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This issue is dedicated to



Sarah Russo

mother of Albert Russo
A great friend
and Advisory Committee Member of Labyrinth.

Ms. Russo passed away on 24.03.12.
May God rest her soul in peace!

Waiting as Tragedy: Beckett and the Question of Choice

- Athanasius A. Ayuk

Abstract: The high point of Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* is the waiting itself. This subject while it has attracted huge critical attention, has equally undermined the gravity of the matter in trying to portray the idea of waiting as simply ridiculous and absurd. This paper challenges the notion that the play's action is simply a representation of the absurd and ridiculous. It argues that the play is as serious as any traditional Shakespearean or ancient Greek tragedy can be in that it portrays the condition of man in its basest form, showing that humankind is trapped in their fate, the only solution being in the choice they have to make. The paper locates the source of the protagonists' tragedy in their inability to choose to separate or to choose not to wait. The protagonists are burdened by both the fact of waiting and their inability to make the choice that will liberate them. This in my opinion is no small tragedy, as it shows them as perpetually entrapped in their own destiny, condemned to stand still and suffer the hell of each other's presence. In this regard, I argue, *Waiting for Godot* is a story of the tragedy of Man's futile attempts to give meaning to life and to define his being.

Keywords: waiting, ridiculous, absurd, tragedy, choice, being

Introduction: It is a well beaten track that the 20th century occasioned a tremendous change in attitudes because of the political and scientific convulsions of the age¹. The impact of this on art was both cataclysmic and innovative. It gave birth to a new wave of artists who frustrated by the nature of the world they were seeing decided to represent it in the way they thought ran consonant with the changing times. One of such writers was Samuel Beckett whose perception of the world as a claustrophobic sphere ended up in his fiction being described as absurd. His works present a world that in essence is ridiculous and absurd, defies meaning and puts to question the meaning of order. Beckett represents the dismemberment of the world that seeks for its own survival the wisdom of personal choice, but above all interrogates the sense of life. Underneath the comic nature of his characters, Beckett presents a world that is fundamentally tragic albeit its absurd appearance. The heightened apogee of this subtle conception of life finds expression in *Waiting for Godot*² his seminal work. Contrary to traditional opinions and definitions of tragedy that characterized the tragic sense as consisting of a personality of high standing and the death of this latter, tragedy as we intend to discuss here has to do with the protagonist's inability to make the choices that will give meaning to his/her life but and above all the inability to take care of one's basic needs. In *Godot*, it goes beyond that to include the

inability to make useful choices. In relating the predicament of the tramps to the events of Dante's "Inferno" in his article "Beckett's "Dead Voices" in "Waiting for Godot": New Inhabitants of Dante's "Inferno" Lois A. Cuddy imputes "Beckett's putative nihilism" on his characters' inability to choose arguing that this is the weakness that defines modern man's hell (48-49). It is around this view and the definition given to tragedy that I intend to argue that the source of Beckett's protagonists' difficulty is their being taken hostage by a moribund messianic quest for essence. The paper locates the protagonists' anguish in the difficulty or rather inability to confront extreme choices, define the terms on which they have to operate and navigate themselves thereof. Vladimir, Estragon, Lucky and Pozzo are simply burdened by the weight of waiting and the impossibility of choice. They are jostled between a thin hope and a futile existence in a society where time and space conflate at extreme antipodes. They are in a society bedecked by a crisis of consciousness where the meaning of life is defined by the protagonists' ability to assume a moral posture that augurs well with their conception of what life is and not on what it should be.

Godot is a representation of a society that is sick and collapsing under the gravity of its insanity. In it, Beckett weighs in the mind of a world abandoned to its caprices where survival and meaning are left, best judgment indicates to the whims and caprices of nothingness. To come to terms with it, it will demand a great understanding of the reality during which Beckett was writing, but equally the playwright's own personal anguish and his struggle to exorcise himself through some sort of literary self-flagellation. As Norma Kroll indicates "Beckett locates Vladimir and Estragon in a universe plagued by disjunctions, a universe which serves as evidence that God's detachment has become so extreme that he seems virtually powerless" (532). Putting the play into perspective is therefore of cardinal importance to the comprehension of the world in which the play was written and how the issues raised ripple to our times and beyond. But it also helps to define how *Godot* like other Beckett's texts is not only influenced by historical movements, but is self-participatory in these movements. This is particularly in line with Jean Howard's argument that "literature is an agent in constructing a culture's sense of reality" (25). This is part of the whole believe by new historicist and cultural materialists that the object of the study of a text is not the text and its context, but rather literature in history. Appropriately therefore, new historicism squares in well as a literary method that can give a better knowledge of the text under study as the image of society at the throes and mercy of time. Born out of the frustration of new criticism and formalism that had endured on the text-only approach, new historicism heralded a new form of literary interpretation that held history as supreme in reading texts. John Brannigan defines new historicism as "a mode of critical interpretation which privileges power relations as the most important contexts for texts of all kinds" (6). H. Aram Veaser argues that new historicism has "struck down the doctrine of non interference that forbade humanists to intrude on questions of politics, power, indeed on all matters that deeply affects

people's lives-matters best left prevailing wisdom went, to experts who could be trusted to pressure order and stability in 'our' global and intellectual domains"(ix). In 1981, the American Marxist critic Frederic Jameson began his book *The Political Unconscious* with the following two-word challenge: "Always historicize". This precept was to develop adherents in the 1980s, with Brook Thomas publishing an essay in 1987 entitled "The Historical Necessity for – and difficulties with – New Historical Analysis in Introductory Courses." Evidently therefore, the new historicists by this time were rediscovering the value of history in literary analysis. Jameson's statement was a watershed in what Stephen Greenblatt the renaissance scholar would later on in 1981 style as new historicism in a special issue of the journal *genre*. On the heels of this, Louis Montrose defines the theory as 'a combined interest in the textuality of history, the historicity of texts'(qtd in Peter Barry,9). Greenblatt himself will define it as 'an intensified willingness to read all of the textual traces of the past with the attention traditionally conferred only on literary texts' (Peter Barry 9). A multi-discipline theory, new historicism encourages divergent ideologies concurring with what Forest Robinson contends that "new historicism seeks to bring down the boundaries between separate disciplines" (321). It is a theory that gives room to a plethora of ideologies whose advantage is in its giving a kaleidoscopic view of the issues raised. The theory involves:

...detail examination of a given cultural production to discover the meanings that particular cultural production had for the people in whose community it occurred and to reveal the social conventions, cultural codes and ways of seeing the world that gave production those meanings. (258)

Waiting can be read as a representation of the past century's malaise and this could be understood against the background of this theory which Greenblatt himself considers as "a dynamic critical movement which rejects the traditional reliance on individual canonical texts exploring a multitude of other more marginal works and voices"(45). In their seminal work *Practicing New Historicism*, Stephen Greenblatt and Catherine Gallagher justify new historicism project on the grounds that:

New historicist projection is not about demoting art or discrediting aesthetic pleasure, rather it is concerned with finding creative power that shapes literary works outside the narrow boundaries in which it had hitherto been located, as well as within those boundaries. (12)

It is in this regard and in accordance with H. Aram Veesser's contention that the boundaries between the literary and non-literary texts are false. It is considered that both the text and the context of its production are inseparable and involved in mutual self-production. To understand the text, one must understand the context, and to understand the context, one must equally come to grips with the text. *Godot*, read from this angle is a fusion of the totality of the historical process of its time and conversely helped to shape the consciousness of those who read it. The feeling of disappointment in the understanding that Estragon and Vladimir have

come to the end of the road at the beginning of their journey is so disheartening. The opening pages of the text announce the collective burden of the protagonist. Estragon and Vladimir express their incapacity and nullity both at the beginning and at the end. They give up even before they try. In presenting his characters in this circumstance Beckett defines the limits of their abilities. That they fail even before they try portraying them as the victims of an incandescent fate.

The Argument: The consciousness of failure and the memory that comes with this is traumatizing, but perhaps the most disturbing thing is their inability to separate because they are bound by a common goal—waiting for Godot. They are trapped by both their inability to separate and the desire to wait. The only path of escape is the choice they make if at all they do make one. Their survival depends on the choice they will have to make, which choice will condition the kind of meaning they will give to themselves. They are hinged between the thin disparity between the choices they have to make and hope for Godot. The expression of doubt about the venue and time of the wait intensifies and even perhaps justifies the comic macabre feeling of abandonment and uselessness. And even more intriguing is their complete lack of knowledge of who he really is, or rather should we say an anguished disinterestedness that reflects their illusion about the possibility of personal or collective involvement:

Estragon: You gave me a fright/ Vladimir: I thought it was he/
 Estragon: Who?/ Vladimir: Godot / Estragon: *Pah! The wind in the reeds* (italics mine)/ Vladimir: I could have sworn I heard shouts
 Estragon: And why should he shout?/ Vladimir: At his horse. (15)

The italics above reflect the worries the tramps have about the real personality of Godot, who in essence is representation of nothingness. In actual fact, he is nameless, simply an idea and therefore ethereal. To depend on him is to depend on nothingness especially as the tramps are not even sure about his identity. Estragon wonders aloud “his name is Godot?” and Vladimir responds “I think so” (17). His person/idea is clouded with doubts. It is ridiculous that the tramps do not know the person they are waiting for, yet they wait with so much anxiety and strangely enough so much hope. Underlying their childlike revelation that they do not even know him and that even if he appears, they will not be able to make him out is a strong feeling of dejection. Estragon and Vladimir are suffering from what David Grossvogel describes as “the difficulty of dying”, (qtd in Frederick Busi 883) because they have no choice they are obliged to resign themselves to eternal torment (Busi 883). The feeling of dejection and tragedy underlying this awakens in the reader an intense compassion for these tramps who like Sisyphus are condemned to a condition they very well know is fruitless, yet it is the only option. To simply consider *Godot* as comic and ridiculous is to undermine the fundamental psychic pain that characterizes the wait. The following conversation between Estragon and Pozzo is premonitory of this psychological and emotional calamity.

Estragon: (recoiling before Pozzo). That's to say...you understand...the dusk...the strain...waiting...I confess...I imagined...for a second...Pozzo:Waiting? So you were waiting for him? (20).

The fundamental discourse of the text lies in this waiting which in itself reveals the sense of hopelessness and by extension, the inability to controvert the state of dejection in which they find themselves. The realization that Pozzo is not the Godot they have been waiting for, the fact that since they cannot even recognize him, meaning that even if he comes the problem of identity will be posed is problematic. There is a double or even triple frustration when you understand that you are waiting for somebody whose presence will not even alleviate your suffering. When Pozzo rhetorically asks Estragon if he were really waiting for Godot, he inadvertently foreshadows the futile nature of the act.

Pozzo pushes this ridicule further when he says "Why it's very natural, very natural. I myself in your situation, if I had an appointment with a Godin...Godot...Godot...anyhow you see who I mean, I'd till it was black night before I gave up. (He looks at the stool). I'd very much like to sit down, but I don't quite know how to go about it" (36). Pozzo makes a downright mockery of who they were waiting for and by that insinuates that Estragon can wait forever and nothing will come out of that. He too like Estragon and Vladimir raises the problem of identity. The pain and difficulty of identifying their guest, the inability to even say why they are waiting for him/her, the ridicule that they have to undergo all add to create and intensify anguish in Estragon and Vladimir. The burden of waiting is like an albatross on their neck, their survival depends on that-it seems. Pozzo is certain that Estragon and Vladimir will not have help and he is tortured by his own inability to help. No amount of food or bones to be more precise will rescue these traumatized figures. The best option in the context in which they find themselves is abandonment or separation and that could give meaning to their lives. However, Beckett dramatizes their ill-fatedness in portraying the impossibility of separation.

Pozzo's statement that "I don't seem to be able... (long hesitation)...to depart" (50) and Estragon's response "such is life" portrays the level of acceptance of their mutual fate. The question of togetherness has been of serious concern in the drama of absurdity, all this being the result of the collapse of the morality of the age. The protagonists are completely annihilated by the understanding that they cannot solve their dilemma by mutual separation. When Jean Paul Sartre in *Huis Clos* dramatized that hell is the other, that theme was to be carried along by many writers of that generation. The imbroglio of Estragon/Vladimir and Pozzo/ Lucky is the revelation of the sacredness of a forced condition to which mankind is a helpless spectator. In the first part of the play, Beckett does not play to the gallery about his vision of humanity. The protagonists have been refused a sense of purpose and are groping in the dark for meaning. Their source of anguish is their being together, but this is also their source of security. The difficulty of choice results from this inability to draw the thin line between the security that results from bonding and the fear of solitude. In spite their differences, Estragon cannot come to terms with solitude. His

request, "Don't touch me! Don't question me! Don't speak to me! Stay with me" (63) justifies their fear of separation. On numerous occasions, Estragon and Vladimir try unsuccessfully to separate, but bonded by a certain psychic immaterial link, they cannot. Vladimir's recognition of the uselessness of effort intensifies Estragon's frustration. When Vladimir says: "There's nothing we can do." and Estragon replies: "But I can't go on like this!" (76). Yet it is Estragon who seems to have found an answer to their dilemma when he contends that "We always find something, eh Didi, to give us the impression we exist?" (77).

Estragon expresses his fear of solitude and by implication his sense of community. He cannot part from Vladimir even if genuinely he wants to. He is ready to stick to Vladimir, an uneasy alliance against unseen forces. And Vladimir understands this reason why he describes their fate sententiously as "To every man his little cross. (He sighs.) Till he dies. (Afterthought.) And is forgotten" (68). The wait and the tedious time that passes are the inexhaustible cross of mankind, but unlike the cross that leads to salvation, this one leads to nowhere. The manner in which Beckett captures the feeling of solitude and dejection in the lines spoken by Vladimir brings the message to us in telling poignancy. They are not words of comfort; they simply represent the reality and the difficulty of coming to terms with it. The understanding that this burden has to follow mankind to their grave is a tragic truth. But perhaps where Vladimir's statement is more disquieting is the recognition that they are forgotten after all this effort. Why then struggle, why then wait when everything comes to nothing. This is a world without meaning, without hope where everything seems to depend on chance, where the very existence of God is doubtful. Estragon's worry as to whether God sees him is the apogee of frustration; it is the result of a man who has exhausted all his possibilities, who has come to the end of his efforts and who is being destroyed by the consciousness of his helpless state. Translated in physical terms, Estragon could be shouting like Jeremiah in the desert. The question as to whether God is present in human activities has meaning both in the beginning and at the end of the tale. It is not simply addressed by Estragon, but as it seems by the entire human community. It is both a cry of discord and an expression of protest against man's condition of life. Estragon like the rest of humanity is caught as Stephani Pofahl Smith has indicated "between despair and presumption" a conclusion drawn from Beckett's reference to St Augustine's statement that "Do not despair: one of the thieves was saved. Do not presume: one of the thieves was damned" (qtd in Smith: 889). This statement squares in well with Beckett's worry about the dilemma of existence which is Smith's concern in her article "Between Pozzo and Godot: Existence as Dilemma". Estragon, Vladimir, Pozzo and Lucky are caught in some form of Christian anguished hope because as Smith indicates they are the victims of "uncertainty" bound to "an attitude of humble, doubtful, but watchful waiting" from which only death will release them (889). This kind of extended anguish couched in the clothes of hope is so terrifying especially when we know that there is nothing to be done. Estragon's sentence at the beginning of the play is an

irrevocable judgment on the nullity of effort and the biting reality of life's nothingness.

To be aware of one's own death like W. B. Yeats, Irish man who sees his own death is frightening. To Beckett, we are all face to face with a fait accompli and time leaves us with no possibility of remediation. Vladimir is first to sense that "Time flows again already. The sun will set, the moon rise, and we away...from here" (88). The sense of fatal infinity haunts Beckett's vision of the universe and even defines his outstretch attempts to give hope in the story of the tree. The constant reminder that we will away from here and that perhaps like Hamlet³ we are not even sure of the fate that awaits us is the more disturbing. It is simply as Pozzo says a "pity!" (88). Beckett who spent his time as a recluse must have understood the meaning of time and the sense that has to be given to it. All the tramps are weighed by the sense of time passing. Unlike in Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse* where the passage of time is a rite of passage for a more beautiful page in the lives of the Ramsays, in Beckett it is more of an albatross on the neck of the characters. Whether in *Godot* or in *Endgame*, the logic is the same and the fear too. Time and the burden that come with paying allegiance to it are instrumental in shaping the belief that humans are a mass of nothing leading to nothing and for nothing.

The understanding that time passes and even if sense cannot be made out of it, it should at least be made part of daily mode of existence is a way of assuaging the suffering of the tramps. Vladimir whose heightened sense of fatalism pervades the text captures in pathetic terms the lines between time's essence and human desire to give form to life. He says:

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. To all mankind they were addressed, those cries for help still ringing in our ears! But at this place, at this moment, all mankind is us, whether we like it or not. Let us make the most of it, before it is too late....What are we doing here, *that* is the question....Yes, in this immense confusion one thing alone is clear. We are waiting for Godot to come- . (90)

Even when it sounds like some preaching on the utilitarian nature of things, Vladimir laments on the terrifying passage of time. Here Beckett echoes Shakespeare on the fear of the unknown. The line between the two authors here is very thin and drawn almost at the same point. Vladimir speaks of the urgency of action, of the nebulous nature of our existence on earth and of heavy moral responsibility. Vladimir cannot answer the questions he is asking, neither the writer nor the reader can. Those questions are baffling effusions of one confused state of being attempting to comprehend and justify its own self. Vladimir is responding to tough times and he recognizes this when he says "All I know is that the hours are long, under these conditions, and constrain us to beguile them with proceedings which-how shall I say-which may at first sight seem reasonable, until they become a habit" (91). Vladimir's ranting soon