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THE THEATRE OF THE ABSURD

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by writing, now more slowly and with greater difficulty than at the time of his great creative outburst.

When Alan Schneider, who was to direct the first American production of *Waiting for Godot*, asked Beckett who or what was meant by Godot, he received the answer, 'If I knew, I would have said so in the play.'¹⁸

This is a salutary warning to anyone who approaches Beckett's plays with the intention of discovering the key to their understanding, of demonstrating in exact and definite terms what they mean. Such an undertaking might perhaps be justified in tackling the works of an author who had started from a clear-cut philosophical or moral conception, and had then proceeded to translate it into concrete terms of plot and character. But even in such a case the chances are that the final product, if it turned out a genuine work of the creative imagination, would transcend the author's original intentions and present itself as far richer, more complex, and open to a multitude of additional interpretations. For, as Beckett himself has pointed out in his essay on Joyce's *Work in Progress*, the form, structure, and mood of an artistic statement cannot be separated from its meaning, its conceptual content; simply because the work of art as a whole is its meaning, what is said in it is indissolubly linked with the manner in which it is said, and cannot be said in any other way. Libraries have been filled with attempts to reduce the meaning of a play like *Hamlet* to a few short and simple lines, yet the play itself remains the clearest and most concise statement of its meaning and message, precisely because its uncertainties and irreducible ambiguities are an essential element of its total impact.

These considerations apply, in varying degrees, to all works of creative literature, but they apply with particular force to works that are essentially concerned with conveying their author's sense of mystery, bewilderment, and anxiety when confronted with the human condition, and his despair at being unable to find a meaning in existence. In *Waiting for Godot*, the feeling of uncertainty it produces, the ebb and flow of this uncertainty—from the hope of discovering the identity of

Godot to its repeated disappointment—are themselves the essence of the play. Any endeavour to arrive at a clear and certain interpretation by establishing the identity of Godot through critical analysis would be as foolish as trying to discover the clear outlines hidden behind the chiaroscuro of a painting by Rembrandt by scraping away the paint.

Yet it is only natural that plays written in so unusual and baffling a convention should be felt to be in special need of an explanation that, as it were, would uncover their hidden meaning and translate it into everyday language. The source of this fallacy lies in the misconception that somehow these plays must be reducible to the conventions of the 'normal' theatre, with plots that can be summarized in the form of a narrative. If only one could discover some hidden clue, it is felt, these difficult plays could be forced to yield their secret and reveal the plot of the conventional play that is hidden within them. Such attempts are doomed to failure. Beckett's plays lack plot even more completely than other works of the Theatre of the Absurd. Instead of a linear development, they present their author's intuition of the human condition by a method that is essentially polyphonic; they confront their audience with an organized structure of statements and images that interpenetrate each other and that must be apprehended in their totality, rather like the different themes in a symphony, which gain meaning by their simultaneous interaction.

But if we have to be cautious in our approach to Beckett's plays, to avoid the pitfall of trying to provide an oversimplified explanation of their meaning, this does not imply that we cannot subject them to careful scrutiny by isolating sets of images and themes and by attempting to discern their structural groundwork. The results of such an examination should make it easier to follow the author's intention and to see, if not the answers to his questions, at least what the questions are that he is asking.

Waiting for Godot does not tell a story; it explores a static situation. 'Nothing happens, nobody comes, nobody goes, it's awful.'¹⁹ On a country road, by a tree, two old tramps,

¹⁹ Beckett, *Waiting for Godot* (London: Faber & Faber, 1959).

¹⁸ Alan Schneider, 'Waiting for Beckett', *Chelsea Review*, New

Vladimir and Estragon, are waiting. That is the opening situation at the beginning of act I. At the end of act I they are informed that Mr Godot, with whom they believe they have an appointment, cannot come, but that he will surely come tomorrow. Act II repeats precisely the same pattern. The same boy arrives and delivers the same message. Act I ends:

ESTRAGON: Well, shall we go?

VLADIMIR: Yes, let's go.

[*They do not move.*]

Act II ends with the same lines of dialogue, but spoken by the same characters in reversed order.

The sequence of events and the dialogue in each act are different. Each time the two tramps encounter another pair of characters, Pozzo and Lucky, master and slave, under differing circumstances; in each act Vladimir and Estragon attempt suicide and fail, for differing reasons; but these variations merely serve to emphasize the essential sameness of the situation—*plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose*.

Vladimir and Estragon—who call each other Didi and Gogo, although Vladimir is addressed by the boy messenger as Mr Albert, and Estragon, when asked his name, replies without hesitation, Catullus—are clearly derived from the pairs of cross-talk comedians of music halls. Their dialogue has the peculiar repetitive quality of the cross-talk comedians' patter.

ESTRAGON: So long as one knows.

VLADIMIR: One can bide one's time.

ESTRAGON: One knows what to expect.

VLADIMIR: No further need to worry.²⁰

And the parallel to the music hall and the circus is even explicitly stated:

VLADIMIR: Charming evening we're having.

ESTRAGON: Unforgettable.

VLADIMIR: And it's not over.

ESTRAGON: Apparently not.

²⁰ Beckett, *Waiting for Godot*, p. 37.

VLADIMIR: It's only the beginning.

ESTRAGON: It's awful.

VLADIMIR: It's worse than being at the theatre.

ESTRAGON: The circus.

VLADIMIR: The music hall.

ESTRAGON: The circus.²¹

In accordance with the traditions of the music hall or the circus, there is an element of crudely physical humor: Estragon loses his trousers, there is a protracted gag involving three hats that are put on and off and handed on in a sequence of seemingly unending confusion, and there is an abundance of pratfalls—the writer of a penetrating thesis on Beckett, Niklaus Gessner, lists no fewer than forty-five stage directions indicating that one of the characters leaves the upright position, which symbolizes the dignity of man.²²

As the members of a cross-talk act, Vladimir and Estragon have complementary personalities. Vladimir is the more practical of the two, and Estragon claims to have been a poet. In eating his carrot, Estragon finds that the more he eats of it the less he likes it, while Vladimir reacts the opposite way—he likes things as he gets used to them. Estragon is volatile, Vladimir persistent. Estragon dreams, Vladimir cannot stand hearing about dreams. Vladimir has stinking breath, Estragon has stinking feet. Vladimir remembers past events, Estragon tends to forget them as soon as they have happened. Estragon likes telling funny stories, Vladimir is upset by them. It is mainly Vladimir who voices the hope that Godot will come and that his coming will change their situation, while Estragon remains sceptical throughout and at times even forgets the name of Godot. It is Vladimir who conducts the conversation with the boy who is Godot's messenger and to whom the boy's messages are addressed. Estragon is the weaker of the two; he is beaten up by mysterious strangers every night. Vladimir at times acts as his protector, sings him to sleep with a lullaby, and covers him with his coat. The opposition of their temperaments is the cause of endless bickering between them and often leads to the suggestion that they should part. Yet, being

²¹ *ibid.*, p. 34.

²² Gessner, *op. cit.*, p. 37.

complementary natures, they also are dependent on each other and have to stay together.

Pozzo and Lucky are equally complementary in their natures, but their relationship is on a more primitive level: Pozzo is the sadistic master, Lucky the submissive slave. In the first act, Pozzo is rich, powerful, and certain of himself; he represents worldly man in all his facile and shortsighted optimism and illusory feeling of power and permanence. Lucky not only carries his heavy luggage, and even the whip with which Pozzo beats him, he also dances and thinks for him, or did so in his prime. In fact, Lucky taught Pozzo all the higher values of life: 'beauty, grace, truth of the first water'.²⁴ Pozzo and Lucky represent the relationship between body and mind, the material and the spiritual sides of man, with the intellect subordinate to the appetites of the body. Now that Lucky's powers are failing, Pozzo complains that they cause him untold suffering. He wants to get rid of Lucky and sell him at the fair. But in the second act, when they appear again, they are still tied together. Pozzo has gone blind, Lucky has become dumb. While Pozzo drives Lucky on a journey without an apparent goal, Vladimir has prevailed upon Estragon to wait for Godot.

A good deal of ingenuity has been expended in trying to establish at least an etymology for Godot's name, which would point to Beckett's conscious or subconscious intention in making him the objective of Vladimir's and Estragon's quest. It has been suggested that Godot is a weakened form of the word 'God', a diminutive formed on the analogy of Pierre-Pierrot, Charles-Charlot, with the added association of the Charlie Chaplin character of the little man, who is called Charlot in France, and whose bowler hat is worn by all four main characters in the play. It has also been noted that the title *En Attendant Godot* seems to contain an allusion to Simone Weil's book *Attente de Dieu*, which would furnish a further indication that Godot stands for God. Yet the name Godot may also be an even more recondite literary allusion. As Eric Bentley has pointed out, there is a character in a play by Balzac, a character much talked about but never seen,

²⁴ *Waiting for Godot*, p. 33.

and called Godeau.²⁴ The play in question is Balzac's comedy *Le Faiseur*, better known as *Mercadet*. Mercadet is a Stock Exchange speculator who is in the habit of attributing his financial difficulties to his former partner Godeau, who, years before, absconded with their joint capital: '*Je porte le poids du crime de Godeau*'. On the other hand, the hope of Godeau's eventual return and the repayment of the embezzled funds is constantly dangled by Mercadet before the eyes of his numerous creditors. '*Tout le monde a son Godeau, un faux Christophe Colomb! Après tout Godeau . . . je crois qu'il m'a déjà rapporté plus d'argent qu'il ne m'en a pris*'. The plot of *Mercadet* turns on a last, desperate speculation based on the appearance of a spurious Godeau. But the fraud is discovered. Mercadet seems ruined. At this moment the real Godeau is announced; he has returned from India with a huge fortune. The play ends with Mercadet exclaiming, '*J'ai montré tant de fois Godeau que j'ai bien le droit de le voir. Allons voir Godeau*'.²⁵

The parallels are too striking to make it probable that this is a mere coincidence. In Beckett's play, as in Balzac's, the arrival of Godot is the eagerly awaited event that will miraculously save the situation; and Beckett is as fond as Joyce of subtle and recondite literary allusions.

Yet whether Godot is meant to suggest the intervention of a supernatural agency, or whether he stands for a mythical human being whose arrival is expected to change the situation, or both of these possibilities combined, his exact nature is of secondary importance. The subject of the play is not Godot but waiting, the act of waiting as an essential and characteristic aspect of the human condition. Throughout our lives we always wait for something, and Godot simply represents the objective of our waiting—an event, a thing, a person, death. Moreover, it is in the act of waiting that we experience the flow of time in its purest, most evident form. If we are active, we tend to forget the passage of time, we pass the time, but if we are merely passively waiting, we are confronted with the action of time itself. As Beckett points out

²⁴ Eric Bentley, *What is Theatre?* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1956), p. 158.

²⁵ Honoré de Balzac, *Œuvres Complètes* (Paris, 1866), XIX.

in his analysis of Proust, 'There is no escape from the hours and the days. Neither from tomorrow nor from yesterday because yesterday has deformed us, or been deformed by us. . . . Yesterday is not a milestone that has been passed, but a daystone on the beaten track of the years, and irremediably part of us, within us, heavy and dangerous. We are not merely more weary because of yesterday, we are other, no longer what we were before the calamity of yesterday.'²⁶ The flow of time confronts us with the basic problem of being—the problem of the nature of the self, which, being subject to constant change in time, is in constant flux and therefore ever outside our grasp—'personality, whose permanent reality can only be apprehended as a retrospective hypothesis. The individual is the seat of a constant process of decantation, sluggish, pale and monochrome, to the vessel containing the fluid of past time, agitated and multicoloured by the phenomena of its hours.'²⁷

Being subject to this process of time flowing through us and changing us in doing so, we are, at no single moment in our lives, identical with ourselves. Hence 'we are disappointed at the nullity of what we are pleased to call attainment. But what is attainment? The identification of the subject with the object of his desire. The subject has died—and perhaps many times on the way.'²⁸ If Godot is the object of Vladimir's and Estragon's desire, he seems naturally ever beyond their reach. It is significant that the boy who acts as go-between fails to recognize the pair from day to day. The French version explicitly states that the boy who appears in the second act is the same boy as the one in the first act, yet the boy denies that he has ever seen the two tramps before and insists that this is the first time he has acted as Godot's messenger. As the boy leaves, Vladimir tries to impress it upon him: 'You're sure you saw me, eh, you won't come and tell me tomorrow that you never saw me before?' The boy does not reply, and we know that he will again fail to recognize them. Can we ever be sure that the human beings we meet are the same today as they were yesterday? When Pozzo and Lucky first

appear, neither Vladimir nor Estragon seems to recognize them; Estragon even takes Pozzo for Godot. But after they have gone, Vladimir comments that they have changed since their last appearance. Estragon insists that he didn't know them.

VLADIMIR: Yes you do know them.

ESTRAGON: No I don't know them.

VLADIMIR: We know them, I tell you. You forget everything.

[Pause. To himself] Unless they're not the same. . . .

ESTRAGON: Why didn't they recognize us, then?

VLADIMIR: That means nothing. I too pretended not to recognize them. And then nobody ever recognizes us.²⁹

In the second act, when Pozzo and Lucky reappear, cruelly deformed by the action of time, Vladimir and Estragon again have their doubts whether they are the same people they met on the previous day. Nor does Pozzo remember them: 'I don't remember having met anyone yesterday. But tomorrow I won't remember having met anyone today.'³⁰

Waiting is to experience the action of time, which is constant change. And yet, as nothing real ever happens, that change is in itself an illusion. The ceaseless activity of time is self-defeating, purposeless, and therefore null and void. The more things change, the more they are the same. That is the terrible stability of the world. 'The tears of the world are a constant quantity. For each one who begins to weep, somewhere else another stops.'³¹ One day is like another, and when we die, we might never have existed. As Pozzo exclaims in his great final outburst:

'Have you not done tormenting me with your accursed time? . . . One day, is that not enough for you, one day like any other day he went dumb, one day I went blind, one day we'll go deaf, one day we were horn, one day we'll die, the same day, the same second. . . . They give birth astride of a grave, the light gleams an instant, then it's night once more.'³²

²⁹ *Waiting for Godot*, p. 48.

³⁰ *ibid.*, p. 88.

³¹ *ibid.*, p. 32.

³² *ibid.*, p. 89.

²⁶ Proust, pp. 2-3.

²⁷ *ibid.*, pp. 4-5.

²⁸ Proust, p. 13.

And Vladimir, shortly afterwards, agrees: 'Astride of a grave and a difficult birth. Down in the hole, lingeringly, the gravedigger puts on the forceps.'⁸³

Still Vladimir and Estragon live in hope; they wait for Godot, whose coming will bring the flow of time to a stop. 'Tonight perhaps we shall sleep in his place, in the warmth, dry, our bellies full, on the straw. It is worth waiting for that, is it not?'⁸⁴ This passage, omitted in the English version, clearly suggests the peace, the rest from waiting, the sense of having arrived in a haven, that Godot represents to the two tramps. They are hoping to be saved from the evanescence and instability of the illusion of time, and to find peace and permanence outside it. Then they will no longer be tramps, homeless wanderers, but will have arrived home.

Vladimir and Estragon wait for Godot although their appointment with him is by no means certain. Estragon does not remember it at all. Vladimir is not quite sure what they asked Godot to do for them. It was 'nothing very definite . . . a kind of prayer . . . a vague supplication'. And what had Godot promised them? 'That he'd see . . . that he would think it over . . .'⁸⁵

When Beckett is asked about the theme of *Waiting for Godot*, he sometimes refers to a passage in the writings of St Augustine: 'There is a wonderful sentence in Augustine. I wish I could remember the Latin. It is even finer in Latin than in English. "Do not despair: one of the thieves was saved. Do not presume: one of the thieves was damned."⁸⁶ And Beckett sometimes adds, 'I am interested in the shape of ideas even if I do not believe in them. . . . That sentence has a wonderful shape. It is the shape that matters.'⁸⁷

The theme of the two thieves on the cross, the theme of the uncertainty of the hope of salvation and the fortuitousness of the bestowal of grace, does indeed pervade the whole play. Vladimir states it right at the beginning: 'One of the

⁸³ *ibid.*, p. 91.

⁸⁴ Beckett, *En Attendant Godot* (Paris: Les Editions de Minuit, 1952), p. 30.

⁸⁵ *Waiting for Godot*, p. 18.

⁸⁶ Beckett, quoted by Harold Hobson, *op. cit.*, and by Alan Schneider, *op. cit.*

thieves was saved. . . . It's a reasonable percentage.'⁸⁷ Later he enlarges on the subject: 'Two thieves. . . . One is supposed to have been saved and the other . . . damned. . . . And yet how is it that of the four evangelists only one speaks of a thief being saved? The four of them were there or thereabouts, and only one speaks of a thief being saved. . . . Of the other three two don't mention any thieves at all and the third says that both of them abused him.'⁸⁸ There is a fifty-fifty chance, but as only one out of four witnesses reports it, the odds are considerably reduced. But, as Vladimir points out; it is a curious fact that everybody seems to believe that one witness: 'It is the only version they know.' Estragon, whose attitude has been one of scepticism throughout, merely comments, 'People are bloody ignorant apes.'⁸⁹

It is the shape of the idea that fascinated Beckett. Out of all the malefactors, out of all the millions and millions of criminals that have been executed in the course of history, two, only two, had the chance of receiving absolution in the hour of their death in so uniquely effective a manner. One happened to make a hostile remark; he was damned. One happened to contradict that hostile remark; he was saved. How easily could the roles have been reversed. These, after all, were not well-considered judgements, but chance exclamations uttered at a moment of supreme suffering and stress. As Pozzo says about Lucky, 'Remark that I might easily have been in his shoes and he in mine. If chance had not willed it otherwise. To each one his due.'⁹⁰ And then our shoes might fit us one day and not the next: Estragon's boots torment him in the first act; in Act II they fit him miraculously.

Godot himself is unpredictable in bestowing kindness and punishment. The boy who is his messenger minds the goats, and Godot treats him well. But the boy's brother, who minds the sheep, is beaten by Godot. 'And why doesn't he beat you?' asks Vladimir. 'I don't know, sir'—'*Je ne sais pas, Monsieur*'—the boy replies, using the words of the *apache* who had stabbed Beckett. The parallel to Cain and Abel is evident:

⁸⁷ *Waiting for Godot*, p. 11.

⁸⁸ *ibid.*

⁸⁹ *ibid.*, p. 31.

⁹⁰ *ibid.*, pp. 12-13.

there too the Lord's grace fell on one rather than on the other without any rational explanation—only that Godot beats the minder of the sheep and cherishes the minder of the goats. Here Godot also acts contrary to the Son of Man at the Last Judgement: 'And he shall set the sheep on his right hand; but the goats on the left.' But if Godot's kindness is bestowed fortuitously, his coming is not a source of pure joy; it can also mean damnation. When Estragon, in the second act, believes Godot to be approaching, his first thought is, 'I'm accursed.' And as Vladimir triumphantly exclaims, 'It's Godot! At last! Let's go and meet him,' Estragon runs away, shouting, 'I'm in hell!'⁴¹

The fortuitous bestowal of grace, which passes human understanding, divides mankind into those that will be saved and those that will be damned. When, in Act II Pozzo and Lucky return, and the two tramps try to identify them, Estragon calls out, 'Abel! Abel!' Pozzo immediately responds. But when Estragon calls out, 'Cain! Cain!' Pozzo responds again. 'He's all mankind,' concludes Estragon.⁴²

There is even a suggestion that Pozzo's activity is concerned with his frantic attempt to draw that fifty-fifty chance of salvation upon himself. In the first act, Pozzo is on his way to sell Lucky 'at the fair'. The French version, however, specifies that it is the *'marché de Saint-Sauveur'*—the Market of the Holy Saviour—to which he is taking Lucky. Is Pozzo trying to sell Lucky to redeem himself? Is he trying to divert the fifty-fifty chance of redemption from Lucky (in whose shoes he might easily have been himself) to Pozzo? He certainly complains that Lucky is causing him great pain, that he is killing him with his mere presence—perhaps because his mere presence reminds Pozzo that it might be Lucky who will be redeemed. When Lucky gives his famous demonstration of his thinking, what is the thin thread of sense that seems to underlie the opening passage of his wild, schizophrenic 'word salad'? Again, it seems to be concerned with the fortuitousness of salvation: 'Given the existence . . . of a personal God . . . outside time without extension who from the

⁴¹ *ibid.*, pp. 73–4.

⁴² *ibid.*, pp. 83–4.

heights of divine apathia divine athambia divine aphasia loves us dearly with some exceptions for reasons unknown . . . and suffers . . . with those who for reasons unknown are plunged in torment. . . .⁴³ Here again we have the personal God, with his divine apathy, his speechlessness (aphasia), and his lack of the capacity for terror or amazement (athambia), who loves us dearly—with some exceptions, who will be plunged into the torments of hell. In other words, God, who does not communicate with us, cannot feel for us, and condemns us for reasons unknown.

When Pozzo and Lucky reappear the next day, Pozzo blind and Lucky dumb, no more is heard of the fair. Pozzo has failed to sell Lucky; his blindness in thinking that he could thus influence the action of grace has been made evident in concrete physical form.

That *Waiting for Godot* is concerned with the hope of salvation through the workings of grace seems clearly established both from Beckett's own evidence and from the text itself. Does this, however, mean that it is a Christian, or even that it is a religious, play? There have been a number of very ingenious interpretations in this sense. Vladimir's and Estragon's waiting is explained as signifying their steadfast faith and hope, while Vladimir's kindness to his friend, and the two tramps' mutual interdependence, are seen as symbols of Christian charity. But these religious interpretations seem to overlook a number of essential features of the play—its constant stress on the uncertainty of the appointment with Godot, Godot's unreliability and irrationality, and the repeated demonstration of the futility of the hopes pinned on him. The act of waiting for Godot is shown as essentially *absurd*. Admittedly it might be a case of '*Credere quia absurdum est*', yet it might even more forcibly be taken as a demonstration of the proposition '*Absurdum est credere*.'

There is one feature in the play that leads one to assume there is a better solution to the tramps' predicament, which they themselves both consider preferable to waiting for Godot—that is, suicide. 'We should have thought of it when the world was young, in the nineties. . . . Hand in hand from

⁴³ *ibid.*, p. 42.

the top of the Eiffel Tower, among the first. We were respectable in those days. Now it's too late. They wouldn't even let us up.⁴⁴ Suicide remains their favourite solution, unattainable owing to their own incompetence and their lack of the practical tools to achieve it. It is precisely their disappointment at their failure to succeed in their attempts at suicide that Vladimir and Estragon rationalize by waiting, or pretending to wait, for Godot. I'm curious to hear what he has to offer. Then we'll take it or leave it.⁴⁵ Estragon, far less convinced of Godot's promises than Vladimir, is anxious to reassure himself that they are not tied to Godot.

ESTRAGON: I'm asking you if we are 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.⁴⁶

When, later, Vladimir falls into some sort of complacency about their waiting—'We have kept our appointment . . . we are not saints—but we have kept our appointment. How many people can boast as much?' Estragon immediately punctures it by retorting, 'Billions.' And Vladimir is quite ready to admit that they are waiting only from irrational habit. 'What's certain is that the hours are long . . . and constrain us to beguile them with proceedings . . . which may at first sight seem reasonable until they become a habit. You may say it is to prevent our reason from foundering. No doubt. But has it not long been straying in the night without end of the abyssal depths?'⁴⁷

In support of the Christian interpretation, it might be argued that Vladimir and Estragon, who are waiting for Godot, are shown as clearly superior to Pozzo and Lucky, who have

⁴⁴ *Waiting for Godot*, p. 10.

⁴⁵ *ibid.*, p. 18.

⁴⁶ *ibid.*, p. 20.

⁴⁷ *ibid.*, p. 80.

no appointment, no objective, and are wholly egocentric, wholly wrapped up in their sadomasochistic relationship. Is it not their faith that puts the two tramps on to a higher plane?

It is evident that, in fact, Pozzo is naïvely overconfident and self-centred. 'Do I look like a man that can be made to suffer?'⁴⁸ he boasts. Even when he gives a soulful and melancholy description of the sunset and the sudden falling of the night, we know he does not believe the night will ever fall on him—he is merely giving a performance; he is not concerned with the meaning of what he recites, but only with its effect on the audience. Hence he is taken completely unawares when night does fall on him and he goes blind. Likewise Lucky, in accepting Pozzo as his master and in teaching him his ideas, seems to have been naïvely convinced of the power of reason, beauty, and truth. Estragon and Vladimir are clearly superior to both Pozzo and Lucky—not because they pin their faith on Godot but because they are less naïve. They do not believe in action, wealth, or reason. They are aware that all we do in this life is as nothing when seen against the senseless action of time, which is in itself an illusion. They are aware that suicide would be the best solution. They are thus superior to Pozzo and Lucky because they are less self-centred and have fewer illusions. In fact, as a Jungian psychologist, Eva Metman, has pointed out in a remarkable study of Beckett's plays, 'Godot's function seems to be to keep his dependents unconscious.'⁴⁹ In this view, the hope, the habit of hoping, that Godot might come after all is the last illusion that keeps Vladimir and Estragon from facing the human condition and themselves in the harsh light of fully conscious awareness. As Dr Metman observes, it is at the very moment, toward the end of the play, when Vladimir is about to realize he has been dreaming, and must wake up and face the world as it is, that Godot's messenger arrives, rekindles his hopes, and plunges him back into the passivity of illusion.

For a brief moment, Vladimir is aware of the full horror of

⁴⁸ *ibid.*, p. 34.

⁴⁹ Eva Metman, 'Reflections on Samuel Beckett's plays', *Journal of Analytical Psychology*, London, January 1960, p. 51.

the human condition: 'The air is full of our cries. . . . But habit is a great deadener.' He looks at Estragon, who is asleep, and reflects, 'At me too someone is looking, of me too someone is saying, he is sleeping, he knows nothing, let him sleep on. . . . I can't go on!'⁶⁰ The routine of waiting for Godot stands for habit, which prevents us from reaching the painful but fruitful awareness of the full reality of being.

Again we find Beckett's own commentary on this aspect of *Waiting for Godot* in his essay on Proust: 'Habit is the ballast that chains the dog to his vomit. Breathing is habit. Life is habit. Or rather life is a succession of habits, since the individual is a succession of individuals. . . . Habit then is the generic term for the countless treaties concluded between the countless subjects that constitute the individual and their countless correlative objects. 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*.'⁶¹ 'The suffering of being: that is the free play of every faculty. Because the pernicious devotion of habit paralyzes our attention, drugs those handmaidens of perception whose cooperation is not absolutely essential.'⁶²

Vladimir's and Estragon's pastimes are, as they repeatedly indicate, designed to stop them from thinking. 'We're in no danger of thinking any more. . . . Thinking is not the worst. . . . What is terrible is to have thought.'⁶³

Vladimir and Estragon talk incessantly. Why? They hint at it in what is probably the most lyrical, the most perfectly phrased passage of the play:

VLADIMIR: You are 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.

VLADIMIR: We have our reasons.

⁶⁰ *Waiting for Godot*, p. 91.

⁶¹ Proust, p. 8 [my italics—M.E.].

⁶² *ibid.*, p. 9.

⁶³ *Waiting for Godot*, p. 64.

Samuel Beckett: The search for the self

ESTRAGON: All the dead voices.

VLADIMIR: They make a noise like wings.

ESTRAGON: Like leaves.

VLADIMIR: Like sand.

ESTRAGON: Like leaves.

[*Silence.*]

VLADIMIR: They all speak together.

ESTRAGON: Each one to itself.

[*Silence.*]

VLADIMIR: Rather they whisper.

ESTRAGON: They rustle.

VLADIMIR: They murmur.

ESTRAGON: They rustle.

[*Silence.*]

VLADIMIR: What do they say?

ESTRAGON: They talk about their lives.

VLADIMIR: To have lived is not enough for them.

ESTRAGON: They have to talk about it.

VLADIMIR: To be dead is not enough for them.

ESTRAGON: It is not sufficient.

[*Silence.*]

VLADIMIR: They make a noise like feathers.

ESTRAGON: Like leaves.

VLADIMIR: Like ashes.

ESTRAGON: Like leaves.

[*Long silence.*]⁶⁴

This passage, in which the cross-talk of Irish music-hall comedians is miraculously transmuted into poetry, contains the key to much of Beckett's work. Surely these rustling, murmuring voices of the past are the voices we hear in the three novels of his trilogy; they are the voices that explore the mysteries of being and the self to the limits of anguish and suffering. Vladimir and Estragon are trying to escape hearing them. The long silence that follows their evocation is broken by Vladimir, 'in anguish', with the cry 'Say anything at all' after which the two relapse into their wait for Godot.

The hope of salvation may be merely an evasion of the suffering and anguish that spring from facing the reality of the human condition. There is here a truly astonishing parallel between the Existentialist philosophy of Jean-Paul Sartre and

⁶⁴ *ibid.*, pp. 62-3.

the creative intuition of Beckett, who has never consciously expressed Existentialist views. If, for Beckett as for Sartre, man has the duty of facing the human condition as a recognition that at the root of our being there is nothingness, liberty, and the need of constantly creating ourselves in a succession of choices, then Godot might well become an image of what Sartre calls 'bad faith'—'The first act of bad faith consists in evading what one cannot evade, in evading what one is.'⁵⁵

While these parallels may be illuminating, we must not go too far in trying to identify Beckett's vision with any school of philosophy. It is the peculiar richness of a play like *Waiting for Godot* that it opens vistas on so many different perspectives. It is open to philosophical, religious, and psychological interpretations, yet above all it is a poem on time, evanescence, and the mysteriousness of existence, the paradox of change and stability, necessity and absurdity. It expresses what Watt felt about the household of Mr Knott: '... nothing changed in Mr Knott's establishment, because nothing remained, and nothing came or went, because all was a coming and a going.'⁵⁶ In watching *Waiting for Godot*, we feel like Watt contemplating the organization of Mr Knott's world: 'But he had hardly felt the absurdity of those things, on the one hand, and the necessity of those others, on the other, (for it is rare that the feeling of absurdity is not followed by the feeling of necessity), when he felt the absurdity of those things of which he had just felt the necessity (for it is rare that the feeling of necessity is not followed by the feeling of absurdity).'⁵⁷

If *Waiting for Godot* shows its two heroes whiling away the time in a succession of desultory, and never-ending, games, Beckett's second play deals with an 'endgame', the final game in the hour of death.

Waiting for Godot takes place on a terrifyingly empty open road, *Endgame* in a claustrophobic interior. *Waiting for Godot* consists of two symmetrical movements that balance

⁵⁵ Jean-Paul Sartre, *L'Être et le Néant* (Paris: Gallimard, 1943), p. 111.

⁵⁶ Beckett, *Watt* (Paris: Olympia Press, 1958), pp. 144-5.

⁵⁷ *ibid.*, p. 146.

each other; *Endgame* has only one act that shows the running down of a mechanism until it comes to a stop. Yet *Endgame*, like *Waiting for Godot*, groups its characters in symmetrical pairs.

In a bare room with two small windows, a blind old man, Hamm, sits in a wheelchair. Hamm is paralysed, and can no longer stand. His servant, Clov, is unable to sit down. In two ash-cans that stand by the wall are Hamm's legless parents, Nagg and Nell. The world outside is dead. Some great catastrophe, of which the four characters in the play are, or believe themselves, to be the sole survivors, has killed all living beings.

Hamm and Clov (ham actor and clown? Hammer and Nail—French 'clou'? Nagg = German Nagel; Nell = English: nail also suggests their dependence on Hamm = Hammer) in some ways resemble Pozzo and Lucky. Hamm is the master, Clov the servant. Hamm is selfish, sensuous, domineering. Clov hates Hamm and wants to leave him, but he must obey his orders. 'Do this, do that, and I do it. I never refuse. Why?'⁵⁸ Will Clov have the force to leave Hamm? That is the source of the dramatic tension of the play. If he leaves, Hamm must die, as Clov is the only one left who can feed him. But Clov also must die, as there is no one else left in the world, and Hamm's store is the last remaining source of food. If Clov can muster the will power to leave, he will not only kill Hamm but commit suicide. He will thus succeed where Estragon and Vladimir have failed so often.

Hamm fancies himself as a writer—or, rather, as the spinner of a tale of which he composes a brief passage every day. It is a story about a catastrophe that caused the death of large numbers of people. On this particular day, the tale has reached an episode in which the father of a starving child asks Hamm for bread for his child. Finally the father begs Hamm to take in his child, should it still be alive when he gets back to his home. It appears that Clov might well be that very child. He was brought to Hamm when he was too small to remember. Hamm was a father to him, or, as he himself puts it, 'But for me . . . no father. But for Hamm . . . no

⁵⁸ Beckett, *Endgame* (New York: Grove Press, 1958), p. 43.