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Beckett’s *Godot*: Nietzsche Defied

Much has been published about Samuel Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot*, described by Berlin in 1999 as ‘the most significant English language play of the 20th century’. Although very little happens throughout its two acts, the play is so rich with various layers of meaning that it is open to very many interpretations—certainly more than the ‘eight’ suggested by Coetzee in his paper on Beckett. First written in French in 1948 as *En Attendant Godot*, it was published in French in 1952 while Beckett was still living in France. Later translated into English by Beckett himself, the play was subtitled, in English only (as recorded by Ackerley and Gontarski), ‘A Tragicomedy in Two Acts’. This subtitle has incited some, like Ruby Cohn and Ronan McDonald, to look for the comic element in it. On the other hand, some, like Steven J. Rosen, consider it a pessimistic play, possibly influenced by Schopenhauer. Numerous critics, following Esslin, regard it as an excellent example of absurd drama. Like Knowlson, some critics have seen it (among other works of his French period) as an expression of its author’s self exile from Ireland. Others, like Helen Astbury, see in the play an indication of linguistic exile. Still others have seen it as an expression of Beckett’s experience of the French Resistance (when one had to wait endlessly for an anonymous message with the instruction to GO DOT). In his book, *Inventing Ireland*, Declan Kiberd regards the play as a ‘critique of man’s inability to stop hoping against the odds’.

Possible views seem to be endless. As Richard Lane has pointed out, ‘Beckett cannot escape the plenitude’, or wealth of interpretations, which his works invite. The purpose of this paper is to suggest yet another interpretation, one which (to my knowledge) no critic has tackled, namely, that the play can also be seen as an exile from meaningful life, possibly written in defiance of Nietzsche’s jubilant announcement that ‘God is dead!’

The statement ‘God is dead,’ occurring in several of Nietzsche’s works, notably in *The Gay Science* (1882), is one of his best known remarks. In that work, Nietzsche boasts (via his Madman): ‘God is dead. God remains dead. And we have killed him’. With great exultation, he asserts:
We philosophers and “free spirits” feel ourselves irradiated as by a new dawn by the old report that “the old God is dead”; our hearts overflow with gratitude, astonishment, presentiment, and expectation. At last, the horizon seems open once more, granted even that it is not bright; our ships can at last put out to sea in face of every danger; every hazard is again permitted to the discerner; the sea, our sea, again lies open before us; perhaps never before did such an “open sea” exist.13

Not only in The Gay Science, but also in several of Nietzsche’s works, the reader is again and again struck by Nietzsche’s exuberant celebration of freedom, because ‘God is dead’. In The Antichrist (1888), Nietzsche hails the ‘unconditional freedom before oneself’.14 He boasts:

We are Hyperboreans; ... We have discovered happiness, we know the way, we have found the exit out of the labyrinth of thousands of years. Who else has found it?15

In Thus Spoke Zarathustra (1883-1885), his alter ego, Zarathustra, calls himself ‘the liberator and joy-bringer’,16 and boasts:


The climax of this exultant jubilation is reached at the end of Nietzsche’s autobiography, Ecce Homo (1888), where he presents himself as a unique person, the first to discover the liberating truth regarding the ‘death’ of God, and concludes with a triumphant summary of his massive critique of Christianity.18

Beckett, ‘the ghostly founding father’ of contemporary Irish drama, as he is called in The Cambridge History of Irish Literature,19 was born on Good Friday 1906, six years after Nietzsche’s death. According to his biographers, Deirdre Bair, Enoch Brater, and others, Beckett had a religious upbringing which engraved into his consciousness the Biblical significance of Good Friday with daily prayers and Bible readings, and weekly Sunday School and Church attendance at his family’s ‘Low Protestant highbrow Church’, as the Church of Ireland was labeled.20

The ‘rise and fall’ of the Church of Ireland, culminating in its Disestablishment in 1896, and consequently ceasing to be official, is outlined in Kenneth Milne’s History of the Church of Ireland.21 Although
such a history is outside the scope of this paper, it is important to note its effect on Beckett. The ‘land war’ later in the century with Charles Stewart Parnell (himself a member of the Church of Ireland) as champion, led to the distribution of large estates, owned mainly by Church of Ireland landlords, to their former tenants, undermining this important source of support to the Church. Finally, the ending of the Union with Britain, when the Irish Free State came into being in 1922, meant that the Church of Ireland, instead of being part of a majority Church in the whole of the United Kingdom, became very much a minority Church. As a result, in the years between 1911 and 1926, membership in the Church of Ireland declined by thirty-four per cent.

Samuel Beckett would have been acutely aware of all this when he received his first communion at that Church, and then in 1923 enrolled as an Arts student at Trinity College Dublin, founded by Elizabeth I as a Reformation institution, with close links to the Church of Ireland. In later years, recalling his first communion, Beckett is reported to have said to Tom Driver (in a 1961 interview), ‘Once I had religious emotion. It was at my first communion. No more’. At times of crisis, he noted, the Clergy did nothing to help, hence the efficacy of religion, he concluded, is similar to that of an ‘old school tie’.22 It is important to note that although Beckett attacked institutional religion, as in the interview with Driver, and also in some of his letters,23 he always denied being an atheist. When in 1937, he was asked at a defence counsel (during a libel brought by his uncle) whether he was a Christian, Jew, or atheist, he replied, ‘None of the three’.24

Beckett’s education has been described as an ‘elite, Ascendancy, Anglo-Irish education that even Joyce envied’.25 As a student at Trinity, with its leading philosopher/theologian, A.A. Luce, as his own Tutor,26 and later during his time as lecturer at Trinity, Beckett was no doubt exposed to the various philosophical views current at the time. Lane’s book, Beckett and Philosophy, gives intriguing studies by eight different scholars (Lane included) exploring the effect of these views on some of Beckett’s works.

In 1931, Beckett resigned his position as lecturer at Trinity College Dublin, and for a period of five years lived in various countries including Germany, before settling permanently in France (it is believed), returning to Ireland for limited but significant periods.

During his German period, Beckett must have been exposed, more forcibly than ever, to Nietzsche’s ideas, for Nietzsche’s philosophical works, which had been virtually ignored during his lifetime, enjoyed great popularity after his death and throughout the early decades of the twentieth century, as we learn from Hayman’s account of Nietzsche’s life,27 and from Safranki’s Philosophical Biography of Nietzsche.28 Beckett, however, was not impressed by Nietzsche’s
philosophy. Rather, he seems to have been repelled by it, as gathered from a conversation with Charles Juliet, where he asserted that he liked the mystical spirit, the flame that 'burns away filthy logic'. It is interesting to note that The Faber Companion to Samuel Beckett concludes that 'for Beckett the post-Cartesian tradition ended with Schopenhauer, rather than continuing with Nietzsche and Heidegger.'

Be that as it may, Beckett's Waiting for Godot does read as a dramatic response to Nietzsche's theory that the death of God is the door to unprecedented freedom – a theory belied, ironically enough, by Nietzsche's own madness throughout the last eleven years of his life. Very possibly, it was Nietzsche's madness, and not any madman of his creation, which suggested the Madman in Beckett's play, Endgame.

To return to Waiting for Godot, if God is really dead, as Nietzsche says, then what actually follows is not the wonderful freedom which Nietzsche and his 'happy atheists' are celebrating, but the terrible bondage pictured so vividly in Beckett's play. The two characters, Vladimir and Estragon, have been helplessly trapped together in a meaningless existence for fifty years. When they think of suicide as a way out, what stops them is the fear that while one of them may die, the other might live on:


One can surmise from this exchange that Godot is a symbol for God. This is again implied by both Pozzo and Lucky. Pozzo says to Vladimir:
'Think twice before you do anything rash. Suppose you go now, ... what happens in that case to your appointment with this Godot – Godot – Godin – anyhow you see what I mean, who has your future in his hands' (p.29). It is interesting to note that when Lucky is ordered to think, he gives a very long speech which, on the surface, seems absolutely chaotic and nonsensical (pp.42-3). However, when carefully examined, it could be summarized as follows (using Lucky’s own words): Given the existence of a personal God, (one who exists) outside time, (and who) loves us dearly (and) suffers with those who are plunged in torment, it is established beyond all doubt that, for reasons unknown, in spite of the strides in anthropology, public works, culture, sports, medicine, (and also strides in philosophy, education, economics and religion made by such as) Bishop Berkeley,34 man is seen to waste and pine, (having) abandoned his labours (and) left (them) unfinished.

This seems to be a direct reply to Nietzsche’s gleeful anticipation of freedom. In the absence of God, instead of finding liberation and fulfillment, as Nietzsche had prophesied, ‘man is seen to waste and pine’ despite all human achievements.

In spite of his assertions (to Peter Woodthrope and Barney Rosset) that Godot is not God,35 Beckett did once concede (as cited by Bair) that ‘if I had that meaning in my mind, it was somewhere in my unconscious, and I was not aware of it’.36 As Vivien Mercier has pointed out, Beckett ‘often stresses the strong unconscious impulses that partly control his writing’, sometimes speaking of being ‘in a trance’ when writing.37

Vladimir and Estragon discuss their plight:
Estragon: [Chews, swallows.] I’m asking you if we’re 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 (p.22).

That Vladimir and Estragon cannot give up waiting for Godot, despite an inward feeling that he will never come, goes to show that when belief in God is discarded, man will still be tied to the old beliefs, but now these beliefs are empty and meaningless. Of the two characters, the one who keeps referring to Scripture is Vladimir. It is he who, at the very beginning of the play quotes Proverbs 13:12 ‘Hope deferred
maketh sick’ (p.12). The continuation of that verse is ‘but a desire fulfilled is a tree of life.’ Possibly, this unquoted part of the verse explains the presence of the tree as the only object ‘on the country road’ which is the setting for the two acts of the play. In Act One, the tree is bare; in Act Two, even though only one day has passed, the tree now ‘has four or five leaves’ (p.53). In Act One, Vladimir and Estragon discuss the tree at some length. It is the place where Godot said he would meet them (p.15). If Godot stands for God, then the tree symbolizes the Cross, often referred to in the Bible as the ‘tree’ (Acts 5: 30; 10: 39; Gal 3: 13; 1 Peter 2:24). That this is a plausible interpretation, is borne out by the following exchange:

Vladimir: One of the thieves was saved [...] Gogo.
Estragon: What?
Vladimir: Suppose we repented.
Estragon: Repented what?
Vladimir: Oh. [He reflects.] We wouldn’t have to go into the details.
Estragon: Our being born? [VLADIMIR breaks into a hearty laugh which he immediately stifles [...] his face contorted.]
Vladimir: One daren’t even laugh any more.
Estragon: Dreadful privation.
Vladimir: Merely smile. [He smiles suddenly from ear to ear [...] ceases as suddenly.] It’s not the same thing. Nothing to be done. [Pause.] Gogo.
Estragon: [Irritably.] What is it?
Vladimir: Did you ever read the Bible?
Estragon: The Bible... [He reflects.] I must have taken a look at it.
Vladimir: Do you remember the Gospels? (p.13)

In vain Vladimir tries to tell Estragon the story of the two thieves crucified with Christ, one of whom repented and was accepted into God’s kingdom (Luke 23:39-43), but Estragon refuses to listen. The entrance of Pozzo and Lucky shortly afterwards emphasizes the idea of bondage. Pozzo, very much the Ascendancy Landlord, bullying and conceited, is on his way to the fair to sell his slave, Lucky, who not only bears the name of a dog, but also behaves very much like a devoted dog. Pozzo controls Lucky by means of an extremely long rope which he jerks and tugs if Lucky does not instantly respond. Lucky is carrying a heavy bag, basket, and stool which he never puts down, except very briefly, to carry out an order by Pozzo. When Vladimir and Estragon ask why Lucky does not put down that burden, Pozzo answers because he wants to ‘impress’ him, so that he would not sell him (pp.31-2). Lucky speaks only once in the play,
when his master orders him to think for Vladimir and Estragon. Possibly, Lucky symbolizes those Christians who believe they can ‘earn’ God’s favour by doing things which are as senseless as carrying those heavy burdens all the time. Lucky’s burden brings to mind Psalms 55:22 ‘Cast thy burden upon the Lord, and He shall sustain thee’, and also Jesus’s words: ‘Come to me all who are ... heavy laden, and I will give you rest’ (Matthew 11:28).

Pozzo and Lucky have been together for almost sixty years, p.33, and are clearly bound together in a meaningless existence (symbolized by the rope), in the same way that Estragon and Vladimir are bound together. We are reminded here of Hamm and Clov in Beckett’s later play, Endgame, where Hamm (the master) and Clov (the servant) are tied to each other, and to one spot (a shelter, or bunker), in a similarly meaningless existence.39 This idea of bondage, pictured so vividly by Beckett, again seems to be a refutation of Nietzsche’s constant reference to himself and those sharing his view as ‘we free spirits’.40

When Estragon apologizes to Pozzo for having mistaken him for Godot by saying ‘We’re not from these parts, Sir’, Pozzo retorts:

Pozzo: 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.] Of the same species as Pozzo! Made in God’s image! (p.24)

Beckett seems to be lamenting the fact that man who, as Pozzo says, was ‘made in God’s image’ (Genesis 1:26), should be so self-centred, with no compassion for others. It is when Vladimir and Estragon have been particularly selfish and callous, that a boy comes to announce that Mr Godot is not coming (pp.68-73). He confirms that he works for Godot as a goat herder, and that he and his shepherd brother are both fed by Godot and sleep in his hayloft. In the Bible, goats symbolize those who have rejected God, leading self-centered lives, while sheep represent those who have accepted His redemption, and therefore show compassion for others (Matt. 25:32-3). That Godot is benefactor to both goat herder and shepherd, recalls Matt. 5:45, the fact that God ‘makes His sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust’. On hearing that Godot is not coming, Vladimir and Estragon say they will leave, but do not move.

Act Two repeats the same incidents as Act One, but with some variation. The bare tree of Act One is now seen to have some leaves, possibly indicating hope for those who are willing to give up their callous selfishness and show concern for others. Vladimir and Estragon are still waiting for Godot, still bored, still considering suicide as a way out, and still doing nothing about it, like Karl Binding’s ‘incurable
idiots’ who ‘have neither the will to live nor the will to die’. Pozzo who has lost his sight (recalling the loss of the unused talent in the parable of Matt. 25:14-30), now needs to be led by Lucky, and cannot drive him as he had done before (recalling Jesus’ words in Matt. 19:30: ‘the first shall be last, and the last, first’). Lucky is still faithful to his master, and has not tried to run away. Significantly, when the two of them fall down and ‘lie helpless among the scattered baggage’ (p.72), Estragon again mistakes Pozzo for Godot:

Estragon: Is it Godot?
Vladimir: At last! [He goes towards the heap.] Reinforcements at last!
Pozzo: Help!
Estragon: Is it Godot?
Vladimir: We were beginning to weaken. Now we’re sure to see the evening out.
Pozzo: Help!
Estragon: Do you hear him?
Vladimir: We are no longer alone, waiting for the night, waiting for Godot, waiting for ... waiting. All evening we have struggled, unassisted. Now it’s over. It’s already tomorrow.
Pozzo: Help!
Vladimir: Time flows again already. The sun will set, the moon will rise, and we away ... from here.
Pozzo: Pity!
Vladimir: Poor Pozzo!
Estragon: I knew it was him.
Vladimir: Who?
Estragon: Godot.
Vladimir: But it’s not Godot.
Estragon: It’s not Godot?
Vladimir: It’s not Godot.
Estragon: Then who is it?
Vladimir: It’s Pozzo.
Pozzo: Here! Here! Help me up!
Vladimir: He can’t get up.
Estragon: Let’s go.
Vladimir: We can’t.
Estragon: Why not?
Vladimir: We’re waiting for Godot (pp.72-3).

The irony is that Godot has actually arrived in the persons of Pozzo and Lucky who need their help, but they do not recognize him as such. In one of his parables, identifying himself with the needy and the helpless, Jesus had said: ‘... as you did it to one of the least of these, my
brethren, you did it to me' (Matt 25: 40). The implication here is that if these two were really waiting for Godot (God), they would immediately have helped Pozzo and Lucky out of their plight. Instead, bound by their own selfishness, they turn a deaf ear to Pozzo's repeated plea for help, and waste their time in 'idle discourse', as Vladimir confesses (p.74). He adds:

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 has consigned us! What do you say? (p.74)

When Estragon says nothing, Vladimir proceeds:

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 – (p.74)

The exchange continues:

Estragon: Ah!
Pozzo : Help!
Vladimir: Or for night to fall. [Pause.] 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?
Estragon: Billions.
Vladimir: You think so?
Estragon: I don't know.
Vladimir: You may be right! (pp.74-5)

Beckett who, according to his biographer, Anthony Cronin, always had 'among the reference books on his shelves' more than one edition of the Bible, and several Bible concordances,42 seems to be saying that although billions of people, like Vladimir, can boast of being 'saints', their religion is empty and meaningless because in their self-centered callousness, they have rejected 'the personal God' mentioned by Lucky, and have identified with Nietzsche in thinking that 'God is dead'. Significantly, the boy of Act Two arrives after Vladimir and Estragon
have been selfishly indifferent to the obvious need of Pozzo and Lucky. As in Act One, the boy announces that Mr Godot is not coming that day, but will come the next day. The implication is that he will come if those who are waiting for him show compassion to others. After the boy leaves, Estragon suggests to Vladimir that they should drop Godot, to which Vladimir replies ‘He’d punish us’, then adds ‘Everything’s dead but the tree’ (p.87). This reference to the leaves on the tree (suggesting Resurrection hope) brings us back to the Biblical verse with which the play opens: ‘Hope deferred maketh sick, but a desire fulfilled is a tree of life’. By implication, the ‘desire fulfilled’ leading to the ‘tree of life’ is an altruistic one. However, the ending of the play seems to imply that Estragon and Vladimir will not change, and therefore Godot will not come:

Estragon: I can’t go on like this.
Vladimir: That’s what you think.
Estragon: If we parted? That might be better for us.
Vladimir: We’ll hang ourselves tomorrow. [Pause.] Unless Godot comes.
Estragon: And if he comes?
Vladimir: We’ll be saved (pp.87-8).

They would be saved from their bondage to a self-centred and meaningless life – from what Agamben calls, in Homo Sacer, ‘life that does not deserve to live’. However, as at the end of Act One, the only decision which these two make is to go, but ‘they do not move’, and the curtain falls.

It is interesting to note that when Beckett was asked by Charles Juliet in 1977 if he had discarded religion altogether, he is reported to have answered that perhaps this was so ‘outwardly, but pour la reste...’ (defying mine). In his dramatic critique of life without God, Beckett produced a superb Christian play! It is perhaps fitting to end this paper with the following quotation, relevant not only to Waiting for Godot, but also to those of Beckett’s works which abound in Biblical references, like his play, Endgame, and his Three Novels: Molloy, Malone Dies, The Unnamable:

SB’s obsessive return to the same (Biblical) images and themes ... inform some of the most powerful religious literature in the Western World. This is a paradox SB might have resented, but not one he could escape. Whatever his disbelief, he is a major religious writer.
NOTES

9. For numerous ingenious suggestions regarding who (or what) the name ‘Godot’ stands for, see Melvin J. Friedman, 'Godotology: Critic! (Sic)', Modern Drama 9 (1966), 302-07; and Robert Fleissner, ‘“Godotology” Revisited: The Hidden Anagram for Gott / Tod’, Germanic Notes 18, 13.3 (1982), 35-37.
15. The Antichrist, p.569.
18. Robert Fleissner argues that the ‘significance’ of Nietzsche’s words about the ‘death’ of God is that ‘in modern times, He (God) often has withdrawn Himself from the world’, and that when Zarathustra says that God has been ‘killed’, the intended meaning is that ‘He needs to be reborn in our hearts, that the outer form may have to be disposed of so that the reality in- side can come to light’ (p.36). However, there is no indication anywhere either that Beckett was sympathetic with Nietzsche, or that this was his understanding of Nietzsche’s view.
24. Knowlson, p. 279. Beckett’s rejection of institutional religion while holding on to belief in God, brings to mind the contemporary American writer, Joseph F. Girzone (b. 1930) and his extremely successful Joshua novels (the first one published in 1983, and the ninth in 2007). Girzone is a retired Catholic priest who invites people to worship God away from the shackles of institutional religion. See http://www.randomhouse.com/features/girzone/author.html

25. Ackerley and Gontarski, p. xii.


31. In their article, ‘The Nietzschean Madman in Beckett’s *Endgame,*’ (*Explicator*, Vol 65, Issue 3, Spring 2007, 167-70), Thomas Dilworth and Christopher Langlois argue that Beckett based his Madman on that of Nietzsche in *The Gay Science*; on the other hand, Langlois and Mike Goodwin in their article, ‘Antoin Artaud and the Madman in Beckett’s *Endgame* (in *Explicator*, Vol.66, Issue 3, Spring 2008, 143-47), find that the artist, Artaud, is more similar to Beckett’s creation than Nietzsche’s. My contention is that Nietzsche’s own madness, not his Madman, served as the springboard for Beckett’s Madman. This does not rule out the possibility that Beckett could have been drawing on Artaud, and also responding to Nietzsche’s Madman.

32. Epithet used by Dilworth and Goodwin (p.145) in their article on the Madman in Beckett’s *Endgame*.


34. For the numerous achievements of Bishop Berkeley (implied by Lucky’s reference to him), see *The Life of George Berkeley* by Arthur Luce (New York: Grove Press, 1940). Berkeley was Fellow at Trinity from 1707 to 1723.

35. See Knowlson, p.785 n.166, 412.


38. This quotation comes from the King James Authorized trans. of the Bible which, according to Ackerley and Gontarski, Beckett preferred to other translations (p.51).


46. Ackerley and Gontarski, p.480.