arden or even Harold Pinter (to name but three of his younger British contemporaries), but these grim warnings might be felt to stand more appropriately in front of the narrow entrances to Beckett's novels, obsessed and obsessive as they are in style and subject matter: *Waiting for Godot* is much less rarefied and obscure. The emphasis on Beckett's difficulty has given rise to at least three major critical strategies in relation to discussion of this play. Firstly, there has been the implied – and sometimes explicit – assertion that to understand *Waiting for Godot* properly one must undertake a lengthy exegesis of all Beckett's works. Certainly it is helpful to be aware of Beckett's preoccupations, and

1. Martin Esslin, 'Samuel Beckett', in *The Novelist as Philosopher*, ed. John Cruickshank (1962), p. 145.
2. *Beckett*, in *Fontana Modern Masters*, ed. Frank Kermode (1973), pp. 9-10.

legitimate to use in interpretation the evidence suggested by the author's other works. But often the effect of such a critical strategy has been that the play has not been looked at clearly enough for what it is in and for itself, and distortion has resulted (as for example in the view that *Waiting for Godot* is a dramatisation of the ideas contained in the essay on *Proust* of 1931, which will be discussed below).

Secondly – and closely related to the stress on Beckett's difficulty and on the need to study every Sibylline leaf – there is the approach which sees the dramatist as a philosopher, as in fact a thinly disguised existentialist who can only be understood in the context of Sartre and Camus. The prolegomena to *Waiting for Godot* on this view are *Being and Nothingness, The Myth of Sisyphus* and *Nausea*. Thus F. J. Hoffmann can say that it is 'an existentialist play [arguing] against the assumption of an image that drains off the energy of stark human responsibility',[3] and the omnivorous Martin Esslin discussing Beckett in the context of Kierkegaard, Heidegger and Sartre – with Bishop Berkeley bringing up the rear – says 'Beckett's writings . . . are more than mere illustrations of the point-of-view of existentialist philosophers . . . they constitute the culmination of existential thought itself.'[4] Though Esslin does argue the success with which Beckett transmutes these philosophical ideas into dramatic and theatrical terms, what I am concerned with here is the misleading and pervasive *tone* which this kind of discussion has imposed on critical response to *Waiting for Godot*. Beckett himself has said in 1961, 'If the subject of my novels could be expressed in philosophical terms, there would have been no reason for my writing them',[5] and the remark applies with even more force to the plays. And anyway, in some important ways, *Waiting for Godot* is at odds with the Sartrean existentialist position – as I shall argue, particularly with the concept of 'bad faith'.

Thirdly, there has been the heavy stress on seeing the play in relation to the 'tradition' or convention of the 'Theatre of the Absurd'. Martin Esslin's famous book with this title (published in 1964) is very useful, but in his almost missionary zeal to proselytize the drama of Beckett, Ionesco, Adamov, Genet and more, he does give the impression that there is a single set of coherent beliefs behind it all, thereby blurring the differences between individual dramatists and individual plays; and secondly, in an attempt to familiarise by association he manages to suggest that this drama is not really all that different from traditional drama anyway – hence *King Lear* can turn up in his list of 'sources' for absurd drama.

3. *Samuel Beckett: The Language of Self*, Carbondale (1962), p. 150.
4. Martin Esslin, ed., *Beckett: Twentieth Century Views*, Englewood Cliffs (1965), p. 5.
5. Quoted in Colin Duckworth, ed., *En Attendant Godot* (1966), p. xxxv. This is an excellent edition with some revealing stills from various famous productions of the play.

A common element in all these strategies is that they divert our attention – often, admittedly, in interesting directions – away from the consideration of the individual work of art, from seeing it steadily and seeing it whole, in Arnold's phrase. It is therefore with some risk of being accused of 'bad faith' (at very least) myself that I would like to preface my consideration of *Waiting for Godot* with some general remarks of my own, the obviousness of which is related to and will, I hope, be excused by, my stress on the play's accessibility as a major modern document.

In the first place, then, behind Beckett's play lies something much broader than is suggested by linking it to existentialist philosophy. It is something in the *Zeitgeist* of our gloomy war-torn century: more specifically, the Nietzschean formulation that God is dead, which colours much more than a good deal of modern literature. This feeling deprives man of the sense of a transcendental purpose in life, it inculcates a sense of the futility of life whose only object seems to be death, and it hurls man back on his own puny resources to attempt to give significance to the void left by the disappearance of God. Eugene O'Neill locates the root of the sickness of our time in

> the death of the old god and the incapacity of science and materialism to give a new god to the still living religious instinct.

The implication of his last phrase is that while we have lost our old beliefs, we still hunger to believe, and so we search on in anguish to find, in O'Neill's words, 'a new meaning of life with which to allay man's fear of death'.[6] This is the essence of the Sisyphean myth: the sense of life as a pointless (and repetitive) *task*, which is felt as punishment.

Now, clearly these ideas are not entirely new; and I would like to refer briefly to the work of two writers who can by no means be called existentialist or absurdist or even avant-garde in an attempt to clear Becketts' drama from a damaging charge often brought in a blanket way against him and Ionesco, namely that they indulge in a sort of trendiness, that their gloom is merely fashionable: as Kenneth Tynan (whose *Oh! Calcutta!* is indeed a monument of trendiness) puts it, 'What irks one most about the Absurdists is their pervasive tone of privileged despair'.[7] First, Leo Tolstoy's powerful short story *The Death of Ivan Ilyich* (1886) concerns a prosperous and successful St Petersburg judge who in his prime of life and at the height of his career suddenly becomes aware that he is the victim of a painful and incurable cancer:[8]

6. Quoted by Eva Metman, 'Reflections on Samuel Beckett's Plays', in Martin Esslin, ed., *Beckett: Twentieth Century Views*, p. 117.
7. *Tynan on Theatre* (1964), p. 191.
8. *The Cossacks, The Death of Ivan Ilyich*, and *Happy ever After*, trs. Rosemary Edmonds (Penguin edition, 1960) pp. 138-139.

> He tried to get back into former trains of thought which in the old days had screened him from the notion of death. But strangely enough all that used to cover up, obscure and obliterate the feeling of death no longer had the same effect. Ivan Ilyich now spent most of his time in these attempts to restore the former mental screen which had kept death out of sight. He would say to himself: 'I will take up my duties again – after all, I used to live for my work'. And banishing all doubts he would go to the Law Courts, enter into conversation with his colleagues and take his seat with an absent-minded air, as was his wont, scanning the crowd with a thoughtful look and resting his two emaciated hands on the arms of his oak chair just as he always did, and leaning over to a colleague and drawing his papers nearer, he would interchange whispers with him, and then suddenly raising his eyes and sitting erect he would pronounce the traditional words that opened the proceedings. But abruptly in the midst of it all the pain in his side, regardless of the stage the proceedings had reached, would begin its own gnawing work. Ivan Ilyich becoming aware of it, would try to drive the thought of it away, but it went on with its business. It would come and stand before him and look at him, and he would find himself rigid with fear and the light would die out of his eyes, and he would begin asking himself again whether *It* alone was true. And his colleagues and his subordinates would notice with surprise and distress that he, the brilliant, discriminating judge, was getting confused and making mistakes. He would shake himself, try to pull himself together, manage somehow to bring the sitting to a close, and return home with the sorrowful consciousness that his judicial labours could not as of old hide from him what he wanted to be hidden, and that his official work could not deliver him from *It*. And, worst of all, *It* drew his attention to itself not in order to make him take some action but simply that he might look at it, look at it straight in the face, and without doing anything suffer unspeakably.

Clearly here there is a structure of feeling which in many ways anticipates something of what we find in the work of Beckett – the sense of the horror of death not only or mainly in its pain but in its inevitability (in Beckett's terms, the horror latent in the consciousness of the void), an inevitability which makes the daily rituals of life become grotesquely meaningless, and which causes us to erect mental screens to block it out. To the extent that each of us is intensely aware of his death, to that extent he asks himself whether '*it* alone is true'. And if the answer is a secular, non-transcendental one, to that extent he may feel his life to be as that of Sisyphus, rolling the meaningless stone up the arbitrary hill in a futile see-saw of misery. Tolstoy's Christianity means that he would have disagreed with Beckett's

conclusions about life, but it is clear from this story at least that he and Beckett share certain *premisses* about the nature of man's life.

The second author is Joseph Conrad, in whose novel *Nostromo* (1904) is described the intense experience of solitude of the young rationalistic and sceptical Decoud, alone on a rocky island, immediately prior to his committing suicide:[9]

> Solitude from mere outward condition of existence becomes very swiftly a state of soul in which the affectations of irony and scepticism have no place. It takes possession of the mind, and drives forth the thought into the exile of utter unbelief. After three days of waiting for the sight of some human face, Decoud caught himself entertaining a doubt of his own individuality. It had merged into the world of cloud and water, of natural forces and forms of nature. In our activity alone do we find the sustaining illusion of an independent existence as against the whole scheme of things of which we form a helpless part. Decoud lost all belief in the reality of his action past and to come . . . Both his intelligence and his passion were swallowed up easily in this great unbroken solitude of waiting without faith . . . His sadness was the sadness of a sceptical mind. He beheld the universe as a succession of incomprehensible images.

Here again, though we may note the characteristic Conradian theme of man hurled back on himself in an extreme situation and found to be hollow at the core, we are clearly not too far away from the world of Vladimir and Estragon. They too talk and act feverishly to give themselves 'the sustaining illusion of an independent existence . . .' in 'the great unbroken solitude of waiting' – as Estragon says 'We always find something, eh Didi, to give us the impression that we exist?' (p. 69).[10] They are luckier than Decoud because there are two of them, but even so, they too behold the universe as 'a succession of incomprehensible images'. As Estragon says, 'There's no lack of void '(p. 66).

Though John Weightman in his sane and witty book *The Concept of the Avant-Garde* (1973) has properly warned us that "Avant-gardism, though international, is, in some important respects, a French invention' (p. 9), there is nothing simply new and trendy and avant-gardish for its own sake, *pace* Tynan, in the attitude to life held by the Irish-French Beckett and the Roumanian-French Ionesco. All that is new is the *intensity* with which the sense of the emptiness of life is held, and the way in which this sense is universalized so as to become the very essence of the artists' consciousness of life. Solutions (Christianity in Tolstoy's case, the ethic of 'fidelity' in

9. *Nostromo,* in the J. M. Dent edition of the *Collected Works* (1947), pp. 497-498.
10. All page references to *Waiting for Godot* are to the Faber second (uncensored) edition of 1965.

Conrad's) are ruled out, and it is possible that these feelings are held more intensely now; but it is very doubtful (given, for example, the *Book of Job*) that they have not found expression in every age.

Something that is more definitely and obviously new in the drama of Beckett (and of Ionesco and other 'absurdists') is the form it chooses to express its vision of life. A simple misreading – but one found in sophisticated disguise in much adverse criticism of Beckett – runs like this: Beckett feels that life is meaningless, and therefore finds 'meaningless' forms to express this vision, forms deliberately jumbled, arbitrary and chaotic, without logic or coherence. Whatever about Ionesco, Beckett does not commit this simple fallacy of imitative form. In his drama especially, the form is extremely logical, patterned and coherent, and is very tightly structured: it is far from being an incoherent jumble of arbitrary non-sequiturs.[11] Further, we must be careful about the use of the word 'meaningless': neither Beckett nor Ionesco is saying that life is literally meaningless: what they are doing is attempting to shift us away from the superficial 'meanings' of life, the surfaces which so bedazzle and entrap Arthur Miller's Willy Loman, to consider what they see as the ultimate and really profound meanings. That these ultimate meanings are conceived and presented as nightmarish and prison-like, as anguish, is not, surely, to say that they are 'meaningless'.

A useful broad analogy to the formal experimentation represented in 'absurd' drama may be found in the development of the modern novel. The linear plot, stable characterization, the explicit tracing of phychological motivation – these formal elements of the nineteenth century novel implied a stable and decipherable universe in which there was a community of values between creator, character and reader.[12] The rejection of that stable and decipherable universe in the early twentieth century is reflected in the new forms and experimental techniques of Joyce, Lawrence, Virginia Woolf and others who adopted a symbolist and impressionistic art to express their sense of a newer, more mysterious and more fragmented

11. The form and structure of *Waiting for Godot* has been the subject of much critical work. Particularly good accounts may be found in Lawrence Harvey, 'Art and the Existential in *En Attendant Godot*', *PMLA*, LXXV (1960), 137-146, and in Duckworth, *ed. cit.*, pp. lxxxiii-xcv. My own remarks are more general, being concerned with a mode of approach to the play.

12. See David Daiches, *The Novel and the Modern World* (revised edition, 1960); and Alain Robbe-Grillet, who expresses himself with characteristic sweepingness: 'All the technical elements of the narrative [in a 'traditional' novel] – the systematic use of the past definite tense and of the third person, the unconditional adoption of chronological development, linear plots, a regular graph of the emotions, the way each episode tended towards an end, etc. – everything aimed at imposing the image of a stable universe, coherent, continuous, univocal and wholly decipherable.' (*Snapshots and Towards a New Novel*, 1965, p. 63.)

universe. Now, the stage has always been a conservative art form for certain obvious reasons: it is more tied to the taste of its audience – 'the drama's laws the drama's patrons give', as Dr Johnson said, and it is inevitably bound more closely to everyday reality simply by the physicality of actors. Looked at from this angle we may simply say that dramatists like Beckett complete the modern artistic revolution on and for the stage:[13] they reject the play which tells a story in a sequential plot, they reject the Ibsenite subtleties of characterization and psychological motivation, and they make no attempt to sketch in a realistic social background. Instead, their plays are essentially symbolic pictures of the situation of man: they tell no story because there is no story to tell, but only a basic condition or situation to be represented,[14] a bleak stasis where temporal notions like beginning, middle and end, inextricably linked with the concept of story, simply have no place. Beckett is not interested in man as a social animal, but in man in his essential solitude against the backdrop of the void of which there is no lack. Virginia Woolf in a famous essay had urged the novelist to 'look within'. Beckett extends the idea in a characteristically grim and extreme formulation:

> The artistic tendency is not expansive, but a contraction. And art is the apotheosis of solitude. There is no communication because there are no vehicles of communication. Even on the rare occasions when word and gesture happened to be valid expressions of personality, they lose their significance on their passage through the cataract of the personality that is opposed to them . . . The only fertile research is excavatory, immersive, a contraction of the spirit, a descent. The artist is active, but negatively, shrinking from the nullity of extra-circumferential phenomena, drawn in to the core of the eddy . . . We are alone. We cannot know and we cannot be known.[15]

The power of plays created inside such an aesthetic will obviously depend on the poetic intensity with which the representation of man's basic situation is treated. And here I think there is an important distinction to be made between the work of Beckett and that of Ionesco. Beckett is a much greater poet: his images reverberate in the mind – the two shoddy old

13. Obviously Strindberg, in plays like *Dream Play* and *The Ghost Sonata,* and other dramatists like Jarry had 'made the revolution' long before; but my point still stands in the sense that it has been the success of Beckett and Ionesco that has revived interest in and 'popularized' early twentieth century expressionist darma.

14. This explains why (as many critics have noted) Beckett tends to repeat himself and to move in his later works inexorably towards silence. In turn this is another reason for concentrating attention on *Waiting for Godot.* It might be going too far to say that Beckett is a 'one-work author'; but it is certainly true that in *Waiting for Godot* what may be called the Beckett theme gets its fullest and most powerful expression.

15. *Proust* (1931), reprinted 1965 as *Proust and Three Dialogues with Georges Duthuit,* pp. 64-66.

men, the withered tree, the empty featureless landscape, the immobility as night falls – 'that's how it is on this bitch of an earth', as Pozzo says. Ionesco's images do not possess the tragic and universal quality of Beckett's – they tend more towards the violent and savage simplification of cartoon or caricature. In his plays, people turn into rhinoceroses, a corpse in the bedroom grows and grows until it has taken over the whole house, a professor stabs forty students a day quite naturally in the course of teaching them philology.[16] There is an arbitrary zaniness in all this; and in a curious way this buoyant and inventive zaniness is deeply at odds with the theoretical gloominess of Ionesco's outlook. In the end, one feels that Ionesco is essentially a satirist, using a postulated and willed nihilism to mock at the superficiality of bourgeois conventions of behaviour and speech in plays like *The Bald Prima Donna,* or to burlesque Nazism in the monstrous fantasy of *Rhinoceros.* But with Beckett we are in an intensely realized tragic universe where the arbitrariness of things seems a product not of the dramatist's imagination but of the condition of man itself.

So much for general considerations about the philosophy and tradition of the absurd. Turning to more particular study of *Waiting for Godot* we find that rarely has any play been subjected to such a barrage of interpretations. Colin Duckworth has summarized some of these: Godot has been equated with De Gaulle, Pozzo with capitalism and Lucky with labour, Pozzo with the U.S.S.R. and the enslaved Lucky with the East European satellite countries, the two tramps with Britain and France waiting for Godot (the U.S.A.) to come to their aid. A detailed hypothesis has even been built up to prove that Pozzo is James Joyce and Lucky is Beckett himself. And so on. My favourite example of critical insanity at work on Beckett's play is the extreme psychoanalytic approach which begins by noting that Didi reversed is Id-Id, Gogo is (e)go-(e)go, plunges wildly forward in arguing that Didi has a backward Id, and so forth, and so on, and ends up in a Freudian bog which bears little resemblance to Beckett's landscape, featureless though that may be.[17]

The multifariousness of interpretation is partly a self-generated product of the academic industry but its prime origin is in the fact that Beckett is a symbolist writer, in the sense that he presents his intuitions about the nature of reality and of man's life in symbolic images. This is frequently denied, and the addendum at the end of *Watt* cited as conclusive proof: 'No symbols where none intended.' But I think that much modern criticism, despite its sophistication, frequently confuses symbolism and

16. The plays are *Rhinoceros* (1959), *Amédée or How to Get Rid of It* (1954) and *The Lesson* (1950).
17. See Duckworth, *ed. cit.,* pp. xcviii-c.

allegory. Coleridge's words are still relevant and, in the case of *Waiting for Godot,* extremely apposite:

> It is among the miseries of the present age that it recognises no *medium* between literal and metaphorical. Faith is either to be buried in the dead letter, or its name and honours usurped by a counterfeit product of the mechanical understanding, which in the blindness of self-complacency confounds symbols with allegories. Now an allegory is but a translation of abstract notions into a picture-language, which is itself nothing but an abstraction from objects of the senses; the principal being more worthless even than its phantom proxy, both alike unsubstantial, and the former shapeless to boot. On the other hand a symbol . . . is characterized by a translucence of the special in the individual, or of the general in the special, or of the universal in the general; above all by a translucence of the eternal through and in the temporal. It always partakes of the reality which it renders intelligible; and while it enunciates the whole, abides itself as a living part in that unity of which it is the representative.[18]

For present purposes the most important sentence here is the last one. Thus, Keats hears the real song of a real nightingale in his famous poem (given the fictive mode), but he finds in the nightingale and its song implications and suggestions, intuitively realized, of a state of being above and beyond mortality. The nightingale does not merely 'stand for' eternity or art or whatever. Nor does the Grecian Urn. Nor does the unfinished sheep-fold in Wordsworth's *Michael* merely 'stand for' fidelity betrayed. The nightingale, the Grecian Urn, the unfinished sheep-fold are really there: they partake of the reality which they render intelligible. If one denies that the nightingale is really there and says 'The nightingale stands for art', one is degrading symbolism into allegory where – as in *The Pilgrims Progress* or *Animal Farm* – there is a simple one-to-one relationship between the image and the idea represented, so that in reading one simply ignores the image level – to a greater or lesser extent – in order to 'dive through to', and grasp the conceptual frame which is all-important. Now we have already seen the results of imposing allegoric readings on *Waiting for Godot,* where we are told that, for example, Pozzo 'stands for' the U.S.S.R. and Lucky for the Eastern satellite countries, or that Godot 'stands for' God. To the question 'Who or what is Godot?' Beckett himself replied 'If I knew, I would have said so in the play'.[19] The implication is that the symbol – Godot, in this instance – cannot be reduced to the single literalness of

18. S. T. Coleridge, *The Statesman's Manual* (1816), in R. J. White, ed., *Lay Sermons* (1972), p. 30 (part 6 of the *Collected Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, ed. Kathleen Coburn).
19. Duckworth, *ed. cit.*, p. xxv.

allegory nor indeed to the hardness-and-fastness of analytical conceptual language at all. A symbol of its nature is elusive of definition: the symbolic object exists as a thing in its own right, but it also carries in itself other wider implications or connotations. This play, then, is what it seems to be – a picture of two old tattered men waiting for a mysterious other to show up, in which Beckett reveals his intuitions about life in the language of symbol. To state the obvious like this is regrettably necessary given the tendency of much criticism to transmogrify the play into allegory, be it Christian or Freudian or political.

Waiting for Godot is not a Christian allegory, but it has often been argued, particularly in the few years immediately after its first great success, that it is susceptible of a Christian interpretation. Thus G. S. Fraser in 1956:

> *Waiting for Godot* . . . is a modern morality play, on permanent Christian themes. But, even if the Christian basis of the structure were not obvious, Mr Beckett is constantly underlining it for us in the incidental symbolism and the dialogue.[20]

On first sight the evidence does seem impressive. The whole situation of waiting, which is of far more importance in the play than the question of the identity of Godot, has orthodox Christian overtones: behind it, and behind the state of mingled fear and hope in which Vladimir and Estragon wait, are the words of St Augustine: 'Do not despair: one of the thieves was saved. Do not presume: one of the thieves was damned'. Early in the play Vladimir muses on this ('One of the thieves was saved. It's a reasonable percentage') and discusses with Estragon the discrepancies in the evangelists' accounts of the crucifixion of the two thieves. Further, the two men believe that if they 'drop' Godot – give up waiting – they will be 'punished', and when in Act II Didi mistakenly thinks that Godot has arrived he cries out 'triumphantly': 'It's Godot! At last! Gogo! It's Godot! We're saved!' We learn that Godot has a white beard in accord with traditional representations of God in Western art (Vladimir whispers 'Christ have mercy on us' when he discovers this), and that he separates his sheep from his goats, with (again) the obvious Biblical allusion.

On a stage as bare as Beckett's a stage prop like the tree will obviously assume considerable importance. The very first directly Christian allusion in the play may be tied to the tree: when Vladimir asks 'Hope deferred maketh the something sick, who said that?', the answer is the *Book of Proverbs,* 13, xii, and the full text is: 'Hope deferred maketh the heart sick, but when the desire cometh, it is a tree of life'. The partial blossoming

20. In an anonymous review in *Times Literary Supplement,* February 10, 1956, reprinted in Ruby Cohn, ed., *Casebook on 'Waiting for Godot',* New York (1967), p. 134.

of the tree on the stage between Acts I and II in the midst of the sterile landscape may refer obliquely to this text. G. S. Fraser sets out conveniently the various Christian possibilities (and incidentally reveals in his critical language that tendency to petrify the play into allegory of which I spoke earlier):

> The tree on the stage . . . obviously stands both for the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil (and, when it puts on green leaves, for the Tree of Life) and for the Cross. When Didi and Gogo are frightened in the second act, the best thing they can think of doing is to shelter under its base. But it gives no concealment, and it is perhaps partly from God's wrath that they are hiding; for it is also the Tree of Judas, on which they are recurrently tempted to hang themselves.[21]

On the level of human action, Vladimir and Estragon seem bound to each other by something that might be called without strain charity. This is illustrated most movingly in Act II when Vladimir takes off his coat to lay it across the sleeping Estragon's shoulders in a protective and self-denying gesture; but it is a constant of their relationship despite the equally constant testy bickering between them. Their initial response to the unfortunate Lucky and the sores on his neck caused by the chafing of the rope is also a charitable one – Vladimir is especially scandalized and bursts out to Pozzo:

> To treat a man . . . like that . . . I think that . . . no . . . a human being . . . no . . . it's a scandal! (p. 27).

On this view, Pozzo and Lucky are there to provide a contrast to Vladimir and Estragon: clearly the latter represent something far higher than this authoritarian tyrant and his abject slave, who are drawn together not by charity but by hatred and fear. Pozzo represents the total belief in self alone and the resulting self-importance. He owns the land, he is responsible to no one, he is masterful and assured.

> (*Drawing himself up, striking his chest.*) Do I look like a man that can be made to suffer? Frankly? (p. 34).

That these values are not sufficient is shown by Pozzo's blindness and helplessness in Act II – the superman has not been able to evade suffering and the chastisement of his pride. Lucky presents another kind of contrast. As his sole lengthy speech shows, Lucky is a rationalist, seeking to establish the existence of God (if any) and his relationship to man (if any) by reference to his absurd authorities Puncher and Wattman, Testew and Cunard, Fartov and Belcher. He has no faith of the kind illustrated however flickeringly in Vladimir and Estragon: thus his quasi-rationalist approach leads him to despair and total incoherence – his speech begins

21. Fraser, *loc. cit.*, p. 135.

with God but ends up with the often reiterated 'the skull the skull the skull'. The dislocation and fragmentation of his language might be taken to indicate the inability of discursive and analytic thought to comprehend or grasp the ultimate realities: it literally breaks down under the strain. Hence it is appropriate that in Act II we find that Lucky has been struck dumb. The values represented in him are as inadequate as the values represented in Pozzo; and at the end Vladimir and Estragon are left holding the stage, still supported by some kind of purpose. As Vladimir has said:

> What we are doing here, *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 . . . (p. 80).

There is no need to insist on seeing the play as a Christian allegory but given the basic situation of the two old men, their relationship to each other and to Pozzo and Lucky, the apparent rejection of alternative philosophies, the incidental imagery and symbolism (such as that of the tree), it is at least tenable to argue that the play embodies a structure of feeling, a patterning of experience, analogous to the Christian. But with the extra evidence provided by Beckett's later plays and by his novels one becomes uneasy with this interpretation. Part of the play's power lies, in my view, in the fact that such a possibility is dangled before us, that the play itself *enacts* fully and dramatically the temptations of allegory in an ironic schematization of Christian experience, in order to show us its spuriousness. And a very different reading may be advanced without recourse to evidence other than that supplied by the text itself, namely, that what the play shows is man's helplessness in his delusion that some power outside himself exists, the hopeful, hopeless fiction that ties him to an inauthentic life (though this quasi-existentialist formulation must be treated with some caution).

Vladimir thinks that the salvation of one of the thieves is a reasonable percentage, but this can't help reminding him or us of the thief who was damned. There is a hint here at the arbitrariness of God's choices which in the particular instance cited depended on the chance exclamations of two men in the last agonies of crucifixion. This is an arbitrariness shared by Godot, who beats the boy who minds the sheep but not the boy who minds the goats. The Christian God favours things the other way round but the point remains basically the same: why one thief and not the other? Why is Abel preferred to Cain? Again, the hope that is deferred maketh the heart sick, but when the desire cometh it is a tree of life. Beckett's tree strains itself to produce four or five leaves, hardly a whole-hearted blossoming and surely an ironic comment on the Biblical text and a bitter hint at the

futility of Vladimir's and Estragon's waiting. It is this kind of effect, where Beckett deliberately frustrates the expectations of allegory that he himself has raised, which causes one to feel that the allegorizing tendency, itself so involved with the patristic and exegetical side of Christianity, particularly medieval Christianity, is actually the object of parodic ridicule.

Each time Pozzo enters, he is temporarily mistaken for Godot himself. This is extremely suggestive. Before the first entry, Vladimir and Estragon discuss their relationship to Godot:

ESTRAGON: (*his mouth full, vacuously*) We're not tied? —
VLADIMIR: I don't hear a word you're saying.
ESTRAGON: (*chews, swallows*) I'm asking you if we're tied.
VLADIMIR: Tied?
ESTRAGON: Ti-ed.
VLADIMIR: How do you mean tied?
ESTRAGON: Down.
VLADIMIR: But to whom? By whom?
ESTRAGON: To your man.
VLADIMIR: To Godot? Tied to Godot? What an idea! No question of it. (*Pause.*) For the moment (pp. 20-21).

A moment later, with the terrible cry, the burdened Lucky staggers on stage roped to the cruel and imperious Pozzo, and the first exchange with the newcomers concerns the question as to whether Pozzo is Godot. The implications here are clear. It is not that Godot *is* Pozzo – to say that would be to project the same sort of unimaginative definiteness which results from allegoric readings – but rather that Godot might, if he exists, be very like Pozzo.[22] Vladimir and Estragon are tied to him metaphorically in a slavish and abject way as Lucky is tied literally to Pozzo. We must remember that Pozzo has not enslaved Lucky or at least that that is not the whole truth, for Lucky may have chosen his enslavement: to the question why Lucky does not make himself comfortable, Pozzo replies

> Has he not the right to? Certainly he has. It follows that he doesn't want to. There's reasoning for you. And why doesn't he want to? (*Pauses.*) Gentlemen, the reason is this . . . He wants to impress me, so that I'll keep him. (p. 31).

The Pozzo-Lucky relationship may then be seen as a parallel rather than a contrast to the old men's relationship with the arbitrary (and illusory?)

22. See Duckworth, *ed. cit.*, p. lx: 'To my verbal question "Is Pozzo Godot?" Mr Beckett replied "No. It is implied in the text, but it's not true." However, when I visited him in Paris several months later, he opened the manuscript of Godot and said, "It's a long time since I looked at this". He glanced at the page where it had fallen open in his hands. "This, for example", he went on, "I'd completely forgotten about it: *Suggerer que Pozzo est peut-être Godot après tout, venu au rendez-vous, et qu'il ne sait pas que Vladimir et Estragon sont Vladimir et Estragon. Mais le messager?*'"

Godot, and both sets of relationships as indicating Beckett's idea of the Christian relationship of man with his arbitrary (and illustory?) God. (It should of course be stressed that all this is in the form of a symbolic image or pattern rather than of a dogmatic argument). The role of Lucky then makes for an especially bitter parodic demonstration. In his total submission to his master, in his acceptance of humiliation without a murmur, in his bearing the literal burdens uncomplainingly – 'because he wants to' – Lucky may be seen in his relationship to Pozzo as an embodied *reductio ad absurdum* of Christ's words (*Matthew*, xi, 28-29):

> Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn of me . . . for my yoke is easy and my burden is light.

Summing this up: Beckett deliberately confuses Pozzo and Godot, suggests a parallel in the relationship between Pozzo and Lucky on the one hand and the old men's relationship with Godot on the other, shows graphically one of the relationships (and therefore by implication *both*) as barbaric and degrading, and implies by symbolic suggestion that the same is true of the Christian's relationship with 'God', even inverting and mocking specifically Biblical imagery.

Beckett therefore implies that there is no Godot to give purpose and point to the 'immense confusion', or that if there is, he is as malevolent and cruel and as ultimately futile as Pozzo and has the same amount of transcendental value as Pozzo which is nil. Therefore waiting for Godot is an empty and sterile 'activity', the main purpose of which would seem to be to disguise from the tramps the void, the nothingness in which their lives are lived out, which is the only true reality.

The two old men seem to be themselves intermittently aware of the void and of their own lives as a series of little rituals and games played on the edge of nothingness. Estragon particularly comes close to a vision of and an admission of the horror. In Act II he rushes precipitately from the stage, re-enters panting with the words 'I'm accursed!' and rushes off again only to come back shouting 'I'm in hell!' (pp. 73-74). Vladimir tries to comfort him – 'You must have had a vision', and this is true, for Estragon has momentarily broken free of their habitual rituals to see the truth of their situation. This 'vision' is closely related to Estragon's dreams: three times in the play he attempts to tell Vladimir about what he has perceived in his 'private nightmare' of sleep, three times Vladimir refuses to listen: 'Let them remain private. You know I can't bear them'. And Estragon finds it harder to put any credence into the idea of Godot, even experiencing difficulty in remembering his name.

To Estragon's frightening glimpses of the emptiness of life we may add a different awareness, mutually shared, of life as a farcical circus-routine:

VLADIMIR: Charming evening we're having.
ESTRAGON: Unforgettable.
VLADIMIR: And it's not over.
ESTRAGON: Apparently not.
VLADIMIR: It's only beginning.
ESTRAGON: It's awful.
VLADIMIR: Worse than the pantomime.
ESTRAGON: The circus.
VLADIMIR: The music-hall.
ESTRAGON: The circus. (pp. 34-35).

Here their perception of life touches on that of their creator, for the sense of life as grotesque pantomime obviously explains the heavy use of the clown-like bowler hats, the overtones of the circus ringmaster in the characterization of Pozzo, the banana-skin style joke involved in having all four characters fall down in Act II, and many other touches in the play which critics have rightly related to Beckett's admiration of the great early comedy movies, especially those of Buster Keaton. It should also be said that this 'stage-tone' (as it were) offsets the general grimness and is one of the indices of Beckett's considerable sense of humour.

It is, however, in the various and unceasing strategies that the two old men adopt to hide from themselves the awareness of the encompassing void that that void, paradoxically, makes itself most clearly evident. In a truly memorable sequence in Act II, for example, they attempt to kill the time by (a) playing at being Pozzo and Lucky, (b) playing at abusing each other, (c) playing at making it up again, (d) playing at doing physical exercises ('I'm tired breathing'), (e) playing at being the tree. Estragon sums up the point of all this as bluntly as possible:

We always find something, eh Didi, to give us the impression we exist?

to which Vladimir retorts testily 'Yes yes, we're magicians' (p. 69). If their games give them the illusion of purpose and activity, their very words serve to blot out the awful silence which is the concomitant of the awful emptiness:

ESTRAGON: In the meantime let us try and converse calmly, since we are incapable of keeping silent.
VLADIMIR: You're right, we're inexhaustible.
ESTRAGON: It's so we won't think.
VLADIMIR: We have that excuse.
ESTRAGON: It's so we won't hear. (p. 62.)

Speech and actions then become ritualized habit to try to impose a shape on the nothingness, or to block it out of the consciousness. One could say that waiting for Godot is the biggest and most reliable habit the two have, 'most reliable' in the sense that it gives them the illustion they exist better

than anything else does. A lot of these ideas and themes are pulled together in Vladimir's important soliloquy near the end of the play. Estragon has been asleep, watched by Vladimir, and as Vladimir speaks he starts to doze off again:

> VLADIMIR: 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? (*Estragon, having struggled with his boots in vain, is dozing off again. Vladimir stares at him*). He'll know nothing. He'll tell me about the blows he received and I'll give him a carrot. (*Pause.*) Astride of a grave and a difficult birth. Down in the hole, lingeringly, the gravedigger puts on the forceps. We have time to grow old. The air is full of our cries. (*He listens.*) But habit is a great deadener. (*He looks again at Estragon.*) At me too someone is looking, of me too someone is saying, he is sleeping, he knows nothing, let him sleep on. (*Pause.*) I can't go on! (*Pause.*) What have I said? (pp. 90-91)

Vladimir is here staring at the solipsist nightmare, the question of how one can be sure that one even exists. The only answer in the context of the play – and of course it is not for Vladimir a satisfactory one – is the Berkeleyan answer, that one's existence is validated by the perception of others. Just as Estragon asleep here 'exists' only because Didi sees him, so Vladimir and Estragon will only 'exist' if Godot or his messengers 'see' them. This is the crucial explanation of their need to believe in him, of the frantically earnest appeals to the boy messenger – 'Do you not recognize me? . . . You're sure you saw me, you won't come and tell me tomorrow that you never saw me!' It also explains the need that they have for each other and the need that Pozzo and Lucky have for each other. To approach the kind of insight Vladimir has in the speech quoted is frightening: it brings the void not only near but actually inside, for one can't be sure that one exists at all. Hence Vladimir's agonized 'I can't go on! What have I said?'. But he also mentions a kind of makeshift antidote to the terrifying consciousness of non-being: 'habit is a great deadener'. This refers us back to all the little games and rituals and conversational 'canters' with which they both try to fill the void, some of which we have already noted.

This series of insights, central to an understanding of *Waiting for Godot*, had been anticipated in a remarkable way by Beckett in his essay on Proust written in 1931 (pp. 13-19):

> . . . We are not merely more weary because of yesterday, we are other, no longer what we were before the calamity of yesterday . . . The aspirations of yesterday were valid for yesterday's ego, not for today's . . . [This is part of] the poisonous ingenuity of Time in the science of affliction . . .
>
> Memory and Habit are attributes of the Time cancer . . . The laws of memory are subject to the more general laws of habit. Habit is a compromise effected between the individual and his environment, or between the individual and his own organic eccentricities, the guarantee of a dull inviolability, the lightning conductor of his existence . . . Breathing is habit. Life is habit . . . The periods of transition that separate consecutive adaptations . . . represent the perilous zones in the life of the individual, dangerous, precarious, painful, mysterious and fertile, when for a moment the boredom of living is replaced by the suffering of being . . .

Firstly this helps to place Vladimir's flattening or foreshortening reference to time: 'Astride of a grave and a difficult birth. Down in the hole, lingeringly, the grave-digger puts on the forceps.' Time conceived of in the traditional linear way in terms of past, present and future Beckett sees as being another stratagem devised by man to give a sense of continuity, a sense of purpose, and to help validate his sense of his personal existence. Conventional Time is almost embodied in the play in Pozzo, whose Act I speeches are filled with references to clock time and who constantly consults his half-hunter watch (until he loses it). This leads all the more force to his great passionate (and lyrical) outburst near the end of the play where he has been apparently brought to the realization that Time itself is just an illustion:

> POZZO: 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 like any other day, one day he went dumb, 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? (*Calmer.*) They give birth astride of a grave, the light gleams an instant, then it's night once more. (*He jerks the rope.*) On! (p. 89.)

In this excerpt from the essay on Proust, Beckett deals mainly with the central idea and structural principle of *Waiting for Godot,* namely, the relationship between 'habit' and the void. Habit is seen as a sort of shield which protects one from reality (conceived as nothingness); but there are moments in the life of every individual when the protective habits break down and he becomes aware of true reality. In 1931 Beckett clearly implied that such moments should be cherished, sought for, as moments when one

may be able to begin living authentically or genuinely ('being') instead of merely existing in the 'boredom of living'. They are 'painful', partly because giving up any habit is painful, but also 'fertile'. The connection with Sartrean ideas is obvious. But by the time of *Waiting for Godot* Beckett's vision has darkened and all didacticism has been filtered out. The play, unlike the essay, does not give the impression that facing up to nothingness would be 'fertile' in any way at all. The intuition of the void produces only Estragon's anguished 'I'm in hell, I'm accursed' and Vladimir's appalled 'I can't go on. What have I said?' Facing up to nothingness, the play implies in the tone of its every line, does not bring to birth the existential hero but would produce a kind of total obliteration of the personality. The habit of waiting for Godot, the hope that he may come, may well be delusion and the old man may even be dimly conscious that this is the case. But there is no attractive alternative. Whether one is waiting for Godot or waiting for the void, there is always the waiting. What Vladimir and Estragon do and say is their only defence against being plunged into silence and timelessness. So we come round with horror to the knowledge that the waiting for Godot is *necessary* even at the simultaneous moment when we perceive that it is a delusion. We even have to recognise that there is something admirable in the games and rituals of the old men, something almost heroic in their stubborn clinging on to their sense of identity at the edge of the extremity. Here we are at the heart of Beckett's tragic vision of life, in the teeth of his iron trap. Man cannot believe in that somebody or something outside himself which will validate and give significance to his futile life, but neither can he afford not to go on pretending that that somebody or something, that Godot, exists and will come. The price of rejection of the pretence is too high, being the admission of and immersion in nothingness and an absolute futility. Thus, he is condemned to play out the farce. It is appropriate in my view to call the play a tragedy, though the tragedy grows not from an event or from character, but out of an apprehension, brilliantly realised in words and action, of a total situation or condition.

Finally, despite the grimness of his vision, Beckett's play – like other good tragedies – is not depressing. There are the moments of wild humour which every reader and audience will immediately respond to. More importantly, there is the curious liberation which we feel at recognizing the basic humanity of the two old men, a humanity which bubbles up irrepressibly even in their situation, astride of the grave and at the edge of darkness. There they are, and yet they are still human, they are still capable of their moments of compassion and charity and humour. They do not give up. Their bodies may be broken and battered, subject to the degrading humiliations of fleshy decay – the stinking feet, the stinking

breath, the kidney problem – but their minds spin on, unstoppably.[23] The heroism of Vladimir and Estragon is not the romantic heroism of *Hamlet* or *Othello,* but it is heroism of a kind. In the end, the Beckett of *Waiting for Godot* is a most humane writer whose quiet assertion of man's worth is the more impressive given the skeletal regions he explores.

GEORGE WATSON, B.A. (Q.U.B.), B.PHIL. (OXON.)
Department of English, *Lecturer*
University of Aberdeen.

23. Beckett makes much in all his work of the tension between the bodily functions (often seen in a Swiftian way) and the immateriality of the mind. Critics often speak solemnly of 'Cartesian dualism' when confronted with this kind of thing; but I prefer to stress the comedy, as in this example from *Molloy*, much quoted but always worth quoting again, especially in the decent pedantry of a footnote:

> And in winter, under my greatcoat, I wrapped myself in swathes of newspaper, and did not shed them until the earth awoke, for good, in April. The *Times Literary Supplement* was admirably adapted to this purpose, of a never failing toughness and impermeability. Even farts made no impression on it. I can't help it, gas escapes from my fundament on the least pretext, it's hard not to mention it now and then, however great my distaste. One day I counted them. Three hundred and fifteen farts in nineteen hours, on an average of over sixteen farts an hour. After all it's not excessive. Four farts every fifteen minutes. It's nothing. Not even one fart every four minutes. It's unbelievable. Damn it, I hardly fart at all, I should never have mentioned it. Extraordinary how mathematics help you to know yourself.