

WAITING FOR GODOT
(SAMUEL BECKETT)



“A World Without Solace . . . Nearly
Almost Always: Alienation
in Samuel Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot*”
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I had a friend named Art. For many years Art lived with a chronic heart condition he knew would kill him—eventually, it did. Art loved to tell stories, especially the kind of funny, bittersweet stories that got you to think about the meaning of life. At Art’s funeral friends and family recounted how Art’s stories kept them going in the face of loss. Art said he learned to tell stories from vaudeville comedians he heard as a young person; their timing was impeccable. In one story Art liked to tell, two bewildered old men crash into each other in a supermarket while looking for their wives. In Art’s stories the logic of the familiar was upended by the unexpected punch line. Not all of Art’s stories had moral purpose; some simply amused.

At Art’s funeral, I began thinking about Samuel Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot* (one of the most wickedly funny plays I know) and its theme of alienation. The play, like so many of the Laurel and Hardy movies that are its indirect models, employed burlesque elements in response to such exasperating travails as ill-fitting boots and loss of bladder control. The difference is that *Godot* couples lowbrow humor with highbrow musings delivered in the disguised voices of poets pretending to be tramps. As Estragon says, “Isn’t that obvious?” (9a).

The opening scene in *Godot*, when Estragon (a.k.a. Gogo, alias Adam—read Oliver Hardy) sits on a low mound like a circus clown trying to pry his boot off, presents a puzzle the play never resolves: Are Estragon's boots too small or his feet too big? For Beckett, it is a matter of probabilities—dumb luck, if you like (like his being born on Good Friday, April 13, 1906—is this a good omen or bad? For a superstitious Beckett this was mostly bad except when it wasn't)—and for some, that conundrum is absurdly funny!

Giving up in exhaustion, resting, and trying with both hands again, Estragon declares: "Nothing to be done." Vladimir, (a.k.a. Didi, mistakenly referred to by the boy in the play as Mr. Albert—read Stan Laurel) advances with "*short, stiff strides, legs wide apart*" (like the exaggerated footfalls of Charlie Chaplin) and responds, "I'm beginning to come round to that 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" (7a). What makes this opening scene both funny and tragic, thereby setting the tone for the play, is that both Estragon's and Vladimir's words appear to be philosophically exaggerated responses to a gag-like setup—the difficulty of repeatedly trying to pry a boot off with both hands! The phrase *Nothing to be done* is an ironic and direct, if unconscious, response to (or parody of?) V.I. Lenin's call to armed struggle and Communist Party discipline in his famous pamphlet published on the eve of the Russian Revolution, *What Is to Be Done?* *Godot* may be many things, but a message play for the establishment of a workers' utopia, let alone a liberal democracy, it is not. Consider Vladimir's lines in act 2: "We wait. We are bored. (*He throws his hand up.*) No, don't protest, we are bored to death, there's no denying it. Good. A diversion comes along and what do we do? We let it go to waste. Come, let's get to work! (*He advances towards the heap, stops in his stride.*) In an instant all will vanish and we'll be alone once more, in the midst of nothingness!" (52a). In one sense, *Godot* can be considered a deeply conservative, as it were, *conserving* work of theater that is profoundly antipolitical or apolitical, to say the least. Or is it? (Some critics even accuse such works of subtextually advocating a quietism or antihope ideology known as nihilism or middle-class apathy.) We will come to that question later.

While *Waiting for Godot* may read like serious stuff, the play is billed as a "tragicomedy" (the shared letter "c" that combines the two words suggests somehow that the comedy begins where the tragic

ends). Unlike Euripides's *Antigone* or Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, there are no suicides in *Godot*—except, of course, the two comically feigned attempts by Estragon and Vladimir in acts 1 and 2—or in any of Beckett's work, with the possible exception of Old Boy in *Murphy*, who, as C.J. Ackerley and S.E. Gontarski point out, only “cuts his throat for a necessary reason: it is a cut-throat razor.” *Godot* consists “only” of witty, ironic banter, word games (at times sad and remorseful), puns, and lyrical-sounding soliloquies that serve as poetic setups for yet another round of pricks and kicks, all ending in a final pratfall—or nearly so. Remember the penultimate scene in *Godot*?

Estragon: “Why don't we hang ourselves?” [The tragic setup]
 Vladimir: “With what?” [The slightly more intellectual but no more effectual one] Estragon: “You haven't got a bit of rope?”
 Vladimir: “No.” Estragon: “Then we can't.” (*Silence*) [Notice the flat, comic deadpan—once again, heightening the setup; the timing here is impeccable.] Vladimir: “Let's go.” [The crescendo—comic relief? Hardly.] Estragon: “Wait, there's my belt.” [Once again, the setup—the expectation is that this time they will do it!] Vladimir: “It's too short.” [A cowardly retreat?] Estragon: “You could hang on to my legs.” [We have heard that before, or something close to it, in act 1.] Vladimir: “And who'd hang on to mine?” [Again, the satiric employment of reason?] Estragon: “True.” Vladimir: “Show all the same.” [Meaning let's see your belt; hand it over.] (*Estragon loosens the cord that holds up his trousers which, much too big for him, fall about his ankles. They look at the cord.*)

With Estragon's pants falling now to his ankles, exposing his boxer shorts and knobby legs, this is nothing less than pure burlesque—the pratfall! This nearly perfect slapstick scene, which goes on for another twenty-two lines, nearly prevented *Godot* from opening in London in 1955 due to the Lord Chamberlain's concerns about indecency—never mind what some critics saw as the underlying tone of pessimism in the play regarding the future of mankind! (The Lord Chamberlain's office until 1968 acted as a kind of *ex officio* state censor.)

Godot could only be performed in England, Deirdre Bair points out, after certain words deemed offensive were changed and the scene with Estragon's exposed bottom was altered. It is instructive to compare

this faux-suicide scene, and the equally satirical suicide contemplation by Estragon and Vladimir in act 1, with the original Laurel and Hardy film *The Flying Deuces* (1937), in which a brokenhearted Hardy (Ollie, the heavy one) comically attempts to engineer a suicide by throwing himself and his reluctant partner, Laurel (Stan, the thin one), into the Seine in Paris by using a length of rope fashioned around their waists and tied to a block of cement. Like Estragon and Vladimir, the pair does not get far, due to a combination of incompetence and bad luck (depending on how you look at it!).

Stan: Well, goodbye Ollie.

Ollie: Goodbye, Stan.

Stan: Good luck.

Ollie: Hey! Where are you going!

Stan: Well, I don't want to get my name dragged into this.

Ollie: (Tying rope around Stan's waist)

Stan: What's that for?

Ollie: When I count to three, we will both jump in.

Stan: What do I have to do with it! I am not the one in love.

Ollie: So that's the kind of guy you are.

After all I have done for you, you will let me jump in there alone.

Do you realize you will just go off living by yourself?

People will stare at you and wonder what you are.

I won't be here to tell them.

There will be no one to protect you.

Stan: I never thought of that. I didn't mean to be disrespectful.

Ollie: That's all right. We will let bygones be bygones.

This is going to be easier than you think!

In the closing pages of the earlier comic novel *Watt*, Beckett had his protagonist of the same name play on the need to plant a "hardy laurel," the pun being that nearly all laurels are hardy (Laurel and Hardy, get it?) when planted in the right plot, including *Godot's*. Though Samuel Beckett and his friend and mentor James Joyce were, in their own ways, very different stylists (one adds, where the other subtracts), one of the challenges in reading Beckett's *Godot*, which is like reading Joyce's *Ulysses* and *Finnegans Wake*, is to know where words employed as symbols begin and end; of course, for

an adventurous and free-spirited reader that is always, or nearly always, part of the great charm and frustration in reading and rereading these works.

And yet to argue, as some scholars do, that *Waiting for Godot* has the comic pedigree of a funny bone that goes back beyond Laurel and Hardy, Charlie Chaplin, and Buster Keaton to the seventeenth-century commedia dell'arte or, further still, to the tradition of the Homeric bard himself is not to deny an underlying sense of loss that runs through the play like an exile longing for home or a Gnostic preacher predicting apocalyptic doom of mankind (remember that *Godot* is also billed as a tragedy). Just listen to these lines of sad resignation uttered by Pozzo ever so lyrically, yet somehow inauthentically (another word for alienated): “The tears of the world are a constant quantity. For each one who begins to weep somewhere else another stops. The same is true of the laugh. (*He laughs.*) Let us not then speak ill of our generation. It is not any unhappier than its predecessors. (*Pause.*) Let us not speak well of it either. (*Pause.*) Let us not speak of it at all. (*Pause judiciously.*) It is true the population has increased” (22a).

What makes *Godot* so sad—so tragic, if you like—is that all of the characters (even the boy in acts 1 and 2) are estranged and made strange—separated, indeed alienated—not only from one another, God, and nature (that poor tree!) but also from time itself (how old are these characters anyway?), a day of the week (does the “action” take place on Saturday, Sunday, Monday?), and everything they touch, think, feel, see, and even remember—or is it forget? It’s hard to recall which, as “nothing” (no thing) really happens in a play in which the past itself is made foreign. Estragon: “I’m unhappy.” Vladimir: “Not really! [Being ironic?] Since when?” Estragon: “I’d forgotten.” Vladimir: “Extraordinary the tricks the memory plays!” (33a).

The very names Estragon and Vladimir suggest a kind of theater of allegory or antiallegory, where a character’s name both means and doesn’t mean anything. Estragon resonates in the Middle English word *estragen* or Middle French word *estrangier*, meaning stranger or one out of place (think of Albert Camus’ novel *The Stranger*, the classic book of existential alienation, which Beckett greatly admired). Vladimir is a foreign-sounding Russian name, at least from an English or French perspective, with echoes in the Latin *validus*, meaning strong, valid, and truthful.

At one point, Estragon's desire to go barefoot and leave his boots to someone else leads to this curious exchange in which Estragon compares himself to the ultimate stranger—some consider him God—or as Karl Barth, the great Swiss theologian, phrased it, “the wholly other.”

Estragon: (*turning to look at the boots*) “I’m leaving them there. (*Pause.*) Another will come, just as . . . as me, but with smaller feet, and they’ll make him happy.” Vladimir: “But you can’t go barefoot!” Estragon: “Christ did.” Vladimir: “Christ! What has Christ got to do with it? You’re not going to compare yourself to Christ!” Estragon: “All my life I’ve compared myself to him.” Vladimir: “But where he lived it was warm, it was dry!” Estragon: “Yes. And they crucified him quick.” (*Silence.*) Vladimir: “We’ve nothing to do here.” Estragon: “Nor anywhere else.” (34b)

However, unlike medieval morality plays in which the personification of names and action are unambiguously intended to mean something (as when Everyman meets the Devil, Fellowship, Wealth, and Good Deeds along the road to salvation), our little wayfarers appear not so much lost as going nowhere (is this a state of purgatory?), while waiting for what feels like an eternity. “Nothing happens,” Estragon cries out. “Nobody comes, nobody goes, it’s awful!” (27b). That is not exactly so, as our heroes—or are they antiheroes?—run into Pozzo, whom Vladimir mistakenly identifies as Godot himself and Estragon incorrectly calls Bozzo. The name *Bozzo* sounds like Bozo, as in Bozo the Clown, a name that can be traced back to the medieval character Baso, the “dunce” in Saint Anselm of Canterbury’s eleventh-century ontological dialogues that logically attempt to prove the existence of God. Pozzo is with his servant Lucky (some say “lackey”), whose very being personifies the unlucky, as he is led by his master’s rope tied around his bruised and bloodied neck. Lucky’s fortune appears to change for neither better nor worse in the second act of *Godot*, when, though “struck dumb,” he silently leads his blind and shaken master in the uncertain direction of home. Such is the picture of human despair—pure alienation if it was not so darkly comic to some.

As for the name *Godot* itself, scholar Martin Esslin, who has interviewed Beckett, contends that while it may sound like the word *God* in English (in French—the original language of the play—the

word for God is *Dieu*, all of which adds to the mystery of Godot), it was not the playwright's intention to "mean" God. In fact, Beckett has quipped, "If by Godot I meant God, I would say God and not Godot." Beckett told Roger Blin, the theater director who also played the role of Pozzo in *En attendant Godot* (Waiting for Godot) on January 5, 1953, that the name Godot finds its origin in *goditots* (masculine) and *godasses* (feminine), French colloquial words for boot. Could God be a boot? More on that later.

The eminent theater critic Eric Bentley made the link between Godot and a character named Godeau in a Balzac novel, a character who never shows up though he's central to the plot. Over the years, Beckett's reply to the question of Godot's identity became, "If I knew, I wouldn't have written the play!" The playwright was either alienated from the meaning of his own work or he was allowing others the freedom to discover the meaning of the play on their own (according to some critics and scholars, a nearly impossible task).

The boy in the play appears to be just an unnamed boy who tends his goats, though his reliability and that of his (possibly twin?) brother as messengers might be questioned; after all, in act 2 the boy cannot recall whether it was he or his brother (who raises sheep and is now sick) who was sent the day before by Godot. When questioned by Vladimir, the boy does "think" (rather than know) that Godot has a white beard and he appeared quite certain that "He does nothing, Sir" (59a). Beckett wanted the boy to be played like an angel (the Greek word *angelos* means messenger). All of this adds to the strange distance and almost ethereal quality of this scene and the play itself.

But where does all of the separation and alienation in *Waiting for Godot* come from? Is it in the bones of the play itself? How much of it derives from the playwright's philosophy of life (if it can be found)? How much of the alienation in *Godot* is a product of the times in which the play was written? How much of the perception of alienation in *Godot* resides in the audiences' and critics' interpretations of a kind of theatrical Rorschach test? These are difficult questions to answer, and that adds to the allure, mystery, and alienation of *Godot*, which might never be completely understood or reckoned with.

In many ways *Godot* is like an alienated young person, neither understanding nor understood, who nevertheless has important, albeit troubling things to say and is therefore worthy of serious respect and attention. We might not like what *Godot* has to say, but it behooves

us to listen. What, then, does alienation reveal in *Waiting for Godot*? While *Godot* is a work of art made up of many disparate parts and conflicting fragments and is not a systematic work of philosophy or a political-science thesis, three lessons might be gleaned.

First of these is that language matters and, despite our best efforts, we might not always say what we mean to, especially when forced to explain ourselves to others (because we are thinking and doubting animals). Consider Lucky's "thinking" speech—"think, pig!" as Pozzo commands (28a). What appears to be pure gibberish is actually a reasoned, or overly reasoned, attempt to "establish beyond all doubt" the nature of human existence. Absurd, you say, and yet we are compelled to do so, or something like it, every day.

Secondly, the problem of being human begins at birth. This is a pessimistic view; it might be an overly simplistic view, but it is true: At our birth, until science proves otherwise, we are animals destined like all others for death. As Pozzo puts it near the end of the play: "Have you not done tormenting me with your accursed time! It's abominable! . . . They give birth astride of a grave, the light gleams an instant, then it's night once more" (57b). This dark passage appears to be confirmed soon after by Vladimir: "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" (58a-b). What can all this alienation possibly teach us?

Finally, the real question the play asks is not so much how we are going to explain our lives away (is it character or temperament, fate or free will?) as we wait, for who knows what, in an endless game. The real question is: What do we do about it? How are we going to live our lives? How do we use the freedom that our alienation from everything and everyone makes possible? In that sense, alienation in *Godot* is a great teacher, for alienation reveals the perennial questions of what, who, where, and how we are going to be in the world. Not as a thing, but as a person, will we make excuses for ourselves and blame others, or as Vladimir comically puts it, "There's man all over for you, blaming on his boots [or God, Godot, you name it] the faults of his feet" (8a).

To answer a question posed earlier in this essay, *Godot*, from one perspective, is a profoundly political (though not partisan) play, for it asks the audience, collectively and individually, what kind of choices we are going to make for ourselves and for society. *Waiting for Godot*

leaves us without a place to hide, and while the world may be almost always without solace, we are condemned to choose, whether we like it or not, how to live our lives.

It is perhaps because *Godot* is so tragically comic at presenting the human condition of alienation and loss that it has so often been performed with great insight before audiences in difficult circumstances, be they inmates in a maximum-security prison such as San Quentin, besieged residents of Sarajevo at the height of the Bosnian war, or residents of the Ninth Ward in New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina (for two thoughtful reviews of the production, see the *New York Times*, “Beckett’s Tramps, Waterlogged While They Wait,” June 3, 2006, Page B10; and “A Broken City. A Tree. Evening,” December 2, 2007, A&L Page 1). Sometimes there is nothing more cathartic and healthy than laughing amid despair.

“A client is mad with a tailor for taking so long making a pair of trousers,” so roughly goes a story of Beckett’s, according to his biographer and friend James Knowlson in an essay aimed at defending modern art against its critics and more conventional ways of painting. “Do you know, it only took God seven days to make the entire world.” “Yes,” said the tailor, “and look at the world—just wait till you see your pants!”

My friend Art would have loved that story, as all good things are worth struggling with and waiting for.

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