

"WAITING FOR GODOT:" A Beckettian Counterfoil to Kierkegaardian Existentialism

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## **WAITING FOR GODOT: A Beckettian Counterfoil to Kierkegaardian Existentialism**

In this paper I will endeavour to analyse Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* as a play typical of Kierkegaardian existentialism and also to defend it against the post-modernist attempt at interpreting the play as a series of language games which all the *dramatis personae* indulge in to pass the time while waiting for the inevitable. It was Jeffrey Nealon who said that "*Waiting for Godot* is the play of Vladimir and Estragon's words, not any agreed-upon meaning for them, which constitutes their social bond."<sup>1</sup> And he quotes Frederic Jameson:

(...) utterances are now seen less as a process of transmission of information or messages, or in terms of some network of signs or even signifying systems than as (...) the 'taking of tricks', the trumping of a communicational adversary, as essentially conflictual relationship between tricksters.<sup>2</sup>

"Such it seems to me," concludes Nealon, "is the state of language games in *Waiting for Godot*."<sup>3</sup>

But like all great works of literature *Waiting for Godot*, too, is elusive. "There is something misleading about this printed text"<sup>4</sup> is a precautionary warning from Hugh Kenner, who himself has reservations about finding out "other contexts" in the play; however, he realises that "this play's world contains more than Vladimir and Estragon."<sup>5</sup> And the play does contain Godot who seems to exist as a reference to the whole context of the play. This referred-to entity, outside the play, is the mysterious one for whom we all wait.<sup>6</sup> The sum and substance of the play is waiting, just waiting, without certainty, for the inevitable. As Kenner puts it: "The play constructs about its two actors the conditions and the quality of waiting, so much so that no one blames the dramatist's perverse whim for the withholding of Godot and the disappointments of their expectations."<sup>7</sup>

Beckett's "perverse whim" of withholding Godot from the play and the waiting itself have compelled critics to call the play absurd as "the patient hopefulness (of two tramps) demonstrates the absurdity of hope itself, and likewise the absurdity of reason."<sup>8</sup> But this absurd nature of the play seems Kierkegaardian and not what Sartre came to mean by it. "In Sartre 'the absurd' which (...) for Kierkegaard meant 'that which cannot be reduced to rule' has come to mean that which is totally meaningless and irrational."<sup>9</sup> It is generally supposed that Kierkegaard derived his word 'absurd' from the mathematical term 'surd': that which cannot be fitted into the pattern, the remainder that is left over

when we have done our best to find a neat and tidy solution.<sup>10</sup> It is somewhat in this sense at Kierkegaard used the word in his *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*.

In Beckett's play, Godot, for whom so much waiting has taken place throughout the play, seems to have been a Kierkegaardian 'absurd.' 'Godot' is possibly formed on 'God,' but what real connection with God is very unsure indeed."<sup>11</sup> He is 'the other' in the play but this 'other' is not a threat or a menace as Sartre might have thought. Right from the very beginning of the play, the impression given to the audience is that Godot is the person/thing the whole play is about, not a threat or a menace but something/someone who even in its/his absence is most welcome. His unseen presence throughout the play is referentially humanized and so he becomes a participant, one of the *dramatis personae* in the play. With a masterstroke of irony, Beckett makes Vladimir and Estragon realise the objective reality of Godot subjectively:

Vladimir : Let's wait and see what he says.

Estragon : Who?

Vladimir : Godot.

Estragon : Good idea.

(...)

Estragon : And what did he reply?

Vladimir : That he'd see.

Estragon : That he couldn't promise anything.

Vladimir : That he'd have to think it over.

Estragon : *In the quiet of his home.*

Vladimir : *Consult his family.*

Estragon : *His friends.*<sup>12</sup>

Vladimir : *His agents.*

Here Beckett employs the *maieutic* method of Socrates as used by Kierkegaard in his *Postscript*.

For Beckett, as for Kierkegaard, truth is subjectivity. It is what man creates and through creation realizes. Vladimir and Estragon are the creators of Godot through their objective reflection on him. But in Kierkegaardian theology, this objective reflection tends to make the subject accidental and transforms his existence into something indifferent and abstract. At various places in the play the reader is made conscious of the accidental and indifferent existence of Vladimir and Estragon, who "are the raw substance so commonly dressed up in accidents of occupation, role, relationship. They are unaccommodated men."<sup>13</sup> Thus for Vladimir, "Time has stopped," and again:

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.  
Estragon : All the dead voices.  
Vladimir : They make a noise like wings.  
Estragon : Like leaves.  
Vladimir : Like sand.  
Estragon : Like leaves.

(Silence)

And when Estragon says, "We always find something, eh, Didi, to give the impression we exist?" (p. 69), he seems to philosophize what Vladimir has already told him: "Never neglect the little things of life." But as Stephen Hawking points out, this care for the little things of life has ultimately made the whole of human existence insignificant by an avoidance of the fundamental questions and things of life.<sup>14</sup>

Kierkegaard further reflects that to exist means to be in the process of becoming: "An existing individual is constantly in process of becoming; the actual existing subjective thinker constantly reproduces this existential situation in his thoughts and translates all his thinking into terms of the process."<sup>15</sup> Something similar happens in the case of Vladimir and Estragon. Waiting is a process for them — a process of becoming through which they seem to realize that they *exist*. Martin Esslin calls this waiting a quest which "is totally fearless, dedicated and uncompromising; it is in the last resort a religious quest in that it seeks to confront the ultimate reality."<sup>16</sup> Vladimir and Estragon's conversation very often gives the impression of being illogical and unsystematized. But logic and pure thought, according to Kierkegaard, can never capture the existential reality of becoming, for logical entities are states of being which are timeless and fixed and also there can be no system for an existing individual who always stands in the throes of becoming.

The long waiting for Godot who does not appear throughout the play, and Vladimir and Estragon's hoping against hope that "he will come tomorrow," confirm once again the contention of Kierkegaard that existence does involve the future; one exists in a process of becoming by facing a future. The play unfolds in waiting for an experience of the fullness of man's personal and impersonal reality. It reminds people of what they need most at present: faith which means "total self-commitment, witness to what is believed, and in the modern world necessarily suffering."<sup>17</sup> In the play, the suffering Christ is a strong attraction for the heroes, so much so that one of them, Estragon, compares himself to the crucified Christ. Life is purgatorial without any hope of an end to human suffering. This suffering, too, is in vain since

it is devoid of any sort of sacrifice. There is a certain futility at the core of human existence. Godot does not come. And Beckett successfully justifies his “interest in failure.”<sup>18</sup>

But the Kierkegaardian subjective thinker in the personae of Vladimir and Estragon has not lost all hope: “they do not move” from the stage and have already decided to come “tomorrow” and again, unless “Godot comes.”

Anurag Sharma

## NOTES

1. Jeffrey Nealon, “Samuel Beckett and the Postmodern: Language Games, Play, and *Waiting for Godot*,” in *Modern Drama* XXXI, 4 (1988): 520.
2. Frederic Jameson, “Forward” in Jean François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report of Knowledge*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Minneapolis, 1984), p. xi. Quoted in Nealon’s article.
3. Nealon, op. cit., p. 520.
4. Hugh Kenner, *A Reader’s Guide to Samuel Beckett* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1973), p. 26.
5. Ibidem, p. 27.
6. Martin Esslin in his article “The Theatre of Samuel Beckett and Harold Pinter” says: “(...) we can see quite clearly what Beckett wants to express: human beings waiting for the arrival of someone or something with whom they may or may not have an appointment. Are we not all born into this world without knowing what our purpose is, are we not all, now that we are here, assuming that perhaps we have a purpose and that the next day will bring the moment of revelation - and then night falls and we are told to try again tomorrow and so on ever after?” In *Modern British Dramatists*, ed. J.R. Brown (New Delhi: Prentice Hall of India, 1980), p. 61.
7. Hugh Kenner, op. cit., p. 29.
8. David Galloway, “Absurd Art, Absurd Man, Absurd Heroes,” in *The Modern World, III - Reactions*, eds. David Daiches and Anthony Thorlby (London: Aldus Books, 1976), p. 127.
9. Stephen Neill, “The Existential Pilgrimage,” in *Christian Faith and Other Faiths* (London: OUP, 1961), p. 188.

10. Ibidem, p. 180.
11. Francis Doherty, "Theatre of Suffering," in *Samuel Beckett* (London: Hutchinson University Library, 1971), p. 89.
12. All quotations from the text are cited from the 1956 Faber & Faber edition of the play; p. 18, emphasis added.
13. Francis Doherty, op. cit., p. 87.
14. See Stephen Hawking, *A Brief History of Time* (New York: Bantam, 1989), p. 1.
15. Frank N. Magill, *Masterpieces of World Philosophy in Summary Form* (London: Allen and Unwin), p. 628.
16. Esslin, op. cit., p. 65.
17. Neill, op. cit., p. 181.
18. Quoted in Gabriel Jocipovici's "Samuel Beckett: The Need to Fail," in *The New Pelican Guide to English Literature: The Present*, ed. Boris Ford (London: Penguin, 1983), p. 164.

