Waiting for Godot

When *Waiting for Godot* was first performed in England, many reviewers seized on the line ‘Nothing happens, nobody comes, nobody goes, it's. awful’ as a description of the play itself. In fact, of course, Pozzo and Lucky come and go twice. A boy comes and goes twice. We also have the putting on and taking off of hats and boots, the eating of carrots and radishes, attempts to commit, suicide, a dance and a. think from Lucky, an oration from Pozzo. Estragon is bitten and Lucky kicked. A tree comes into leaf. One could almost say ‘All human life is here’.

What the critics meant was that nothing happened which they recognized as dramatic. Yet in saying that, they were betraying their ignorance of a great deal of what is most important in modern drama. Here is a conversation between two men in a play:

> V. It's unbearable. What am I to do? What am I to do?
> A. Nothing.
> V, Give me something! Oh, my God! I'm forty-seven. If I live to be sixty, I've got another thirteen years. What a time! How am I to get through those thirteen years? What shall I do, how shall I fill in the time? Ah, don't you see ... don't you see, if only you could live the rest of your life in some new way! To wake up on a clear, calm morning and feel that you're starting your life over again, that all your past is forgotten, blown away like smoke, [*Weeps*] To begin a new life. ... Tell .me how to begin . . . what with . . .
> A. Oh, get away with you! A new life indeed! Our situation's hopeless - yours and mine!
> V. Do you mean that?
> A, I'm certain of it.
> V. Give me something ...

This is. not Beckett. It was written in 1896 by Anton Chehov. The something Uncle Vanya is asking for is hope, the hope of a new life (and the one certainty is that there is no hope of that), the hope of some drug or pastime to make him less conscious of the tedium and emptiness, or the hope of poison to end it. I quote this passage to show how traditional a writer Beckett is. His subject matter goes back to the Greeks. In *The Birth of Tragedy* Nietzsche wrote:

> An old legend has it that King Midas hunted a long time in the woods for the wise Silenus, companion of Dionysos, without being able to catch him. When he had finally caught him the king asked him what he considered man’s greatest good. The daemon remained sullen and uncommunicative until finally, forced by the king, he broke into a shrill laugh and spoke: ‘Ephemeral wretch, begotten by accident and toil, why do you force me to tell you what it would be your greatest boon not to hear? What would be best for you is quite beyond your reach: not to have been born, not to *be*, to *be nothing*. But the second best is to die soon.

In Beckett's words (in *From An Abandoned Work*, a characteristic Beckett title, one of Lucky's ‘labours left unfinished’) this reappears as: ‘All I regret is being born, dying is such a long tiresome business’.

The Greeks believed that to punish man for his attempt, (the theft of fire on his behalf by Prometheus) to get up off his hands and knees and assert some independence, the gods had sent Pandora with her box containing all the evils which have subsequently plagued mankind. But the gods were wise enough and cruel enough to include also hope, knowing that without hope man would simply end it all with a bare bodkin, poison, or a piece of rope. ‘Hope deferred maketh the something sick’, says Vladimir. The full biblical quotation is: ‘Hope deferred maketh the heart sick, but when the desire cometh, it is the tree of life’. In Beckett hope is always deferred, desire is dead, and the tree of life is a cross.

Beckett's theatrical technique is just as traditional as his subject matter. From Shakespeare he learned the aptness of theatre as a metaphor for life:

> Life's but a walking shadow; a poor player,
> That struts and frets his hour upon the stage,
> And then is heard no more.

In Pirandello life becomes an impromptu tragic farce. The author plays god, sadistically withholding meaning from his characters, keeping them for ever waiting in the wings. In *Waiting for Godot* we have two characters in search of an author. They find themselves on a stage almost without scenery or props, without scripts. They must keep the dialogue going at all costs until the author arrives to tell them who they are and what to do. It is a savage game in which they must keep talking for a lifetime (though repetition, hesitation and deviation are here allowed). It is the only way they can give themselves the impression that they exist at all. They are, in this, surely representative figures. What, are our own lives made up of but finding something to give us the impression we exist, finding ways to pass the time which would have passed in any case.

From Chehov Beckett learned how to do without melodramatic action, how to write about excruciating boredom without boring your audience, how to distill a poetry from despair. Chehov called his plays comedies. His characters are clownish. But their absurdity is a measure of their humanity. Compassion keeps breaking in. Again we are watching ourselves. If only we could become famous, or get a rewarding job, or become young again, or marry the right person, or get to our own equivalent of Moscow, or come into a large amount of money out of the blue. ...

Beckett has also brought back into the theatre other traditions which had become artificially cut off from it – circus, pantomime, music-hall and silent cinema. Stan and Ollie, with their circular dialogue, total incompatibility, and total mutual dependence, clearly stand behind Didi and Gogo. Several times Didi comes close to saying ‘Another fine mess you've gotten us into’. Then, of course, there is the tradition of Irish humour. For example: ‘Don't come down the ladder, Paddy, I've taken it away’. The clown is one who is unable to cope with the ordinary business of living, who inevitably steps on the banana skin he has probably dropped himself, who always comes down the

ladder just after it has been taken away. The fall is an archetypal comic situation, and is frequent in Beckett. An early play is called *All that Fall*. Standing upright, is symbolic of a certain dignity, a sense of man's place at the pinnacle of evolution. Few Beckett characters remain upright for long. They are more likely to be prone in a ditch, or, at best, on their hands and knees. ('Old dogs have more dignity', says Pozzo of Lucky.) Another typical comic situation signifying the loss of dignity is trousers falling down. But is that still funny when we know that. Gogo has removed the cord holding them up in order to try to hang himself with it? It is still funny, but our laughter is very hollow, what Beckett calls 'the mirthless laugh at that which is unhappy'.

Much has been written about Godot, not so much about waiting. But Beckett has said that he is more interested in the waiting than in Godot. Everyone is waiting – for Mr Right, or dead men's shoes, or that big pools win. As Philip Larkin puts it:

> Watching from a bluff the tiny, clear,
> Armada of promises draw near.
> How slow they are! And how mucb time they waste,
> Refusing to make haste!
>
> We think each one will heave to and unload
> All good into our lives, all we are owed
> For waiting so devoutly and so long,
> But we are wrong. ('Next Please')

Vanya dreams of a new day when the burden of the past blows away like smoke. But for Beckett that burden is more like bags of sand which we cannot put down. In his essay on Proust he writes:

> There is no escape from the hours and the days. Neither from tomorrow nor from yesterday. There is no escape from yesterday because yesterday has deformed us. ... Yesterday is ... irremediably part of us, within us, heavy and dangerous. We are not merely more weary because of yesterdav, we are other, no longer what we were before the calamity of yesterday ... We are in the position of Tantalus, with this difference, that we allow ourselves to be tantalised.

Tantalised, that is, by the vain hope that tomorrow will redeem all our yesterdays, that. waiting is, therefore, a meaningful occupation, the only meaningful occupation.

In Kalka's *The Trial*, the protagonist Joseph K. is told a parable about waiting. A man seeks admittance at the gate of the Law. The doorkeeper tells him that he cannot be admitted 'at the moment', and gives him a stool, where he sits and waits for days and years. Periodically he renews his request to be admitted, which is always denied (like Beckett's 'not today, but surely tomorrow'). He tries pleading, flattery, subterfuge, bribery, threats, all to no avail. He grow old and feeble. He summons his last strength to ask a final question of the doorkeeper: 'Everyone strives to attain the Law, how does it come about, then, that in all these years no one has come seeking admittance but me?' The doorkeeper bellows in his ear: 'No one but you could gain admittance through this door, since this door was intended only for you. I am now goind to shut it'. There follows seven pages of analysis of that deceptively simple story.

It is not at all clear what the man should have done. But the one thing that does seem to me clear is that he should not have done what he did. He should not have waited. If he was not in the right condition to be admitted immediately he is not likely to become so merely by waiting, as if his dog-like patience would itself move God, or whoever makes the decision, to compassion. As Pozzo says of Lucky: ‘He imagines that when I see him indefatigable I'll regret my decision’.

Waiting soon becomes a matter of habit, and ‘habit is a great deadener’. Or, as Beckett puts it more strongly in the Proust, essay, ‘habit is the ballast that chains the dog to his vomit’. Habit is our way of evading as much as possible those ‘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 … that is, the free play of every faculty’. In *Eleuthéria* Beckett wrote:

> I am the cow, which, at the gates of the slaughterhouse, realizes all the absurdity of pastures. A pity she didn’t think of it sooner, back there in the long lush grass. Ah well. She still has the yard to cross. No one can take that away from her.

Perhaps the highest, we can realistically expect from life is to be offered the opportunity to experience the suffering of being. Perhaps the tramps are offered that in each act with the visits of Pozzo and Lucky. But they are unable to escape more than momentarily from their paralysis. Here is a typical example of their dialogue:

ESTRAGON: In the meantime let’s try and converse calmly, since we’re incapable of keeping silent.
VLADIMIR: You’re right, we’re inexhaustible.
ESTRAGON: It’s so we won’t think.
VLADIMIR: We have that excuse.
ESTRAGON: It’s so we won’t hear.
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.
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.
VLADIMIR: Say something!

ESTRAGON: I'm trying.
Long silence.
VLADIMIR : (*in anguish*). Say anything at all!
ESTRAGON: What do we do now?
VLADIMIR: Wait for Godot?
ESTRAGON: Ah!

The rules of the game (called life) the tramps are playing are: do not listen to the silence; do not listen to the voices; drown them both with your own voices filling the vacuum with words. We talk, therefore we exist. Since there is nothing to exist for, we must be waiting for something. Therefore, there must be something to wait for. That 'something' we call God, or Godot.

Despite the fact that *Waiting for Godot* was originally written in French, the significance of the syllable 'God' cannot be denied, especially as the title *En Attendent Godot* echoes Simone Weil's *Attente de Dieu.* There is also a reference to a character called Godeau in a play by Balzac, in which a failed speculator, Mercadet, dangles before his creditors the hope of the imminent arrival of his partner Godeau, bringing a fortune. 'Everyone', says Mercadet, has his Godeau, a false Christopher Columbus!' Godot is certainly the opposite of John Donne's God, of whom he says in a sermon:

> We ask panem quotidianum, our daily bread, and God never sayes you should have come yesterday, he never says you must againe tomorrow, but today if you will hear his voice, today he will heare you.

The many allusions to the biblical God in *Waiting for Godot* are summarized by Eva Metman:

> At the end of each day, a boy-messenger arrives in his stead with the promise that he will come tomorrow. In the first act we hear that he does not beat the first messenger, who is a goatherd, but that he beats his brother, who is a shepherd. The two friends feel uneasy about him. When they meet him they will have to approach him 'on their hands and knees' and if they stopped waiting he would punish them. At the end of the second act we hear two more items: Godot does nothing, and his beard is – probably – white.
>
> From all this we may gather that Godot has several traits in common with the image of God as we know it from the Old and the New Testament. His white beard reminds one of the image of God's old-father aspect. His irrational preference for one brother recalls Jehovah's treatment of Cain and Abel; so does his power to punish those who would drop him. The discrimination between goatherd and shepherd is reminiscent of the Son of God as the ultimate judge; as a saviour for whom men wait and wait, he might well be meant as a cynical comment on the second coming of Christ; whilst his doing nothing might be an equally cynical reflection concerning man's forlorn state.[1]

Metman concludes that 'Beckett points to the sterility of a consciousness that expects and waits for the old activity of God or gods'. Insofar as Godot is God, he is a parody of the Christian God, whose service, we are told, is perfect freedom. Waiting for this God involves the loss of even the ultimate freedom, the freedom to end it all by suicide.

---

[1] 'Reflections on Samuel Beckett's Plays', in *Samuel Beckett: A Collection of Critical Essays,* ed. Esslin, Prentice-Hall, 1965, pp. 124-5.

The French novelist Robbe-Grillet has said: ‘They are waiting for someone called Godot, about whom we know nothing except that be will not come. That at least is clear to everyone from the beginning’. It is not clear to me. Vladimir at least is convinced that they have an appointment; that Godot has undertaken to help them, or consider it, and would be capable of doing so. This is confirmed by the daily visit from the boy or boys bringing his apology for today and promise for tomorrow.

Beckett is fascinated by paradoxes, particularly the paradoxes of the ancient Greek philosopher Vico. One of these paradoxes asks how long it would take to move all the grains of rice from one heap to another by transferring half the heap at a time. Since there is no highest number, there is also no lowest fraction; therefore the process of halving can go on for ever. The first pile is ever-diminishing but never exhausted, like human hope. For grains of rice Beckett substitutes grains of sand, and these are the moments by which life is measured. There can never be certainty that Godot will not come. This is the whole point of the play. There is only, with every day that passes, with every performance of the play, the ever-increasing unlikelihood.

To prevent despair there are the questionable miracles, such as the new boots, the new leaves on the tree, the angelic boys. Are these intimations of divinity or merely cruel tricks to prolong fruitless hope? The intimations are untrustworthy, even contradictory. One of the boys is beaten, the other not, if there are two, and if they are not lying. It is like the story of the two thieves, which is different in each of the gospels. Four witnesses to the same events come up with contradictory accounts. Gogo and Didi themselves often remember or interpret the same events quite differently. Certainty constantly recedes.

St. Augustine’s interpretation of the story of the two thieves is radically ambiguous:

> Do not despair –one of the thieves was saved.
>
> Do not presume – one of the thieves was damned.

Didi is optimistic about his chances: ‘It's a reasonable percentage". Gogo is not: ‘I'm in hell’. Didi is the one who is in favour of waiting,: ‘We have kept our appointment, and that's an end to that. We are not saints, but we have kept our appointment, How many people can boast as much?’ To which Gogo replies; ‘Billions’.

The tree also partakes of this ambiguity. It is the place where they were to meet Godot, but this may not be the right tree, since it is no different from any other. It may not even be a tree at all, but a shrub. It is also a cross. When Gogo ‘does the tree’ he simply stretches out his arms. It is therefore the promise of redemption or the threat of long-drawn-out torture. Here each is his own cross, and they crucify slowly. Its miraculous coming into leaf over-night testifies to the capacity of nature to renew itself, but there is no reason to suppose that this capacity extends to man. In any case, the process is circular, like the poem about the dog's epitaph. Things are born only to die. We give birth astride of a grave. The tree offers the possibility of suicide by hanging, but this poses insuperable technical difficulties. It is also the tree of knowledge in Eden, a symbol of their fruitless fallen state. All the falls in the play are reminders of this.

Not only is it far from clear that Godot will never come; it also seems to me not at all clear that he does not in fact come, twice, during the play. On each day covered by the

play, and therefore, we can assume, on every other day, (since the tramps cannot remember from one day to the next), at the very moment when Godot is expected, Pozzo arrives. Estragon takes him for Godot. Pozzo affects not to have heard of Godot, but how then does he know that Godot has their future in his hands? Pozzo describes the tramps as 'made in God's image', 'my likes, even when the likeness is an imperfect one'. He claims to have been walking for six hours, yet still to be on his own land, with 'never a soul in sight'. He is not short of slaves. We had understood Godot to be the local landowner, keeping sheep and goats 'in these parts'.

I can see two possible explanations. Either Godot does not exist, but has been invented by Pozzo as a way of testing or tormenting the tramps; or Pozzo *is* Godot assuming another name and an appearance very different from the old man with a white beard the tramps believe Godot to be, again to test or confuse them.

If we had thought that the tramps represented humanity at its lowest, Lucky makes us think again. At least they are not tied, either to Godot or anyone else, as Lucky is to Pozzo. Pozzo and Lucky are locked into the relationship of master and slave, warder and prisoner, capitalist, and worker, sadist and masochist. Lucky lives entirely in response to external stimuli, He has waived all his rights. He is man reduced to beast, by choice, if we are to believe Pozzo. And we can believe him, since we see the tramps aspiring to put themselves into exactly the same relationship to Godot – on their hands and knees.

But Lucky was not always like this. Once he had taught Pozzo 'beauty, grace, truth of the first water'. He used to dance for Joy, once refused, and now thinks he is entangled in a net. Lucky, it seems, is fallen man, perpetually regurgitating the bitter apple of the tree of knowledge. He is 'ail mankind'. His big think is the sum of all human knowledge and aspiration. A core of meaning can be extracted from his interminable breathless sentence:

> Given the existence of a personal God with white beard, outside time, without extension, who loves us dearly and suffers with those who are plunged in torment, whose fire and flames will fire the firmament, it is established beyond all doubt that man wastes and pines.

What spins this out to three pages is the labours of the ages which have failed to get beyond this lame and self-evident conclusion.

The crux of the play seems to me to be Pozzo's invitation to the tramps to help him to raise Lucky up, not to let him go, to hold him tight. But the tramps do not recognize their common humanity with Lucky. Pozzo and Lucky embody for the tramps, could they but see it, a revelation, like the Book of Job, of the degradation of man in relation to the Christian god. This is a much more valuable revelation than the coming of the Godot of Didi's imagining would have been, since it offers the tramps the possibility of action with dignity, without illusions, with 'the free play of every faculty', ignoring Godot as he ignores them, and helping each other to raise up the fallen. It seems for a moment that Vladimir will rise to the occasion:

> 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!

But the inflated rhetoric of this speech, the posing, should alert us to the fact that Vladimir, like Hamlet, will unpack his heart with words and do nothing:

> It is true that when with folded arms we weigh the pros and cons we are no less a credit to our species. ... 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 alone is clear. We are waiting for Godot to come –

Waiting for Godot becomes an excuse for not doing the little which might be done to alleviate human suffering. They collaborate with Pozzo in giving Lucky a taste of the boot. Spiritually they remain asleep. Perhaps, at the end, it is too late. As Beckett says in *Malone Dies*.:

> For there comes the hour when nothing more can happen and nobody more can come: and all is ended but the waiting that knows itself in vain.