

The Role of Absurdity in Waiting for Godot

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ABSTRACT

Samuel Beckett (April 13, 1906–December 22, 1989) was an Irish avant-garde playwright, poet and novelist best known for his play Waiting for Godot. Strongly influenced by fellow Irish writer, James Joyce, Beckett is sometimes considered the last of the Modernists; however, as his body of work influenced many subsequent writers, he is also considered one of the fathers of the post-modernist movement. He was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1969, for his writing, which-in new forms for the novel and drama-in the destitution of modern man acquires its elevation. Born in the Dublin suburb of Foxrock on Good Friday, 1906, Samuel Barclay Beckett was the younger of two sons born to William Frank Beckett and May Barclay. The area surrounding his family home featured in his prose and poetry later in life. Irish poet and Beckett biographer, Anthony Cronin said of Samuel Beckett's childhood, "if anything, an outdoor type rather than an indoor one. He enjoyed games and was good at them", (Beckett, 1976).

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INTRODUCTION

They are two tramps, Vladimir and Estragon, and have nothing significant to do with their lives other than waiting for the inscrutable Godot or any significant place to be other than by the side of a road in the middle of nowhere. Although scarcely an epistemologist or metaphysician, Vladimir has moments of lucidity in regard to their situation:

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. Estragon, the more passive and instinctive of the pair, although frequently living in a daze and subject to the lure of sleep and the thralldom of dreams, is not

without insight into this abysmal world. After listening to Vladimir's comment about the uselessness of reason, he pronounces: "We are all born mad. Some remain so". And at the beginning of the play, he opines: "Nothing to be done" (Wolosky, 1995).

DISCUSSION

This is reminiscent of Nietzsche's claim that "Any meaning is better than none at all". Despite their sense that human life is nothing more than a brief and absurd interlude between the thrownness of birth and the darkness of death, the tramps cling to the notion that the mysterious and enigmatic figure of Godot will save them and give their lives significance. They will not allow themselves, therefore, to be nihilists for they refuse the one freedom the nihilist insists on-the freedom of suicide. The tramps play at suicide, and the constant stage presence of the tree suggests that the possibility

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of suicide is an *a priori* of the human condition. One is reminded of Camus's assertion that suicide is the only serious philosophical problem, but the tramps can only joke about hanging themselves.

Undoubtedly, "there is certain sadness in this interchange as well as another realisation of their dependence on each other, but there is also a good deal of slapstick humour" (Kaufmann, 1968). From the context of the discussion of suicide in Act 1 to that of the same issue in Act 2, the tramps are acutely aware that all they can or are willing to do in life is just wait together endlessly-and rather mindlessly-for Godot. Such habitual, reflexive, and conformistic behaviour is hardly what the existentialists have had in mind with the notion of authenticity. Although his analysis is insightful, Anders seems to miss a deeper level on which the tramps may indeed be nihilists in Nietzsche's precise sense of the term. That is, for Nietzsche, a nihilist is not one who believes in nothing, but one who abandons belief in *this* world in favour of another world that is (according to Nietzsche) idealised, fictitious, and the product of the mechanisms of *ressentiment*. Nietzsche finds the source of such nihilism in the Platonic/Judeo-Christian world view, and vigorously exposes this in many works using his genealogical method of analysis. Although Nietzsche does not use the word as such, the idea of a critique of *eschatology*-and specifically the Platonic/Judeo-Christian idea of the *eschaton*-figures prominently in his philosophy. Eschatology, of course, is the study of the end of time, classically in a religious sense, and the *eschaton* is the expectation of what that end time would involve. Following largely in the tradition of Zoroastrianism, the three Semitic religions of the West have postulated similar *eschatons* that share common structure: the return of a messianic figure at the end of cosmic linear history, a final apocalyptic battle between the forces of good and evil, and the institution of a scenario of judgment, which will be followed by eternal salvation or damnation.

Godot is the unreachable God; he is death; he is some kind of future utopia; he is the panacea of plentiful food

and shelter; he is the suggestion of the triumph of mass unconsciousness and social conformity over individual authenticity; or he is a strange sort of quasi-bureaucrat or administrator who has family, friends, agents, correspondents, books, and a bank account. Two issues complicate correct explication: (1) All suggested exegeses are underdetermined by the text itself and by the absence of any significant interpretation of the play by Beckett himself; and (2) Beckett claimed that he was more interested in the aspect of "waiting" in the play, and less concerned with the question of who or what Godot is. I will follow this latter thread momentarily; but tentatively, I want to postulate, as have others that Godot is the equivalent of the Platonic/Judeo-Christian *eschaton*. Both of these secular eschatologists issue into a kind of determined waiting or expectation as to the consummation of history, whether in the form of the resolution of the dialectic in pure spirit and the Prussian state or its dissolution in the classless society. Either way, it is abundantly clear that the tramps are envious of Pozzo and his menial precisely because *they* have a direction and goal (at least in Act 1 of the play). We see this conversion occurring constantly in *Waiting for Godot*. The tramps go through the dull routines of each day; nothing of any real consequence is accomplished, and all actions and conversations move in vast circles, the purpose of which is merely to jolt lived time ahead inch by inch. This explains why the tramps are desperate for diversions. Anything at all is fair game including verbally abusing each other, silly routines, sing-song *divertissements*, playing at being Pozzo and Lucky, speculating about Godot, and contemplating suicide. Their great despair is precisely a function of their mindless devotion to an end state that (in Beckett's eyes) cannot and will not come, because they merely exist but do not experience the full richness of the temporal. Now they lack a significant world and are doomed to the labour of constantly being forced to "kill time". (ibid) It is true that there are moments of genuine humour in the play, and the tramps do seem to have a kind of empathy for each other, but all this is overridden by the fundamental pessimism that

forces them to live in the shadow of a pseudo-salvation that will never come. Their numbingly repetitive references to Godot are analogous to the final weary efforts of men who no longer believe in anything significant at all in this world. They are doing nothing other than going through the motions of living in a manner not unlike the “last men” that Nietzsche postulated as the denouement of the inherent nihilism of the Western eschatological world view. Of course, it is true that waiting is the fundamental project or meaning of the tramps’ lives, as Vladimir realises when he notes that “we are not saints but have kept our appointment” (Wolosky, 1925). Thus, it might be argued that in realising their being-as-waiting they have realised their authentic being. However, the question from Nietzsche’s point of view would be: what have the tramps accomplished by their deadened rituals, and what have they found out about themselves? The answer seems to be that “they cling to a worldview that no longer has any life or vitality or even believability to it” (Eva, 1965).

Paul Fiddes points out that the parable in the Gospel of Luke about the watching servants who await their master’s return (Christ) stresses the nature of the Christian *parousia*, which anticipates a creative and joyous ending of the world for true believers. In this worldview, time is not merely to be endured but is to be celebrated as part of the cosmic plan. However, the main issue for exegesis here is that, while never officially announcing his atheism, Beckett does not seem to have believed in such a grand narrative. Vladimir and Estragon (as well as other tragic dyads, such as Hamm and Clov in *Endgame*) are veritable strangers wandering in a strange land where the narrative is dying, if not already dead. Beckett is not exploring the *parousia*, but rather the *a-parousia*; he seems to take

the emptiness or falseness of Western eschatology for granted and relentlessly explores the consequences thereof. Objectively, of course, it does not seem possible to prove which view of the end times is correct, and so we may take Beckett as offering a sort of philosophy of “as if”; that is, he seems to be suggesting that if the Western eschaton is false and/or belief in it has decayed to the point of meaninglessness, then the characters of Vladimir and Estragon would be inherently tragic or farcical human archetypes.

CONCLUSION

They would be the reduction to absurdity of the theology of waiting for that which (according to Beckett) cannot and will not come. Objective proof of statements supporting or denying the ontology of the Western eschaton seems to be problematic, so Beckett apparently resorted to literature as the only medium in which he could express his views on the matter. That the tramps lack a significant world has not gone unnoticed by commentators. Günther Anders notes: That this real loss of a world requires special means if it is to be represented in literature or on the stage goes without saying. Where a world no longer exists, there can no longer be a possibility of a collision with the world, and therefore the very possibility of tragedy has been forfeited. Or to put it more precisely: the tragedy of this kind of existence lies in the fact that it does not even have a chance of tragedy, that it must always, at the same time, in its totality be farce...and “that therefore it can only be represented as farce, as ontological farce, not as comedy” (Schonfeld, 2009). Owing to their stubborn and nihilistic attachment to an idealistic eschaton, the tramps cannot rise to authenticity. That is, “they cannot, for example, be tragic heroes in the way Hamlet is, nor can they be Übermensch in the way that Nietzsche thought of Goethe” (Jeffery).

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