

***Waiting for Godot as a 'Modern Tragedy'***

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## 要約

### 現代的な悲劇としての『ゴドーを待ちながら』

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『ゴドーを待ちながら』は一般に典型的な前衛演劇とみなされている。すなわち、主題もテクニックも極めて現代的で実験的なものなので、西洋文学に先例のないものとされている。なるほどこの劇は、それにふさわしい現代的なテクニックを駆使して、伝統的な一切の価値を奪われてしまった世界に生きる現代人の実存的な苦境を提示してみせる。しかしこの劇は、既存の西洋悲劇の伝統の範囲内でこのことをおこなっている。劇作家ベケットは現代の哲学的な思想を超え、人は自分の住む矮小化された世界においても、自らの悲劇的な偉大さを主張できるものだということを見せている。

In his book, *The Death of Tragedy*, George Steiner has argued that the classical idea and form of tragedy as a “representation of personal suffering and heroism” (3) is something beyond the reach of the modern dramatist because the religious and social environment that surrounds him is not conducive to it:

... tragedy is that form of art which requires the intolerable burden of God's presence. It is now dead because His shadow no longer falls upon us as it fell on Agamemnon or Macbeth or Athalie. (353)

It may be recalled that when Arthur Miller produced his masterpiece, *Death of a Salesman* in 1949, he was also aware of such a commonly-held view about the impossibility of tragic writings in modern times:

In this age few tragedies are written. It has often been held that the lack is due to a paucity of heroes among us, or else that modern man has had the blood drawn out of his organs of belief by the skepticism of science, and the heroic attack on life cannot feed on an attitude of reserve and circumspection. For one reason or another, we are often held to be below tragedy—or above us” (1).

But, of course, Miller went on to argue, and what is more important *demonstrate* through his tragic writings, that tragedy could be created out of the contemporary life, however debased it might be in comparison with the classical past.

Curiously, George Steiner, who wrote his book more than a decade later, was apparently unimpressed by Miller's argument. He was not only convinced of the “death” of tragedy but also of drama as a viable literary form:

In the renaissance and the neo-classic period, it is the dramatist who is emblematic of literature; during romanticism, it is the lyric poet. But since the time of the industrial revolution, the writer in essence, the man who typifies even at first glance the profession of letters, is the novelist. (307)

And specifically as regards *Waiting for Godot*, Steiner does not think that it qualifies as drama, hence the question of whether it is a tragedy or not does not even arise:

There are moments in *Waiting for Godot* that proclaim with painful vividness the infirmity of our moral condition: the incapacity of speech or gesture to countenance the abyss and horror of the times. But again, I wonder whether we are dealing with drama in any genuine sense. Beckett is writing “antidrama”; he is showing, with a queer kind of Irish logic, that one can bar from the stage all forms of mobility and natural communication between characters and yet produce a play. But the result is, I think, crippled and monotonous. At best, we get a metaphysical *guignol*, a puppet show made momentarily fascinating or monstrous by the fact that the puppets insist on behaving as if they were alive. (350)

It is ironical that Steiner is so unresponsive to Beckett's technical innovations despite the fact that he grants the possibility, towards the very end of his book, that tragedy might carry on its "essential tradition despite changes in technical form: " [There is a ] threefold possibility of our theme: that tragedy is, indeed, dead; that it carries on its essential tradition despite changes in technical form; that tragic drama may come back to life" (351). Presumably, Steiner feels that if the modern artist were able to create tragic art, he would be able to do so only in a form other than that of drama, i.e. the novel.

But Beckett's achievement is not only that he has written a successful play but also one that is unmistakably a tragedy. His drama and tragedy are 'modern' both in theme and technique. One has to respond to the effectiveness of the new dramatic techniques that Beckett uses in order fully to appreciate such a claim for the play. The play was first published in Paris as *En attendant Godot* on 17 October 1952 and it had its world *premiere* at the Theatre de Babylone on 5 January 1953. In what was perhaps the first published review of the performance, a "littel-known French critic," Sylvain Zegel wrote: "In my opinion, Samuel Beckett's first play, 'Waiting for Godot,' at the Theater de Babylone, will be spoken of for a long time" (88). The enormous popularity and success that the play has enjoyed abundantly justify Zegel's prescience and prediction. (One is reminded in this connection of the accuracy of Kenneth Tynan's prognosis about the destiny of *Look Back in Anger*.) Beckett himself translated the play into English, and it was published as *Waiting for Godot* by Grove Press in America in 1954, and by Faber and Faber in Britain in 1956. Both the editions are still in print: according to Grove Press's announcement in March 1975, "the American paperback edition has sold more than a million copies and was still selling at the rate of 2,500 a week" (*Samuel Beckett: The Critical Heritage* 12). It is reasonable to assume that even now, fifteen years later, the publishers would, if asked, produce similarly impressive sales-figures of the book.

One would be equally justified in seeing a correlation between the book industry and the critical industry in this matter, for, although "an American college professor was forced to resign after directing *Godot*, which was declared 'detrimental to the moral fibre of the college community'" (Cohn, "Waiting" 42), *Waiting for Godot* has been the subject of wide and serious discussions in the groves of Academe where it "is now widely accepted as the greatest dramatic achievement of the last generation, some would say the greatest imaginative work of any kind during the same period" (Gilman 69). It is true that when the play was first produced in English in the United States, it left many members of the audience and reviewers bewildered and perplexed—its *premiere* at the Coconut Grove Playhouse, Miami, was a disaster, with taxicabs coming at the end of the first act to pick up fares. But very soon the critics realized that it was a new kind of play which could be fully responded to only if one was prepared to leave behind one's conventional notions of dramatic forms and modes. They saw it as belonging to the Theatre of the Absurd which was founded—albeit with no conscious intention of innovation—in Paris after the Second World War. It just so happened that a few expatriate dramatists in Paris—Beckett (Irish), Ionesco (Rumanian), Adamov (Russian) and Arrabal (Spanish)—created a new form of drama out of the 'absurdist' position they found themselves in:

The sudden outburst of French absurdism may in part be explained as a nihilistic reaction to the recent atrocities, the gas-chambers and the nuclear bombs of war. Theatre of the absurd revealed the negative side of Sartre's existentialism, and expressed the helplessness and futility of a world which seemed to have no purpose. (Styan 125)

There does not seem to be any 'tragic atmosphere' in the play— neither is there any sobriety or sombreness in the action nor dignity in the protagonists. In fact, the latter would seem to be absurd characters in an absurd situation, and the only way they can react to their life is with laughter, or despair, or both. This, however, is not accidental but the result of Beckett's conscious dramatic strategy. He knew, with his fellow-absurdist, that he had to introduce new "stylistic methods" in order to give dramatic credence to his theme, and to hold the audience's attention:

Purposelessness is inconsistent with everythig dramatic art has achieved in the past, and, in addition, extremes of the absurdist vision are too repelling to stage in their own terms. Playwrights in this vein therefore adopted stylistic methods to hold the attention of the audience, to erect a kind of screen through which the statement of the play could be filtered, and at the same time to reduce the resistance of the spectator. Almost universally, the methods adopted were those of farce, and laughter was found to be the most successful device in disarming the wary audience. (Styan 126)

Beckett has no difficulty in accommodating these contradictory responses within his play because, as Nell says in *Endgame*: "Nothing is funnier than unhappiness. ... It's the most comical thing in the world." And Beckett teasingly calls the play a "tragicomedy."

But this 'modern' response to man's absurd situation does not in any way diminish the value of the play as tragedy. *Waiting for Godot*, in which the two essential ingredients of tragedy, as stipulated by Steiner—"personal suffering" and "heroism"—are markedly, albeit in a modified form, present, projects a profoundly tragic vision of life. Jean Anouilh has succinctly summarized the play as follows: "'Nothing happens, nobody comes, nobody goes, it's awful.' This line, spoken by one of the characters in the play, provides its best summary" (92). This simple plot—indeed, no plot—has been the subject of vigorous critical discussions and analyses. Ruby Cohn has remarked: "I have edited a volume that contains theatrical, source, genre, Marxist, Christian, mythic, philosophic, pehnomenological, imagistic, linguistic interpretatons of *Godot*. Other editors have included other approaches" ("Waiting" 49). Most of such attempts have been aimed at locating the symbolic meanings in the play. One of the most widely accepted critical views is that the play symbolizes the existential predicament of man, that Beckett presents a purposelss universe that is bereft of all traditional values. The two main characters, Vladimir and Estragon, inhabit this purposelss, and in many ways arbitrary and absurd, world in which no action is meaningful. The burden of their existence drives them to the brink of despair, and they even contemplate committing suicide more than

once. They feel trapped inside this empty and futile life, and they cannot “go” anywhere. There is another reason for their static condition: Vladimir tells Estragon that they are “waiting for Godot” (14), though it soon becomes obvious that Godot has no intention of obliging them.

Critics have attempted to understand the symbolic significance of Godot and of waiting itself. But Beckett himself had tried to forestall symbolical interpretation of the play: “. . . the early success of ‘Waiting for Godot’ was based on a fundamental misunderstanding, critics and public alike insisted on interpreting in allegorical or symbolic terms a play which was striving all the time to avoid definition.” And he went on to condemn, with a touch of exasperation, those critics who looked for meanings in the play which were not there in the first place: “When are they going to stop making me mean more than I say?” *Samuel Beckett: The Critical Heritage* 10).

Hugh Kenner would seem to be one of those critics of whom Beckett might have approved because he does not look for any esoteric meanings which might lie concealed under the surface. He believes that Beckett has endowed Vladimir and Estragon with a common human experience which the audience and readers share, and hence easily understand:

We have all waited, perhaps not by a tree at evening or on a country road, but waited. The details are immaterial. They are waiting for Godot. Each of us has his Godot, if only someone from whom, for several days, we have expected a letter. The substance of the play, in short, is as common a human experience as you can find. . . . The substance of the play is waiting, amid uncertainty. (32)

And Kenner goes on to point out that all that Beckett attempts to do is to give artistic form to this theme: “Beckett fills the time [of waiting] with beautifully symmetrical structures” (33).

But, surely, the substance of the play is not just the common experience that Kenner mentions nor is the playwright’s intention merely the creation of an aesthetic form. Rather, it is the human reaction to a common experience that Beckett seems to be mainly interested in: what does man do, what *can* he do in the interim while he is waiting? This leads Beckett, in the first place, to portray the deep anguish that lies at the heart of human existence. Vladimir and Estragon become increasingly dispirited as they discover the absurdity and arbitrariness that pervade their lives. But at the same time, Beckett succeeds in revealing these characters’ capacity for asserting their human identity. As the play progresses they reveal their human potentials. Despite Estragon’s complaint that “Nothing happens, nobody comes, nobody goes, it’s awful” (41) which might suggest that these two feckless tramps are helplessly ensnared in a stagnant world—an impression which is reinforced by the stage directions, “*They do not move*” at the end of each act,—there is a stir in the consciousness of these two men. Paradoxically, while on the one hand they achieve a deeper consciousness of their miserable state, they also become aware of possibilities. In this respect, *Waiting for Godot* is very much like *The Waste Land*. F R Leavis has pointed out that although *The Waste Land* “exhibits no progression . . . the

poem ends where it began," it succeeds in its positive aim of presenting "an inclusive consciousness" (103). The same claim can be made for *Waiting for Godot*.

The protagonists, though similar in many ways, are also quite different from each other. Vladimir, whose name means 'ruler of the world,' and Estragon, whose name derives from the French word for the herb 'tarragon,' can be reasonably associated with qualities of a leader and feelings of bitterness and mortification respectively. They have known each other for more than half a century, and it soon becomes apparent that in the past Vladimir has come to Estragon's aid when he was in trouble. He has saved him when he tried to drown himself in the Rhone. When the play opens, we find that although Vladimir shares his friend's frustration with the helplessness that permeates life, he is not entirely so hopeless as Estragon obviously is. In fact, the opening dialogue of the play seems to herald the central theme of the play:

Estragon: (*giving up again*). Nothing to be done.

Vladimir: (*advancing with short, stiff strides, legs wide apart*). I'm beginning to come round to the same opinion. All my life I've tried to put it from me, saying, Vladimir, be reasonable, you haven't tried everything. And I resumed the struggle. (9)

Though Estragon is giving up in the face of life's struggle, Vladimir, despite being equally battered, is still clinging to possibilities. The "reasonable" in him urges him to resume life's struggle. As a result, in the face of heavy odds he is determined to go on: "*(gloomily)*. It's too much for one man. (*Pause. Cheerfully.*) On the other hand, what's the good of losing heart now, that's what I say" (10). Thus the stage is set for the tragic story of two ragamuffins who have come to the conclusion that life is bleak, but whereas one is gloomy and is disinclined to exert himself in any way, the other one feels that reason demands that he must somehow strive, somehow find something meaningful. Estragon, the weaker of the two, tries to escape from wakefulness (because it only makes him conscious of misery and wretchedness) by lapsing into sleep and dream. Vladimir, on the other hand, is more intellectual of the two and he tries to lift his mood and that of his friend by speculating about alternative possibilities or by just indulging in desultory conversations and distractions.

With the coming of Pozzo and Lucky the tramps' 'educational process' begins, a process through which they realize that "passing the time in the dark ... is ... what life is about" (Tynan 96). They learn, in the absence of an escape route through suicide, that they must struggle "on," to borrow Pozzo's keyword, and get used to the "muck" (21) that life is. Remarkably, they also become imperceptibly aware of the values of companionship and help as they journey through the darkness. Critics have variously seen Pozzo and Lucky as symbolizing the relationship between materialism and intellectualism, body and spirit, the exploiter and the exploited, the master and the slave. But what is undeniable is that they both are drawn to each other by some kind of sado-masochistic pull. Pozzo is rich, self-assured and he lives in a world of illusions and is convinced that he was not "made to suffer" (34). Lucky, on the other hand, is an intellectual who reveals through his schizophrenic oratory his knowledge that man is doomed to "waste and pine

waste and pine ... for reasons unknown" (43). He is 'lucky' in that he has been able to opt out of the panic that life is by becoming Pozzo's unquestioning slave. Pozzo similarly has been evading the terrifying realities of life by pushing them to the level of abstractions. He has learnt from Lucky all sorts of "beautiful things" which he lyrically articulates:

The tears of the world are a constant quantity. For each one who begins to weep, somewhere else another stops. The same thing is true of the laugh. (*He laughs .*) Let us not speak ill of our generation, it is not much unhappier than its predecessors. (*Pause .*) Let us not speak well of it either. (33)

Presumably, it is also under the influence of Lucky that he has come to know that just as in nature the light of day fades into the darkness of night, a similar process operates "on this bitch of an earth" (38) too. But these comments are merely rhetorical musings on his part because his temperament as well as his position in society have enabled him to keep real suffering at bay, at least for the moment. He delivers these ideas to the tramps simply to impress them with his oratory. At the end of the speech, he asks them for their verdict on his performance:

Pozzo: How did you find me? (*Vladimir and Estragon look at him blankly .*) Good? Fair? Middling? Poor? Positively bad?

Vladimir: (*first to understand .*) Oh very very good, very very good.

Pozzo: (*to Estragon .*) And you, sir?

Estragon: Oh tray bong, tray tray tray bong.

Pozzo: (*fervently .*) Bless you gentlemen, bless you! I have such need of encouragement! (38)

Pompous man that he is, Pozzo quickly overcomes his momentary weakness—"I have such need of encouragement!"—and again assumes his self-satisfied role of a liberal, generous man who wants to help others in their boredom and distress:

... I ask myself is there anything I can do in my turn for these honest fellows who are having such a dull, dull time. ...

Is there anything I can do, that's what I ask myself, to cheer them up? (39)

The episode involving Pozzo and Lucky is not important in itself. Its significance lies in the effect that these two characters, their thoughts and actions, have on Vladimir and Estragon. The tramps are certainly distracted as they are hugely amused by the antics of Lucky and the pomposity of Pozzo. In fact, they make Estragon laugh "*noisily*" and Vladimir is "*convulsed with merriment*" (35). But there are more substantial results of this encounter. In the first place, soon after meeting the tramps, Pozzo establishes the common humanity that all the four characters share, even though he is materially and socially superior to the other three:

You are human beings none the less. (*He puts on his glasses.*) As far as one can see. (*He takes off his glasses.*) Of the same species as myself. (*He bursts into an enormous laugh.*) (23)

Therefore what Pozzo says about human life is relevant to and meaningful for Vladimir

and Estragon. They respond to Pozzo's musings about the darkness that overwhelms "this bitch of an earth" as follows:

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.

Estragon: Simply wait.

Vladimir: We're used to it. (38)

Beckett tellingly portrays through these brief, stark sentences the tramps' understanding of the tragic nature of life, and the part that they will have to play in it: that life is terrible, that they must get used to it and just wait for it to run through. But they also reveal two of their qualities which will develop as the play proceeds, and these qualities will establish their identity in the world which otherwise seems to be meaningless.

One is the recognition that they can lighten each other's burden through the charity of each other's friendship and companionship. Both Vladimir and Estragon see that, despite the strange nature of their relationship, Pozzo and Lucky help and sustain each other notwithstanding the negative nature of their relationship. Their own relationship does not have this negative element but it does have moments when they get on each other's nerves. They often threaten each other with leaving but they remain together because deep down they know that they need each other's company and help in their journey through life. At the end of Act I this recognition is clearly achieved:

Estragon: Wait! (*He moves away from Vladimir.*) I wonder if we wouldn't have been better off alone, each one for himself. (*He crosses the stage and sits down on the mound.*) We weren't made for the same road.

Vladimir: (*without anger*). It's not certain.

Estragon: No, nothing is certain.

*Vladimir slowly crosses the stage and sits down beside Estragon.*

Vladimir: We can still part, if you think it would be better.

Estragon: It's not worth while now.

*Silence*

Vladimir: No, it is not worth while now. (53–54)

In addition to the need for each other's companionship in their common misery, they also demonstrate their capacity for fellow-feeling and sympathy. When Pozzo makes his first entry in the play, followed by Lucky who soon struggles and collapses under the weight of the burden that he is carrying, both Vladimir and Estragon turn towards Lucky. Vladimir moves to help him and enlists Estragon's sympathy also. They both commiserate with Lucky in his plight as they notice running sores on his neck. Vladimir begins to accuse Pozzo of inhumane treatment of Lucky, and Estragon, if only to keep up with his friend, joins in expressing their outrage:

Vladimir: (*stutteringly resolute*). To treat a man ... (*gesture towards Lucky*)... like that ... no ... a human being ... no ... it's a scandal!

Estragon: (*not to be outdone* ). A disgrace! (27)

The value of companionship and feelings of sympathy for fellow-sufferers are the attributes that these two tramps come to appreciate in greater degree as the play progresses, even though there is no change in their lives. The stage directions at the beginning of Act II— *Next Day. Same Scene. Same Place.*—suggest the continuation of stagnation. However, there is a hint of life and change in that the hitherto bare tree has now sprouted “*four or five leaves*” (57). Similarly, a slight movement in the otherwise “same” life of Vladimir and Estragon is indicated. Vladimir “loudly” and cheerfully sings a song and is happy to see his friend again. But Estragon is sullen and irascible because, in the absence of Vladimir’s company, he was beaten up again. He feels alienated from Vladimir’s cheerfulness and is resentful of his neglect. But at the same time he wants Vladimir to stay with him: “Don’t touch me! Don’t question me! Don’t speak to me! Stay with me! (58). Together again, they resume their irrational talk about this and that. Estragon revives his bleak vision of life, “All my lousy life I’ve crawled about in the mud” (61) which Vladimir endorses: “To every man his little cross, (*He sighs.*) Till he dies” (62). This being the case, they fall back upon the ‘comfort’ of each other’s friendship and companionship and conversation:

Estragon: In the meantime let’s try and converse calmly, since we are incapable of keeping silent.

Vladimir: You’re right, we’re inexhaustible. (62)

And they wait. They wait for Godot. However, it is again Pozzo who re-enters along with Lucky, but this time *both* of them are in an abject state, Pozzo having gone blind, and Lucky dumb. They totter and collapse, and Pozzo groans and cries for help. Vladimir notices his plight and expresses sympathy for “Poor Pozzo!” (77). He suggests to Estragon, “perhaps we should help him first” (78) but the latter is not in a charitable mood. Instead, he first proposes that they should take advantage of Pozzo’s helplessness by demanding a chicken bone in return for helping him, and then changes his mind and feels that perhaps they should exploit this opportunity for beating Pozzo up. Though Vladimir’s initial reaction is to go along with Estragon’s way of thinking, he stops short and decides otherwise: they must seize the opportunity of helping the helpless Pozzo:

Estragon: And suppose we give him a good beating, the two of us?

Vladimir: You mean if we fell on him in his sleep?

Estragon: Yes.

Vladimir: That seems a good idea all right. But could we do it? Is he really asleep? (*Pause* .) No, the best would be to take advantage of Pozzo’s calling for help—

Pozzo: Help!

Vladimir: To help him—

Estragon: *We help him ?*

Whereas Estragon finds the whole idea ridiculous, that they, the impoverished and down-and-out tramps, could be of help to anybody, Vladimir, the intellectual and the leader, thinks otherwise. He rises to the occasion and delivers a stirring speech, the content, the

diction and the shape of which underline its significance in the whole play:

Let us not waste our time in idle discourse! (*Pause. Vehemently.*) Let us do something, while we have the chance! It is not every day that we are needed. Not indeed that we personally are needed. Others would meet the case equally well, if not better. To all mankind they were addressed, those cries for help still ringing in our ears! But at this place, at this moment of time, all mankind is us, whether we like it or not. Let us make the most of it, before it is too late! Let us represent worthily for once the foul brood to which a cruel fate consigned us! What do you say? (*Estragon says nothing.*) It is true that when with folded arms we weigh the pros and cons we are no less a credit to our species. The tiger bounds to the help of his congeners without the least reflection, or else he slinks away into the depths of the thickets. But that is not the question. What are we 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 is clear. (79–80)

Vladimir's intellectual and linguistic resources belie his present condition or indeed his earlier years when he was "presentable" (10) if only as a grape-harvester. (Beckett's implied comment here on the state of the intellectual in the modern world should not go unnoticed.) But the basic potentiality for finding meaning in life was apparently there in him right from the very beginning. His awareness, that in this wretched existence to which he is doomed man can vindicate his humanity as well as his worthiness by positively responding to cries of help from fellow-sufferers, underscores the play's affirmation which is often missed by critics. Estragon certainly finds it ignorable, and he dismisses Vladimir's thoughts as the outpourings of a man who has not yet outgrown the madness with which he was born: "We are all born mad. Some remain so" (80). However, Vladimir is determined, he will not let the opportunity pass. He exhorts Estragon, "Come, let's get to work!" because in "an instant all will vanish and we'll be alone, in the midst of nothingness" (81). Before long Estragon is persuaded and he joins Vladimir in raising Pozzo to his feet. Pozzo is soon revived and he is ready to go, and his last word, as was his first, in the play is "On" (89). Significantly, Vladimir's last exhortation to Estragon is "Pull ON your trousers" (Beckett's own emphasis) (94), suggesting something like 'pull your socks up,' make an effort even though life is bleak.

That the play ends where it began, with the characters being unable to move, is undeniable. In fact, Vladimir's last longish speech re-emphasizes the wretchedness of life from which there is no escape:

Astride of a grave and a difficult birth. Down in the hole, lingeringly, the grave-digger puts on the forceps. We have time to grow old. The air is full of our cries. (90–91)

However, some recognitions have been made, some understanding achieved about the nature of human existence. This fact is often lost sight of because sufficient critical

attention has not been paid to the later parts of the play which bring into sharp focus some of the points which are vaguely hinted at earlier. They constitute the climactic stages when ideas and themes acquire clarity and conviction. For example, Vladimir learns from his experiences the validity of what he had said in his first utterance in the play—"Vladimir, be reasonable, you haven't tried everything" (9). In other words, he now realizes how his "thinking" ability can be exploited for practical purposes. In much of the play both the tramps are extremely suspicious of "thinking" because, as Vladimir says, "What is terrible is to *have* thought" (64). But not long before the play ends he comes to the understanding that "reason" or "thinking"—which has previously led man to wander in "the abyssal depths" (presumably through metaphysical speculations about the purpose of life)—can be more sensibly used to "beguile" the long hours of suffering by "proceedings" which probably means diversions and distractions "until they become a habit" (80). And since "habit is a great deadener" (91), both Vladimir's and Estragon's experiences show that they can avoid being overwhelmed by life's miseries by getting used to them. What is more, by going through this "deadening" process, they can rekindle their lives through companionship which brings them welcome distractions as well as mutual comfort and support, and through acts of sympathy for and help to fellow-sufferers. The latter factor in the equation is of particular significance because in this play in which the characters are supposed to be incapable of doing anything, they do 'do' something which proves their capacity for "friendship" (85) and their common humanity. Moreover, they recover, at least partially, their sense of time. It is true that in much "of the play [the playwright] dramatizes habitual routines, repetitions that stretch and flatten time to an eventless continuum" (Cohn, *Just Play* 42) so that characters do not recognize one another or their past encounters. But after helping Pozzo, Vladimir can be confident about time (even though Estragon continues to be vague about it):

Pozzo: What time is it?

Vladimir: (*inspecting the sky*). Seven o'clock ... eight o'clock ...

Estragon: That depends on what time of the year it is.

Pozzo: Is it evening?

*Silence. Vladimir and Estragon scrutinize the sunset.*

Estragon: It's rising.

Vladimir: Impossible.

Estragon: Perhaps it's the dawn.

Vladimir: Don't be a fool. It's the west over there. (85)

Vladimir also becomes sure of his identity, and he asks the Boy to recognize it: "You're sure you saw me, you won't come and tell me tomorrow that you never saw me! (92). Thus, although there is no diminution in their wretchedness, Vladimir and Estragon demonstrate, through companionship and compassion, that they are human individuals who—"at this place, at this moment of time"—worthily "represent for once the foul brood to which cruel fate consigned [them] " (79).

This streak of humanity—definite, though it is surrounded by a sense of futility and almost despair—places *Waiting for Godot* firmly within the Western literary tradition of

tragedy which shows the human spirit alive in the midst of ruins. Of course, it is a very modern play in form and content, in that it presents the post-war contemporary situation in an *avant-garde* manner which has no precedent in the history of English drama. Critics have commented copiously on the 'modernist' aspects of the play. But it seems to me that they are too obsessively preoccupied with the picture of 'modern life' they find reflected in the play. In his book *The Plays of Samuel Beckett* Eugene Webb has sketched that picture as follows:

Man in our age is the heir to centuries of analysis which have left experience in fragments and man a stranger in an unintelligible universe. . . . We are impelled by our nature to seek understanding, but reason, the only instrument we have with which to seek it, has proven a clumsy and fragile tool. (23)

And Eric Bentley finds this life, and the philosophy that it has given rise to, mirrored in the play:

['Waiting for Godot'] is the quintessence of 'existentialism' in the popular, and most relevant, sense of that term—a philosophy which underscores the incomprehensibility, and therefore the meaninglessness, of the universe, the nausea which man feels upon being confronted with the fact of existence... (106)

As a consequence, much of the critical energy has been directed at finding the symbolical significance and esoteric meanings in the characters, their gestures, their actions or inaction, their speech or reticence with a view to buttressing such a bleak vision of life. But Beckett himself had disclaimed any philosophical interests. In one of the rare interviews that he gave, he said:

"I never read philosophers."

"Why not"?

"I never understand anything they write."

"All the same, people have wondered if the existentialists' problem of being may afford a key to your works."

"There is no key or problem. I wouldn't have had any reason to write if I could have expressed their subject in philosophic terms."

(*Samuel Beckett: The Critical Heritage* 217)

This being so, all that we can say is that as a sensitive man Beckett came to conclusions about life which were similar to the ones that the philosophers had intellectually reconstructed. The advantage of this, for Beckett, was that with his creative intuition he was still left free to look beyond the doors that the philosophers had found shut. Thus, the tragic artist in him who wrote *Waiting for Godot* discovered that for all his wretchedness man remains indomitable in spirit, one who, even in his reduced capacity in modern times, can create a stir in the stagnant world he inhabits.

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