

The Quest for the Altered Self in Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*

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Abstract:

The Twentieth century has been the age of the outbreak of two world wars that caused spiritual disillusionment. These two world wars caused profound destruction and loss of ultimate human certainties and definitively created a world without unifying principles, a world without meaning, disconnected from human life. This hastened the advent of nihilism and accentuated the widespread feeling of futility where the self is transformed into a meaningless abstraction. These obsessions have been demonstrated in the works of 20th-century writer Samuel Beckett in his dramatic art ranging existentialism, psychology and absurd which were applied in the description of a dominant trend in the twentieth-century theoretical barrel . This article is an attempt to explore the self in Beckett's *Waiting For Godot* and affirm a continuous self-identity. It aims to show Beckett's perspective on underlying human relationships and how it reflects the characteristics of the subject/object dichotomy to analyse this self throughout time and space.

Keywords: Self – Time/Space- subject/object – Absurdism – Beckett

I- Introduction

The twentieth century has been the age of the outbreak of two world wars that caused spiritual disillusionment. These two world wars caused profound destruction and loss of ultimate human certainties and definitively created a world without unifying principles, a world without meaning, disconnected from human life. This hastened the advent of nihilism and accentuated the widespread feeling of futility where the self is transformed into a meaningless abstraction. These obsessions have been demonstrated in the works of 20th-century writer Samuel Beckett in his dramatic art ranging existentialism, psychology and absurd which were applied in the description of a dominant trend in the twentieth-century theoretical barrel .

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In the past when faith rode high, the self functioned as a controlling center, a power within the organism that sifted and structured the streaming mass of sensory impressions from the external world. This self is like a phantom that dissolves when it is caught in the focused light of consciousness. Many writers have explored this complex problem of the self, and have independently come to the conclusion that the self itself does not exist; it is a psychological ghost, no more than that, a metaphysical spook.

To Beckett, the self is so vague that it cannot be defined and one of his solutions to approach it, to quote Ross, is that “the self must be attained in a nondimensional place, outside time and space, which is by definition unattainable within that world”. (1963, pp.153-154) Samuel Beckett has introduced and manifested one of the abstract existential obsessions of modern man regarding his self and philosophy of existence that no one has ever been that much assertive and promising in its revelation. The main reason for the displacement and estrangement of self originates from the absurdity which has dominated man in the postmodern era which Beckett has epitomized it in his existential philosophy via his idiosyncratic Theatre of Absurd. This theatre dealt with absurdism which is a philosophical concept that refers to man's attempt to find reason in his life, which is thwarted by his humanly limited constraints. It departs from realistic characters, situations, already accepted traditions, and finally, a theatre in which time, space, and identity are ambiguous and fluid. A person becomes aware of the passing of time and begins to make plans for a better future, but it is absurd and absurd because people are caught up in time. And from there emerges an insatiable being, constantly frustrated, trapped in what he lives, albeit unconsciously, as an oppressive temporality.

Over time, humans see themselves as constructed, rhetorical beings only, rather than as deeply ontological and spiritual creatures. The truth about the self is that it is neither Inner nor Outer, neither given nor constructed, but something in between. As far as *Waiting for Godot* is concerned, then, this paper aims to show the basic operative principle underlying human relationships and how it reflects the characteristics of the subject-object dichotomy to analyse this self and its relatedness to

other over time and space in Samuel Beckett's using schematically the technique of timelessness to explore the fragmentation of the self.

II. Discussion

Through science, men have uncovered some of the secrets of the atom, but they have utterly failed in their search for a meaning or a purpose that would justify their existence on earth. An existence that is linked with one of the paradoxical concepts "Time-space" which is for their part considered as the realm of interiority as well as exteriority including the subject and the object.

The breakdown of the medieval worldview initiated a radical change in the Western concept and experience of self. The question: "What am I?" can no longer be answered by defining man's status and destiny within "the primordial community of being."¹ Man's nature has not changed. What has changed in Western consciousness is the felt relationship between self and world. The self as subject faces any non-self as an object of investigation and action; it experiences itself as the Wholly Other, to use Rudolf Otto's term in a different context. Since self can no longer define itself through its relations to what now has become "outside," it must seek the answer in a world without time and space. It took a twentieth-century playwright, Samuel Beckett, who had spoken early of "the poisonous ingenuity of Time in the science of affliction"².

Basically, in an age of nihilism, the self is fractured, broken into warring elements, palsied with doubt and indecision, no longer sure of itself. An age that is sceptical of all absolutes can do no more than asking questions. Heidegger presents a self that is projected inevitably toward a future that culminates in death. His philosophy emphasizes the reality of death and the truth of Nothingness. Winnicott suggests on the other hand, that the individual discovers the self while playing in this potential space between herself and her

¹"God and man, world and society form a primordial community of being. The community ... is knowable only from the perspective of participating in it." Eric Voegelin:

Order and History, Vol. 1. Louisiana University Press: 1956, p. 1.

²Samuel Beckett: Proust [1931] and Three Dialogues with Georges Duthuit [1949]. London: Calder, 1965, p. 15.

environment, in the interrelation between the two (Winnicott, 1971, p.54), whereas Lichtenstein suggests that the individual discovers the self, the sense "that I am," in the functions of identity, how one processes external stimuli. The core identity itself is "a biological adaptive principle" (Lichtenstein, 1983, p.114). It is this Existentialist and philosophical motif that led Beckett to dive deeper in the human psyche to combine between the split and suffering self that emerges with compulsive intensity in his play "Waiting For Godot" in which characters try to negate themselves through complete detachment and inaction to be safe from the destructive alluring of the outside world which shatters the manifestation of the self. They try to approximate the point of zero as Robert Langbaum best summarizes in his chapter, "Beckett: Zero Identity" (Langbaum, 1977, p.120). where they return into proximity to the essence of being to start a new beginning not because "Time moves cyclically, as we see by the repetitions [in this play]; but because memory fails, the cycles cannot be perceived" (Langbaum, 1977, p.124). Beckett's characters "are symbolic only in a negative way, as they symbolize the lack of life". (Langbaum, 1977, p.127). "Identity in Beckett approaches zero, with the difference between life and death almost imperceptible" (Langbaum, 1977, p.128).

Being in time is the only reality the self may be known from, though, time measures the flow of existence from the womb to tomb, the "going back and forth" that appears to be so careless and without end. As Seaver states, in Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, "all time, past, present and future is resolved in an instantaneous present, because past, present and future are cyclical, and all the theories of acts are repeated endlessly" (Seaver, 1992, p.32). Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* throws time into relief instead of throwing it out and replacing it with repetitive monotony, creating through a relentless backdrop against which we repeat ourselves as naturally as the world turns and replacing it with a place outside time, a place of unchanging repetition, where one day becomes indistinguishable in memory from the next and how much time passes remains a mystery. Thus, repetition underlies Beckett's plays and suggests man's desire to

maintain a sense of sameness "within the flow of time" (Lichtenstein, 1983, p.30), a sense of identity.

Waiting for Godot is a play of halted being as it moves from the unsatisfied expectations of Didi and Gogo, Beckett's characters who suffer an unending temporal discontinuity and spatial separation from self and others. Samuel Beckett highlights the concept of man through revealing the problems of the modern man who is stuck in endless suffering, disappointment, and despair, and leads such a life until both time and man are used up. A man in a perpetual quest for a true self. Hence, the self for Beckett, is so blurry that it cannot be defined. Therefore, any scientific, rational and logical method will not be useful following the revelation of the nature of the self and one of Beckett's solutions to treat timelessness as one of the techniques to approach the self is to escape the flux of time by dragging past and future to the present time. And because the Proustian struggle to rescue and preserve the self from time was Beckett's cue, the self though fought steadily to avoid immersion in nonentity, to assert identity. 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.

Time, however, is the heavy medium through which the body and the mind move, and most of Beckett's characters move through it with difficulty, hence the crawling and increasing immobility. Their future is most inauspicious, their consciousness streams out in the present (tense and moment) as self-descriptive language, a discontinuous and disconcerting chronicle of being. Neither the past, fitfully held in the memory nor the future, dreadfully perceived as a "finality without end,"¹. A past that has been chosen to be forgotten and that memory tries to transform into identity where beginning, middle and end do not connect in the mind. Beckett's characters search their memories and tell their stories, but nothing on the order of a "Proustian solution" occurs only questions without answers, suffering without purpose, consciousness without identity. Causality remains a mystery because life is—a birth, a death, and a life of major and minor plays in between. The world is charged with mortality: Death succeeds in life, which succeeds in death. Act Two succeeds Act One as irrevocably

¹ Samuel Beckett, Molloy, in *Three Novels* (New York: Grove Press, 1965), p. 111

and monotonously as Gogo and Didi can predict each other's gestures and eccentricities.

Moreover, death is a continuation of life and with it of exile from the self and such is the only certainty Beckett's characters know: that of everlasting ignorance of self: the only real birth or death that concerns them is the one that resolves their eternal separation from their selves, and that if it occurs at all will be a birth and a death at the same time. "The irrelevance of death, art as an absurd penum, and a life as a long exile, these three closely interrelated ideas can be stated in two ways as the unattainability of the self or, conversely, the inescapability of existence". (Ross 1963, p.155) This is the notion of a self-conceived not dynamically, as an instrument, but spatially, as a place, outside of space and time. the question where (in space) and when (in time) am I? cannot conceive of itself "except falsely, and so the wearisome business of self-pursuit goes on beyond death with the old dualism of a non-temporal, non-spatial subject of consciousness seeking itself in terms made for the categories of time and space, that is made only for describing the object of consciousness". (Ibid) However, The two tramps are though, forever asking "What shall we do now?" or seeking diversion. While during these brief periods, Beckett's characters feel the full weight of the nothingness that surrounds their existence. When Pozzo and Lucky leave the first time, the shouting and the crying has gone once again,

Vladimir says: "That passed the time."

Estragon: It would have passed in any case.

Vladimir: Yes, but not so rapidly.

Pause.

Estragon: What do we do now?

Vladimir: I don't know.

Estragon: Let's go.

Vladimir: We can't.

Estragon: Why not?

Vladimir: We're waiting for Godot. (*Waiting for Godot*, p.31)

Waiting here is an ambiguous metaphor for the human condition—the dichotomy of the self and the world. Beckett's characters, here need each other to help pass the time and to keep their minds off their

situation which looks so unreal to them and they feel so alienated and frustrated from the world of motion or time that they need each other to prove that they exist: "We don't manage too badly, eh Didi, between the two of us?.....We always find something, eh Didi, to give us the impression that we exist".

.(*Waiting for Godot*, p.20)

While waiting, these characters talk about their lives and their appointment with Godot, a very essential character for them, who is supposed to tell them the real meaning of their lives. All these characters exist in a dramatic time-space that is indistinguishable from the time-space of performance. They do not rely on history to confirm their existence as well as their subjectivity; but they can define themselves momentarily, in actions and words performed day after day and night after night. Gogo and Didi must not only "fill time" but assert and prove existence, ally themselves forcefully with other existing beings. The dangers of nonexistence forever threaten, and they are even a temptation. So, they try to involve themselves in their world of waiting. They make out of them a way of passing time. They reach out for and find a certain solace in others. "Didi and Gogo could spend this time more productively because, on the surface, they're just waiting" (Beckett, 1971, p.32). Here Beckett offers us the idea that "everyone is the other's pastime; that company facilitates endurance of pointlessness of existence or at least conceals it. As Lichtenstein notes, "Human beings can only develop identity "through a specific kind of interaction with another one from whom an affirmation of the reality of existence can be obtained" (Lichtenstein ,1983, p.11). Didi and Gogo have each other and play creatively in the potential space between themselves, using dialogue as their tool, each simultaneously juggling the need to be separated with the need to be together. They create a less drab future for themselves beyond Godot. Nothing may matter to them for long but waiting, but the waiting has a purpose for them. The waiting is, for them, ".a type of action" (Kennedy, 1989, p.31). They (Didi and Gogo) often wonder if they would be better off alone, but they cannot leave each other. Didi often suggests that it is Gogo who needs him, implying that he would be fine alone: "When I think of it . . . all these years . . . but for me . . . where would you be" (Beckett, 1971, p.7); "I missed you . . . and at the same time, I was happy" (*Waiting for Godot*, p.38) Gogo, however, is the one who most

often suggests parting while Didi won't even let him sleep, "I felt lonely" (Beckett, 1971, p.11), and is the happiest at each reunion, "Where were you? I thought you were gone forever" (Beckett, 1971, p.47). It is Gogo who seems aware that Didi needs him. When they argue about who will try to hang himself first, Gogo says, "Gogo light—bough not break—Gogo dead. Didi heavy—bough break—Didi alone" (Beckett, 1971, p.12). Thus, Didi and Gogo, regardless of how thoroughly each understands his own and the other's need, stand "back to back" against their fear of the world: "Huddled together, shoulders hunched, cringing away from the menace, they wait" (Waiting for Godot, p.15).

They embrace several times. We notice here that they are there for each other:

Estragon: You'll help me?

Vladimir: I will of course. (Waiting for Godot, p.44)

Estragon: (on one leg) I'll never walk again!

Vladimir: (tenderly) I'll carry you. (Pause) If necessary. (Waiting for Godot, p. 22)

Like Gogo and Didi, Pozzo and Lucky are free agents, aimless, not tied to anything but each other.

In both acts, most of the dialogues present unfinished and repetitive conversations: one speaks to pass the time. While waiting for the happy moment when they can see Godot, Estragon and Vladimir first try to "pass the time". The expression "time passing" returns in different ways, as a leitmotif in the mouths of characters who seek fun when they are inactive. Estragon proposes to call Pozzo by other names: "Time would pass" (Beckett, 1971, p. 117). Vladimir mainly uses this therapy. The smallest occupation, telling a story (Beckett, 1971: 14), trying on a pair of shoes (Beckett, 1971, p. 97), etc. are all ways of spending time. In these conditions, the most derisory activity carries out this vital function: Time passed. I would have come without it. Yes, but more slowly. (Beckett, 197, p. 66).

Waiting here, in a pure state, without end or outcome, pure and simple decomposition, without the possibility of death is a way to pass the time. This is the story of these tramps, cripples, and mimes who desperately plunge into this futile pattern: waiting. As Jean Jacques

Mayoux, says *Waiting for Godot* "is on one level a dialectic of suicide, for to wait is to live. Suicide thus appears as a rational decision that should have been undertaken after the very first awareness of the absurdity of life. Once caught up in the 'waiting', however, no instant of time can ever be decisive again." (Mayoux, 1959, p.142). *Waiting* is, therefore, a Rendition of man; it involves an acceptance both of death and life, suffering and boredom, then, are the two contrasted conditions of human life.

Beckett's characters do not find their identity in a coherent past or a planned-out future: they only exist as they act and in having to cope with the outside world, these characters adopt the habit, which is every bit their protector as it is their prisoner. They have become so weak losing so many faculties. The situation though is a dreadful void, an emptiness, a wearisome threat of boredom, a desperate need to "fill in the holes of time." This time, that proceeds in a straight line toward death. 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. Yet creating others within the self, as opposed to reaching outside of the self to "real" others, is in itself a form of silence, more than this, a form of death. The creation of others from within the self is a ruse, a delousing creation of response, a mockery of relationships, and ultimately of little use. Yet, the "true" Beckettian self exists outside of both space and time. But just as because Beckett's characters can never escape from the fluctuations of time which prevent them from being and perceiving a stable self, so are they condemned to change positions constantly in an earthly space from which there is no issue and in which there is no fixed point for them to occupy that would afford a complete and clear view of the constantly shifting field around them, or which would permit them to remain still long enough so that they might be the same subject from one instant to the next. The self, though, is unattainable and because it is unattainable, each time we change places to look for it, we have become other in terms of both space and time, and both the object and subject of our search have vanished. However, the self is never the same from one moment to the next and space and time never remain stable enough to permit vision, one still, paradoxically, encounters "the same, precisely" wherever one wanders in Beckett's universe: the same flux,

uncertainty, and invisibility. For only in an extratemporal, extra spatial dimension, which is not subject to the process of change, could objects remain still long enough for us to see them as they are, and not as they have been or are in the process of becoming: "La chose immobile dans le vide, voilà enfin la chose visible, l'objet pur. Je n'envoie pas d'autre."¹ Only in a state of timelessness and spacelessness (we could as subjects stop the flow of desire within us that guides our gaze from one fleeting object to another so is the Beckett's hero. But habit simultaneously conceals this temporal dynamism and permits us to believe that both we and the objects that surround us exist largely without change from one moment to the next. Time . . . gives nothing to see. It is at the very least the element of invisibility itself. Within its passing, there are boredom and desperate strategies to give it significance, or simply to "pass the time." For Beckett, time's movement, from which there is no escape, thwarts the self's desire to perceive its own identity as a changeless essence, to add up the unconnected seconds of its days to make a life it can call its own, to salvage the fragments of its existence and integrate them into a comprehensible whole.

Bergson spoke of this essential self as "ce moi réel et libre, qui est en effet étranger à l'espace. . . . [et] que nous apercevons . . . toutes les fois que, par un vigoureux effort de réflexion, nous détachons les yeux de l'ombre qui nous suit pour rentrer en nous-mêmes."²

Beckett discusses how time acts upon a desire to impede one's perception of other people and oneself. He asserts that the self, and its desires, change constantly over time and can therefore never coincide with the objects they pursue:

We are not merely wearier because of yesterday, we are other, no longer what we were before the calamity of yesterday. . . . The aspirations of yesterday were valid for yesterday's ego, not for today's. We are disappointed at the nullity of what we are

¹ Beckett, "La Peinture des van Velde" (see Intro., n. 38), p. 126.

² Henri Bergson, *Essai sur les données immédiates de la conscience* (1888; rpt. Geneva: Editions Albert Skira, 1945), p. 178.

pleased to call attainment. But what is attainment? The identification of the subject with the object of his desire. The subject has died—and perhaps many times—on the way. For subject B to be disappointed by the banality of an object chosen by subject A is as illogical as to expect one's hunger to be dissipated by the spectacle of Uncle eating his dinner. (Proust,1957,p. 3)

Within this period—this lifetime, this day, this second—the Beckett hero is beset by boredom and pain... Beckett yet uses timelessness of approaching the self because to approach the self is only possible in a world without time and movement. In this play, living with these characteristics, that is temporal and spatial, is more like a hallucination and not as solipsism because the move toward solipsism, toward silence, that Beckett's characters often attempt and at times attain is a move toward psychological death.

Vladimir: (vehemently). Let's go!

Pozzo: I hope I'm not driving you away. Wait a little longer, you'll never regret it.

Estragon: We're in a hurry.

Pozzo: What happens in that case - I'm not (relights his pipe)-in that Case (puff)-in that case (puff) ...anyhow you see whom I mean, who has your future in his hands...(pause)...at least your immediate future? (Waiting for Godot, p.20)

Pozzo, on getting rid of time and timekeeping, achieves timelessness sooner than the tramps as he is dissolved in time.

Vladimir: But yesterday evening it was all black and bare. And Now it is covered with leaves

Estragon: Leaves!

Vladimir: In a single night.

Estragon: It must be spring.

Vladimir: But in a single night. (Waiting for Godot,p.61) In *Waiting for Godot*, Beckett's characters suffer an unending temporal discontinuity and spatial separation-from self and others. Yet, on the line of quest for the self, trying to kill the time,

time has deteriorated their selves, the precious possession they are unaware. It has deteriorated their faculties. unaware. They face alarming incomprehensible predicaments.

III- Conclusion:

In a nutshell, one can come up with the idea that Beckett's characters are always waiting for the future "their ruinous consolations being that there is always tomorrow; they never realize that today is today. In this, says Mr. Beckett, they are like humans, which dawdles and drivels away its life"¹.

Beckett has made his characters in a way that if we comment on them, we comment on ourselves. He has made them play in such a way as to show that ordinary people are doing the same things, obsessed by the misery of life - that brief moment - that flash of light between the tomb and the womb. The pursuit of the self outside time becomes an endless, hopeless task because time will not stop. Although his 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"². 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).

Beckett's *Waiting For Godot* is just a play about a dying species which provides roles for actors to exercise a diapason of skills, and we can recognize ourselves through their skills. Finally, the significance of Beckett's play lies in the precision of its wide human embrace. In Vladimir's sentence: "But at this place, at this moment, all mankind is us, whether we like it or not."³

¹ Hobson, Harold, Sunday Times, 1955, p.11.

² Nichole, Ehlers(2007): "The Failed Search for Self-Identity in Krapp's Last Tape", p.5, www.jmu.edu/writeon/docs/2008/Ehlers.pdf, retrieved in May 2010

³Cohn, Just Play, p.14

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