

Self-identity Through Time and Habit

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Abstract

Beckett's most enduring contribution to world literature is without a doubt his depiction of this interstitial zone of uncertainty between subject and object. Waiting for Godot, a controversial play, by Samuel Beckett is supposed to be off-balance, with question marks preceding and following nothing to give us that specific tension. Time, habit, memory, and games add both literary and theatrical interest to the play's texture. Proust's ideas and works inspired Beckett immensely, particularly his concept of habit that looks behind the ego's surface, behind voluntary to involuntary memory and which can be seen in most of Beckett's writings, and most notably in Waiting for Godot. This paper tries to explore Beckett's habit to discover his self-identity using Proust's ideas on time, habit and memory. It also shows how Beckett's characters face eventually failure in achieving their real selves.

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Introduction

Throughout his career, Beckett's characters are in a perpetual exploration of their inner world, they begin to realize that knowledge of the self is just as elusive as knowledge of the outside world. This loss of self, which profoundly marks all of Beckett's characters, leaves them in a kind of no man's- land between an unknowable outside world and an unlocatable self. Without a solid foundation for their beliefs, whether in the outside world of objects or the internal world of the self. Beckett's characters find themselves in a position of extreme epistemological weakness. Beckett's most enduring contribution to world literature is without a doubt his depiction of this interstitial zone of uncertainty between subject and object. In terms of dealing with the outside world, the Beckettian character adopts a habit that serves as both protector and prisoner. *Waiting for Godot*, a controversial play, by Samuel Beckett is supposed to be off-balance, with question marks preceding and following nothing to give us that specific tension. Time, habit, memory, and games add both literary and theatrical interest to the play's texture. Proust's ideas and works inspired Beckett immensely, particularly his

concept of habit that looks behind the ego's surface, behind voluntary to involuntary memory and which can be seen in most of Beckett's writings, and most notably in *Waiting for Godot*. The psychological research strategy should be incorporated since the study of the self and the ego are the main concepts that Beckett used in this play *Waiting for Godot*.

2. Beckett and Self-identity

With the advent of new scientific revolutionary impact, formerly accepted a priori categories of time and space have been superseded by new definitions that take into consideration the spatiotemporal coordinates and the individual qualities of the observer, who thus enters the field of the observed and so, the logic of the human consciousness loses its formerly privileged position as observer and reality decoder, resulting in a complex interplay between the conscious and unconscious.

Space, time, and identity, not only are they the three questions to which narrative discourse feels most obliged to respond, they are, nevertheless, crucial points of reference for the human subject as she or he tries to figure out where she or he is in the world.

The Beckettian vision of the world doesn't focus on identity, the other-elusive self, as many authors would say, but it conveys a struggling attempt towards a new means which is the quest for the authentic self-based on a decisive detachment, this sum of mnemonic experiences lived through time and space, which in turn impacts the identity of the individual. Yet, to assert identity, Beckett's self fought steadily to avoid immersion in nonentity. Beckett, therefore, appreciates the Proustian goal as the sustenance of the ego, keeping it above the flux of ordinary time and enclosing it within vital cages of memory.

2.1 Beckett's Psychological Quest

While Descartes achieves a conclusion by translating doubting into thinking as an affirmation of self-existence, Beckett's ego continues to doubt, turning skepticism into pessimism. In Beckett's world, the self never achieves personal identity, as defined by Locke, Hume, and others. The self takes on a variety of names until it no longer has any, yet it is never fully grasped, and therefore remains elusive¹. Nevertheless, the self talks about itself. Hence the "language of the self"². This existentialist and philosophical motif drove Beckett to delve deeper into the human psyche, combining the split and suffering self that emerges with compulsive

intensity in his play *Waiting for Godot*, in which characters strive to negate themselves by absolute detachment and inaction in order to avoid being shattered by the devastating allure of the outside world that shatters the character's self.

Beckett's characters are puzzled over the question of the identity of created things as they are engaged in the bewildering process of defining objects as individually and separately objects or as extensions of the self. All of these facts about Beckett's world set it off from that of his contemporaries. Beckett is not concerned to prove illogicality or absurdity since they have been already assumed. Instead, his writings are meaning attenuations: a never-ending, noisy, and repetitive echoing of logical questions and close definitions.

According to Kalb, Beckett insists, on encouraging performances that limit the external physical techniques and work toward inward psychological centers (Kalb, 1991, 22), he also points that "it is Beckett's protagonists' disempowerment, removed from the sphere of active engagement in the world, is what guarantees their integrity." (Kalb, 1991, 205). In a parallel way, McMullan evaluates Beckett's art of directing and states that Beckett's actors, like Lois Overbeck, describe their experience of being put in a "straitjacket

making their bodies and senses cut off" (McMullan 202).

Beckett's characters exhibit this kind of inward quest in their "eventful immobility or movement around a still center" (Gilman 177). They are crushed by the weight of consciousness, which occurs with the self-responsibility they wish to avoid but cannot. Hence, the Beckett hero does not seek, but rather flees, his identity; his quest is for obscurity, for self-annihilation. How then is the relationship between this self and Beckett's Time?

Beckett's characters try to negate themselves through complete detachment and inaction in order to be safe from the destructive alluring of the outside world, which alienates them trying to start a new beginning, a return to the essence of being. They perceive a world in which the distinction between living and having lived fades into a constant oscillation. This idea conveys a struggling attempt toward a new means of the quest for an authentic self which is based on a decisive detachment.

2.2 The Self and the theory of Habit

Proust's ideas and works inspired Beckett immensely, particularly his concept of habit, which can be seen in most of Beckett's writings, and most notably in *Waiting for Godot*. Habit, according to

Proust, is an impediment to knowledge and a technique of dulling one's senses; it is the "ballast that chains the dog to its vomit," (Proust, 19) as Beckett defines.

For Andrews: "... habit, from the standpoint of psychology, is a more or less fixed way of thinking, willing, or feeling acquired through previous repetition of a mental experience." (Andrews 121). He goes on to say that habit "lies outside of consciousness," that it is "the more or less fixed course of consciousness with repeated experiences; the shaping of the familiar consciousness rather than that consciousness itself;" (121-122). After the general statements on time in the first chapter of his book, Beckett presents the theory of habit to interpret Proust's well-known distinction between two kinds of memory. When treating the subjects "habit and, memory"; Beckett sticks closely to Proust's original text. He just seems to defend them with philosophical content from Schopenhauer. As mentioned in his Proust essay, he describes habit as a paralyzing force that causes the attention to focus more on the inner world, resulting in the protection of the essential faculty that is human essence: "Habit paralyzes our attention, drugs those handmaidens of a perception whose cooperation is not absolutely essential (P, 8-9). Habit, thus as

mirrored in Proust, looks behind the ego's surface, behind voluntary to involuntary memory. Beckett calls memory and habit "attributes of the time cancer" with the former subject to the more general laws of the latter, which in turn is a function of the subjects desire to escape the reality of the world in which he must live: "Habit is a compromise effected between the individual and his environment, or between the individual and his own organic eccentricities, the guarantee of a dull inviolability, the lightning-conductor of his existence" (P, 18–19). Habit then is not a condition but an active agent, and as such, it operates as a strategy. Routine is a habit, and when waiting is filled with routine, it too is a habit. But when habit breaks down, the individual suffers: "The periods of transition that separate consecutive adaptations... represent the perilous zones in the life of the individual." According to Beckett, the need for renewal necessitates periods of transition, wherein the protective function of habit may be broken down and a vision of true reality emerges. This "adventure of being" presumably provides the occasion for precise identification of self in Beckett's work, yet habit is also a challenging resource of being for the Beckett hero.

In his Proust, Beckett describes periods of transition between an old self and a new one as follows:" When for a moment, the boredom of living is replaced by the suffering of being ... that is when every faculty is free to play. Because the pernicious devotion of habit paralyzes our attention . . . our current habit of living is . . . unable to deal with the mystery of a strange sky or a strange room, or with any unexpected situation in her curriculum... But when the atrophied faculties step in to save the day. . . the maximum value of our being is restored" (Beckett, 2006, p. 516). Yet the self that existed yesterday is not the same as the one existing today, every cell of which the body is composed being, as we now know, replaced and renewed in the process of growth. There is certainly no rebirth of the self in these characters. Beckett's characters are all locked into an old self; they are all, to borrow Beckett's terminology in Proust's book, 'prisoners of habit'. When they suffer because they have, for a moment, broken through to an awareness of their suffering; the release is not as in Proust, involuntary memory; it is a glimpse through the structured world of habit into the void: a momentary awareness of their own nothingness. The discarding of selves leads to the same void; the process is not rebirth.

3. Beckett's Characters and the passage of Time

In *Waiting for Godot*, the two acts are repetitive yet non-identical, similar yet different, in which the characters struggle to recall past events, rejected not only the contemporary doubts about the stability of human identity but also, and in a broader sense, the distrust of empiricism itself, the conviction that the tangible elements in this world are ultimately insignificant, that they have shimmered away into insubstantiality as individuals seek some overarching meaning beyond the purely tactile, beyond the terrestrial reality that has grown more irrelevant to these fundamental questions about mankind's role in the universe and the ultimate purpose of life. In Beckett's plays, time is the burden—both as a chronic endurance and as a common theme. His characters suffer time and consciousness without being able to form them into a satisfying design. Furthermore, according to Beckett, we exist everywhere in time, not only in the present, which implies the past is inextricably part of us. So in his plays, Beckett is concerned with the passage of time or refusal of time to pass. Beckett reminds us in all of his works that man can be related to time in two ways: first, as a temporal measuring system that allows him

to easily classify things as past, present, and future; and second, as the essential substance of life, because man develops to be (creates his essence) in the world of Time rather than the realm of Space.

Therefore, in *Waiting for Godot*, space is nothing more than a reflection of what Time and man have created. Estragon and Vladimir are more concerned with the waiting fact— a temporal experience than with where they are waiting. Pozzo and Lucky's journey is never defined in terms of where they are coming from or going to (despite Pozzo's unreliable explanation that he is taking Lucky to be sold at the "Marché de Saint-Sauveur". Their journey is a means for them to fill the empty hours and days. It is a temporal experience that represents the meaningless and aimless wandering of the inauthentic existent in life. In the opening pages of his essay *Proust*, Beckett quotes Proust's statement about Time: "But were I granted time to accomplish my work, I would not fail to stamp it with the seal of that Time, now so forcibly present to my mind, and in it, I would describe men, even at the risk of giving them the appearance of monstrous beings, as occupying in Time a much greater place than that so sparingly conceded to them in Space, a place indeed extended beyond measure,

because, like, giants plunged in the years, they touch at once those periods of their lives—separated by so many days—so far apart in Time." Beckett explains his concept of man as a temporal being whose past is not only present but is constantly shaping it, and whose future is likewise present in his finitude—his being toward death: Yesterday is not a milestone that has been passed, but a day-stone on the beaten track of the year and irremediably part of us, within us, heavy and dangerous. We are not merely wearier, because of yesterday, we are other, no longer what we were before the calamity of yesterday". The world that Beckett creates for his characters has been described as "an eternity of stagnation," Estragon and Vladimir continue to wait, putting on hats, taking off shoes, and eating carrots and turnips. Pozzo and Lucky resume their journey, pausing every now and then for Pozzo to eat his chicken, smoke his pipe, check his watch, and sit on his camp stool as if this were a world of habit, of relatively fixed behavioral patterns.

In terms of dealing with the outside world, the Beckettian character adopts a habit that serves as both protector and prisoner. Protector such as: "[a]n automatic adaptation of the human organism to the conditions of its existence" (Proust 9) as

Beckett describes it in his Proust. He adds then that habit is 'the innumerable treaties concluded between the innumerable subjects that constitute the individual and their innumerable correlative objects' (Beckett 1999: 19). For Beckett, the habit would refer to a set of thoughts, strategies, and (re)actions that memory calls upon throughout our attempts to make sense of and negotiate the world. Through these habitual processes of adjustment, time divides self from self and subject from object, ensuring that we neither remain the same nor grasp the dynamic object-in-itself. However, habit distorts this temporal dynamism, allowing us to believe that both we and the objects around us are basically unchanged from one moment to the next.

3.1 The Self Across Time and Space

The self is many selves, and the problem is to assert a continuous self-identity. In Habit, this identity is maintained at the expense of distinction. Beckett defines Habit as "the generic term for the countless treaties concluded between the countless subjects that constitute the individual and their countless correlative objects" (Pothead 109). This statement admirably defines the condition of the Beckett hero, who strives loudly and desperately to "count himself in"

as a self; he undergoes elaborate routines of repetition, draws up fantastically intricate charts of possibilities inherent in habitual decision and action. Beckett's character is always changing, his moods going back and forth across the spectrum of feelings. And, as Proust claims, knowing oneself or the other is difficult due to the endless series of moi's that inhabit each of us: "Ces êtres, s'ils changent par rapport à nous, changent aussi en eux-mêmes"³ It is clear then that according to Proust the universe is seen differently by each of us and changes daily its aspects, as we change within ourselves: "L'univers est vrai pour tous et dissemblable pour chacunce n'est pas un univers, c'est des millions, presque autant qu'il existe des prunelles et d'intelligences humaines, qui s'éveillent tous les matins."⁴ In his essay on Proust, Beckett emphasizes the turmoil of the subject as a barrier to perception:" The observer infects the observed with his own mobility" (p. 6) and this is well defined in Beckett's drama where art is the ultimate expression of human impotence, whereas for Proust it represents a triumph over the fragmented universe created by the passage of time and the variation of perceptions from one person to another: "l'oeuvre d'art était le seul moyen de retrouver le Temps perdu"⁵. (Hale, 6). There is still change, which is

something that happens in time. However, the way the characters experience change is usually such that the occurring events cannot be properly arranged in the temporal order. This is also why the characters cannot utilize the experience of change to secure the passage of time. The tree grows leaves without transition. Pozzo and Lucky, on their second appearance, are blind or dumb, respectively, without transition. Pozzo denies a well-ordered succession to the process of his going blind. He even concentrates on a single moment, all those events which are normally separated in time. This means that he considers time as a basic structure of the empirical world to be null.

POZZO: (*suddenly furious*). Have you not done tormenting me with your accursed time! It's abominable! When! When! One day, is that not enough for you, one day like any other day, one day he went dumb, one day I went blind, one day we'll go deaf, one day we were born, one day we shall die, the same day, the same second, is that not enough for you? (*Calmer.*) They give birth astride of a grave, the light gleams an instant, then it's night once more. (*He jerks the rope.*) On! (89)

The characters neither possess some kind of mental device which could be used as the source of a reliable orientation in time nor are they in contact with a stable, objective world structure from which such an orientation could be derived.⁶

The characters in *Waiting for Godot* continually strive to find a secure notion of yesterday, tomorrow, and sometimes even today. Similar issues occur when it comes to their location in space. Their insecurity over their place in space; is exacerbated by their persistent loss of memory. By creating characters who ultimately cannot remember, or if they can, immediately undermine memory's validity, Beckett constantly draws our attention to the problem of memory: that "reference [in memory narrative] is never to events of the past but to memories of those events" (Olney 863). For Beckett, the past is irreversible and ultimately unknown. This is an interesting and crucial temporal inversion that Beckett employs in his plays: the past, although it is already lived, cannot be known; the future, even though it is un-lived, remains certain—we will die.

Waiting for Godot exhibits Beckett's inverted sense of temporality, and because the characters have nothing on which to base their experiences, they seem to exist

from the outset in a setting defined by the loss of the real.

The central characters of *Waiting for Godot* are always wondering where they are, where they were yesterday, and where they will be tomorrow. They also keep thinking about what happened the day before, and if there seems to be any memory of what this may have been, whether their memory belongs to yesterday or to some other strange moment in time if there is any trustworthy memory at all. Vladimir and Estragon know where they are "going" (nowhere, in that they will continue to wait for Mr. Godot), but they do not know where they have been. Early in Act I, Vladimir and Estragon attempt and fail to establish what they did yesterday. They are unable to determine whether; the place where they find themselves is the same as the one where they were last night. Space, if large enough, to need successive experiencing is experienced in time; if there is no certainty about temporal relations anymore, there is no certainty about spatial relations either.

ESTRAGON: We came here yesterday.

VLADIMIR: Ah no, there you're mistaken.

ESTRAGON: What did we do yesterday?

VLADIMIR: What did we do yesterday?

ESTRAGON: Yes.

Such an exchange implies that the past is unknowable to Beckett. Vladimir and Estragon cannot remember what they did yesterday, and they cannot claim or reconstruct the past if they cannot remember. Godot's future, not the past, is definite. As a result, our current location (as derived from the past) becomes as elusive as our past activities. While Vladimir and Estragon attempt to create reality through recalling a past they cannot remember, their attempts are always futile. In the following exchange in Act II, Vladimir attempts to shake a realization from Estragon that things have changed since yesterday, but again Estragon cannot remember yesterday.

VLADIMIR: The tree, look at the tree.

Estragon looks at the tree.

ESTRAGON: Was it not there yesterday?

VLADIMIR: Yes, of course, it was there. Do you not remember? We nearly hanged ourselves from it. But you wouldn't. Do you not remember?

ESTRAGON: You dreamt it.

VLADIMIR: Is it possible that you've forgotten already?

ESTRAGON: That's the way I am. Either I forget immediately or I never forget.

VLADIMIR: And Pozzo and Lucky, have you forgotten them too?

ESTRAGON: Pozzo and Lucky?

VLADIMIR: He's forgotten everything! (60-61)

Here, as Olney notes, the characters deny the absolute statement of "I remember." Didi attempts to coax Gogo into such a statement, but Gogo hesitates. Eventually, Gogo will state that he remembers being "kicked in the shins" by "a lunatic who played the fool" (Godot 61) but establishing when and where the occurrence took place results in futility. So, we have left an occurrence without specific relation to time or space, thereby its causality or origin cannot be established. Such moves do not allow for the creation or even the simulation of a real; they underline its absence. Beckett's characters have no past, which denies them an identifiable time and space. In Act I, Vladimir and Estragon have difficulty determining which day they are and which day they are to wait for Mr. Godot.

ESTRAGON: In my opinion we were here.

VLADIMIR: (*looking round*). You recognize the place?

ESTRAGON: I didn't say that.

VLADIMIR: Well?

ESTRAGON: That makes no difference.

VLADIMIR: All the same ... that tree ... (*turning towards the auditorium*) ...that bog.

ESTRAGON: You're sure it was this evening?

VLADIMIR: What?

ESTRAGON: That we were to wait.

VLADIMIR: He said Saturday. (*Pause.*) I think.

ESTRAGON: You think.

VLADIMIR: I must have made a note of it.

He fumbles in his pockets, bursting with miscellaneous rubbish.

ESTRAGON: (*very insidious*). But what Saturday? And is it Saturday? Is it not rather Sunday? (*Pause.*) Or Monday? (*Pause.*) Or Friday?

VLADIMIR: (*looking wildly about him, as though the date was inscribed in the landscape*). It's not possible!

ESTRAGON: Or Thursday?

VLADIMIR: What'll we do?

ESTRAGON: If he came yesterday and we weren't here you may be sure he won't come again today.

VLADIMIR: But you say we were here yesterday.

ESTRAGON: I may be mistaken. (*Pause.*) Let's stop talking for a minute, do you mind?⁷

The problem of the past is extended in this passage, and its importance for creating a context for present understanding is highlighted. If the characters cannot remember the past, they cannot either establish the present. The unfathomable past has crept into the present, displacing certainty of time and space. Hence, we arrive at the significance of the play's nonspecific setting: "A country road. A tree. Evening."

3.2 Beckett's Character's 'Framed Memories'

The memories of Vladimir and Estragon are questioned, in the dialogue, with no clear answer as to which version is true. Indeed, everything about the time frame shifts in *Waiting for Godot*, including the understanding of what happened "yesterday." Because Vladimir can preserve fragments of his past despite his sporadic memory, we can assume that he did meet with Godot at some point and that their agreements were mere: "[n]othing very definite," suggesting that his haziness of Godot is due to the fact that he has

forgotten most of the details of their encounter (WFG 49). Memory, of course, provides the foundation for identity because it allows us to record past experiences which have led to our current sense of self. Vladimir's internal memory device, on the other hand, is defective since he, the doubting being, has rejected the uncritical acceptance of his memories' perceptions. In his play, Samuel Beckett gave the fault line between interior and basic exterior reality, a physical manifestation that denies the audience the opportunity to match the "outside world" assumptions about the lives of those on stage.

4. CONCLUSION

Waiting for Godot seems to occur outside time and space and signals the lack of temporality the characters experience, as they are unable to understand themselves via cause and effect—via past and present.

The methods that were once used to secure oneself a firm foothold in time are no longer effective. Memory, the most essential of these instruments, has lost its ability to offer a stable point from which even the present moment could be accurately identified. The existence of Gogo and Didi is such that there is no secure temporal orientation for them. They don't have a trustworthy memory, and they

don't have any other tools that could help them find their way.

Moreover, the self is multifaceted because there are transitions between states of existence. This puts the self's ability to control itself in jeopardy, and it also means that Beckett's characters' desires cannot be fulfilled because they change at different stages. Involuntary memory can often restore an older self that can no longer exist. Then the awareness of the non-repeatability of personality becomes painful, as evidenced by Vladimir and Estragon's memories of a period when they were respectable. Although memory-driven repeated synthesis combines past and present, it also stimulates difference, preventing the creation of a full being. The self, on the other hand, is stabilized by repetition as a habit, which shields it from formlessness and helps it to keep control over itself and the world.

The pursuit of the self outside time becomes an endless, hopeless task because time will not stop. Although Beckett's characters face eventually failure in achieving their real selves, they impressively manifest the "existence of the individual as well as the absurdity of human condition"⁸. They get close to the self; to that infinite reality, that inner life, but can never attain it. Beckett's characters spend

their time talking, dancing, singing, a kind of routine to forget that they are waiting for Godot who may never come, and this has become a habit that Beckett describes as 'the countless treaties concluded between the countless subjects that constitute the individual and their countless correlative objects' (Beckett,1999, p. 19).

5.References:

1. See Frederick J. Hoffman, 'The Elusive Ego: Beckett's M's', in Samuel Beckett: The Language of The Self (New York: Dutton, 1962).
2. This conception of the "language of the self" is present in Hoffman's aforementioned study, but it is also the theme of Jacques Lacan's research. See, in particular, Anthony Wilden, The Language of the Self (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1968).
3. Marcel Proust, La Prisonnière. (Paris : Gallimard-Folio,1954), p. 80.
4. Ibid., p. 227.
5. Marcel Proust, Le Temps Retrouvé (Paris : Gallimard- Folio, 1954), p. 262.
6. The insecurity is not diminished by the fact that the author, at the beginning of the second act, gives this stage direction: "Next Day. Same Time. Same Place". It is only the reader who gets to know that, not the spectators, let alone the

characters. In the world in which the characters have to live, there is no certainty about time or space. For the role of time and the paradoxical structure of Gogo's and Didi's world see B.O. States, The Shape of Paradox, Berkeley CA, 1978.

7. Samuel Beckett, Waiting for Godot, London (Faber and Faber) 1956, 14 f. Page numbers henceforth given in parentheses refer to this edition.

8. Nichole, Ehlers (2007): "The Failed Search for Self-Identity in Krapp's LastTape",p.5, www.jmu.edu/writeon/docs/2008/Ehlers.pdf, retrieved in May 2010

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