

Traffic of our stage: Why *Waiting for Godot*?

The Massachusetts Review; Amherst; Autumn 1999; Normand Berlin

At the end of this year, 1999, which means at the end of this century, Samuel Beckett will have been dead ten years. If Clov, of Beckett's *Endgame*, were writing this essay he would say the century is "finished, it's finished, nearly finished, it must be nearly finished." This seemed the right time to be in Paris to visit the gravesite of the dramatist whose *Waiting for Godot* was recently voted the most significant English language play of the 20th century in a British Royal National Theatre poll of 800 playwrights, actors, directors and journalists. And it seems the right time to ask why *Waiting for Godot*?

The Irishman Beckett died on December 22, 1989 in Paris, where he lived most of his life. The *New York Times* didn't report the death until December 27 with the front-page headline, "Samuel Beckett Is Dead at 83; His 'Godot' Changed Theater." Beckett's family kept his illness and death secret, and the funeral was private. Avoiding a large public funeral-and it would have been very large because of Beckett's importance and his many personal friends-was "what he would have wanted," according to a spokesperson. True. A very private man who avoided fanfare and distrusted popularity, Beckett would have approved the quiet burial at Cimetiere Montparnasse. James Knowlson, in his exceptional biography of Beckett, reports that for weeks after the funeral, hundreds came to the gravesite with flowers and messages in many languages. When I visited the gravesite on a cloudy Paris afternoon no one was there, and the one flower in a small planter in front of the site was wilted and drooping, which seemed appropriate. So too did the simplicity of his rectangular slab, flat on the ground (and easily missed, which I did at first), inscribed only with the names and dates-his wife "Suzanne Beckett, nee Dechevaux Dumesnil, 1900-1989," then a space, then "Samuel Beckett, 1906-1989." Minimal, modest, surrounded by higher, more massive monuments with many words to the stones. The cemetery itself was criss-crossed by many concrete roads, and was too crowded with tombs for grass to grow. A cold place, hardly allowing for sentiment, and that seemed right too for the writer who stared unblinkingly at man's condition and never mixed sentimentality with his compassion. I felt no emotion at the gravesite, perhaps because Beckett, in his thoughts (as reflected in personal statements and in his work), was always cemetery-bound, waiting for the rest that is silence. What came to my mind were the haunting, ambiguous last words of Beckett's last prose work, *Stirrings Still*: "Oh all to end." These words could suggest regret that it will all be over; the words could suggest hope that it will be over soon. I think the latter. For Beckett the waiting stopped ten years ago, but his *Godot* tramps are on some stage, somewhere in the world, even at this moment, waiting. And they will continue to wait as long as we go to that special place called theater.

The play that gave Beckett world-wide fame was written in French (and later translated into English by him) as a kind of diversion or relaxation from his struggle with the prose of his novel trilogy-*Molloy*, *Malone Dies*, *The Unnamable*. Written within four months, *Godot* came to him easily, but it wasn't easy to convince producers to stage it. His friend and future wife Suzanne tirelessly went to possible producers, dropping off the script wherever she could, until finally Roger Blin, an actor and director who was unafraid of unconventional scripts (and whose theater was usually empty, which meant, from Beckett's point of view, he must be doing something right), decided to stage *Godot*. It opened, after many obstacles, on January 5, 1953 in the Theatre

Babylone, Paris. From that day on, Samuel Beckett lost his anonymity and was "damned to fame," the apt title of Knowlson's authorized biography. From that day, controversy surrounded the play, many playgoers and reviewers puzzled and bored and dismissive, some enthusiastic and exhilarated. The controversy sparked high interest in Paris, the kind of interest it would generate whenever and wherever it opened.

Interest and puzzlement. After all, how in the 1950's-the time of Osborne's kitchen-sink *Look Back in Anger* and O'Neill's realistic masterpiece, *Long Day's Journey Into Night*-should audiences have reacted to this strange play whose main "action" is waiting? Drama, as we traditionally know it, tells a story, usually of conflict, that is the basis for the play's action and revelation of character. The dramatist who wrote *Godot* boldly rejected that idea, making inaction his focus, telling us, in the first words of the play, "Nothing to be done." No plot, rather a somewhat static situation, with Beckett cleverly making his audience wait for something to happen in the play, as it conventionally does, even as his two tramps wait for something to happen in their lives. He gives us "A country road. A tree. Evening." On his naked stage we see two tramps named Estragon (Gogo) and Vladimir (Didi) who talk about things in general - usually trivial things but sometimes uttering words that touch deeper matters, that express anguish and hope-as they wait for the arrival of an unknown person named Godot. While they wait two other characters arrive-the imperious Pozzo, who cracks a whip, and his burdened servant Lucky, who has a rope tied around his neck. More talk, including a very long speech by the otherwise silent Lucky, and then Pozzo and Lucky leave. Just before the end of Act I a Boy arrives to tell Didi and Gogo that Godot will not be coming that night "but surely tomorrow." The two tramps decide to leave-"Yes, let's go." But "They do not move. Curtain." In Act II the inaction is repeated, the waiting and talk continue, Pozzo and Lucky arrive again, this time Pozzo blind and Lucky dumb, they leave, the Boy arrives to give the same message, and Didi and Gogo again decide to leave, but "They do not move. Curtain."

Like Peggy Lee, we could ask, if not sing, "Is that all there is?" Presenting the plot-no, the situation-in this way gives no indication of the play's richness, its originality, its fun and anguish, the haunting quality of its stage images, its potential as a philosophical puzzle, with "Who is Godot?" the most prodding question in a play filled with questions. When asked that question by Alan Schneider, the director he most admired, Beckett replied, "If I knew, I would have said so in the play." And Beckett's most refreshing, and disarming, rejoinder to all speculations about the play's meaning or symbolism was, "Why people have to complicate a thing so simple I can't make out."

That "thing so simple" had an immediate and long-lasting effect on me. Perhaps I can suggest why by briefly recalling what I experienced, what happened to me personally, when I went to see the play in the Golden Theater on Broadway back in 1956, when I had no idea who Samuel Beckett was and only knew that the play I was about to see was controversial. Before coming to Broadway *Godot* had opened in Miami, of all places, and was advertised-because Bert Lahr and Tom Ewell were the stars-- as "the laugh sensation of two continents." Almost half the firstnight audience walked out. Then it opened on Broadway, with Herbert Berghoff replacing Alan Schneider as director, and with E.G. Marshall replacing Tom Ewell. This time the advertisements read, "Wanted-70,000 Playgoing Intellectuals." It closed after only 59 performances, one of which I attended. I've seen many productions of *Godot* since then, some

excellent, but none filled me with such pleasure and wonder, the special pleasure of hearing a new voice.

When the final curtain descended on the two tramps, frozen on stage, I too remained frozen for a few seconds before I joined the audience in applause for the actors-Bert Lahr as Gogo, E. G. Marshall as Didi, Kurt Kaszner as Pozzo, and Alvin Epstein as Lucky. I was exhilarated by the sheer purity of the presentation. Beckett was eliciting a surprisingly deep and complex response from the often crazy juxtaposition of word, gesture, and silence. Everything happening on stage was clear and mysterious at the same time, and specific stage images have remained with me through the years. Here are some of these images: The curtain rising to Lahr's struggle to take off his boot, an effort so exhausting and exasperating that his first words seemed to take in more than a man's confrontation with an inanimate thing: "Nothing to be done." Marshall's first appearance on stage, walking stiffly with legs wide apart, clearly indicating that the "it" that hurts-when he later says, "He wants to know if it hurts." -is between his legs. Lahr, throughout the play, gazing in every direction, including in front at the audience, screening his eyes, Buster Keaton-fashion. Much ado about hats, not only Lahr and Marshall exchanging hats in a juggling routine -unquestionably suggested to Beckett by the Marx Brothers in *Duck Soup*-and Marshall looking inside and tapping his hat periodically, but also the hat that must be removed from Lucky's head so that his seemingly endless, and certainly disturbing, speech would stop. The speech itself, not the content but Alvin Epstein's frenetic delivery of the lines, a tour de force making palpable the exhaustion of thought. Much movement on stage -the pacing of Gogo and Didi, their going around in circles, the slow walk across the stage of Pozzo and Lucky, connected by a comically long rope in Act I which becomes a short rope in Act II, when the blind Pozzo's dependence on Lucky is greater. Lucky's quick and stiff dance, and Gogo's clumsy imitation of it. Gogo eating a carrot with such eagerness and sucking its end so suggestively that his words, "I'll never forget this carrot," seemed no exaggeration. Didi tenderly covering with his coat a sleeping Gogo in fetal position. Gogo's boots, left on center stage during the intermission, splayed Chaplin-style, staring at the audience as if it had a life of its own. The four or five leaves on the previously bare tree when the Act II curtain went up, causing a stir in the audience. Lahr's finger in the air whenever he said "Ah!" when he was reminded that they were waiting for Godot. Gogo's trousers which fall about his ankles when he removes the cord to hang himself. The frozen positions and glaring stares of Didi and Gogo as each act ended and the curtain descended.

These concrete stage images, these first impressions that became lasting impressions, perhaps suggest why *Godot* had such a direct subjective appeal. So much depended on the play's physical reality-those gestures, those props (hats and boots and trousers and carrots and rope), that tree, the stage's emptiness. So much depended on the here-and-now quality of the stage business, much of it comic business-with inevitable echoes from vaudeville and the movies-even though the total effect touched the tragic. Nothing seemed to come between me and the stage, although Beckett never allowed me to forget that this was a stage experience, artificial, stylized. The theatrical and the authentic, the representational and the presentational, uncannily came together in that performance of 1956. Something new was happening in the theater, no question. And the play, theatrically original, presented a stage so bare, actors so exposed, a situation so clear and simple, that the audience, unaccustomed to such minimalist art in drama, was prodded-prodded itself?to make something of "nothing." " *Godot* avoids the theater's usual visual and verbal

luxuriance. The dialogue often comes in fragments, the stychomythia of two clowns, non-sequiturs, mechanical repetitions, allusions not elaborated, ideas not pursued, small talk jostling with big thoughts. Godot makes silence as important as dialogue-not only the kind of silence that comes to all of us in everyday life, or the silence of characters in their anguish, but a peculiarly Beckettian silence, the presence of an absence that is palpable, touching the heart of existence, as if in the beginning was the Silence, then came the Word, then the Silence again. Godot erases the most important ingredient of realistic theater, character recognition. Who are these tramps? of what nationality? did they ever work? go to school? do they have families? why are they meeting here? (Where is here?) Etc. Possessing no history, connected to no naturalistic background, they seem to slip into the universal or archetypal. They are just there, on stage, in the same way that Gogo's boots are there, on stage, during the intermission. Those boots also have no known history. They don't fit Gogo, but then again, perhaps they do. Are they Gogo's boots or someone else's? (Chaplin's?) Lee Strasberg, the notorious teacher of American Method acting, told his students, "There are times when you pick up your shoes and see through them your whole life." Gogo's shoes suggest no life story-for Gogo.

Like a sculptor who chips away at the superfluous stone that hides his figure, so Beckett chips away at almost everything we thought was important to theater in order to reveal his own distinctive figure. What emerges seems narrow, as though he chipped away too much, but is, in fact, remarkably expansive. It is interesting to note that Giacometti, who knew Beckett personally, designed the tree for a 1961 Paris production of Godot. Giacometti once said that he was sculpting not the human figure but "the shadow that is cast." Beckett's play draws us to contemplate the shadow, to think about what is not there even as we see so clearly what is there, on stage. Beckett said he was surprised that people complicated "a thing so simple" but his presentation does tease us into searching for meanings and asking questions. Godot, like Hamlet before it, is a play in the interrogative mood. Questions make up one quarter of the play, half of which remain unanswered, and among these are questions of seemingly high importance, touching identity ("So there you are again." "Am I?"), birth and death, God. The debate about the play's meaning started from the first Paris production and it will continue. The questions will be answered partially, incompletely, tentatively, because Beckett himself undermines whatever positive answers we think we've arrived at. He gives us statements, then counterstatement ("Don't touch me. Stay with me."), assertions, then denials ("I don't know. A willow.").

He is always dealing with balances. Beckett was particularly fond of St. Augustine's much-quoted statement: "Do not despair, one of the thieves was saved; do not presume, one of the thieves was damned." For Vladimir this fifty-fifty chance of salvation is "a reasonable percentage." Balance informs the play's dialogue. "That's the idea. Let's contradict each other." Balance informs the play's two-act structure, with each act just stopping, Didi and Gogo frozen in position. (A third act usually resolves something.) Balance informs the presentation of characters: Vladimir closer to mind (head or hat) and Estragon closer to body (feet or boot), Pozzo¹ the master and Lucky the slave, two boy messengers (or are they the same boy?), two thieves on the cross. Balance informs the mode of presentation, the melding of artifice and realism, comedy and tragedy. This strategy of balances pushes the audience into an atmosphere of uncertainty. His favorite word, Beckett once said, is "Perhaps."

A world of "perhaps" is particularly unsettling to some directors and actors. So painstakingly careful is Beckett of his balances that stage directions must be considered part of his text. Paying faithful attention to them, it seems, takes away from the independence of those directors who wish to go their own ways. (Alan Schneider was admirably faithful to Beckett's instruction through the years, for which Beckett was warmly appreciative.) Usually, directors who wish to clarify, to explain, reduce the play's effectiveness. Those actors who must "know" the characters they play also are uneasy with Beckett. Ralph Richardson, slated to play Estragon in a British production, personally asked Beckett specific questions from a list he drew up. Beckett listened and then just said, "I can't answer any of your questions." So Richardson turned down, in his own words, "the greatest play of my lifetime." How Richardson would have played Gogo, opposite the proposed Didi of Alec Guinness, is itself an intriguing question. Even more intriguing is the pair of actors that Beckett at one time proposed-Buster Keaton as Didi and Marlon Brando as Gogo. The thought ravishes.

Beckett's juxtaposition of comedy and tragedy make the genre of *Godot* as uncertain as everything else in the play. For his English language translation Beckett himself labeled the play a "tragicomedy," which is somewhat surprising because he distrusted classification. "The danger," he wrote in an essay on Joyce, "is in the neatness of identification." He rejected criticism that neatly classifies and defines or attempts to explain the unexplainable. Still, the label "tragicomedy" does display a Beckettian balance; its oxymoronic quality is built into the word. It seems that Beckett wants to make sure that the play is not lodged in any one genre, comedy or tragedy. Beckett wants them both, together, but this has not stopped critics from emphasizing the comedy over the tragedy or vice versa. My own view tilts *Godot* closer to tragedy because I find the play's direction-even with all the comic routines, and despite all the circularities and stalemates and balances-is toward the dark, toward death. The characters are not there yet, but Pozzo and Lucky are moving "On" in that direction, and although Didi and Gogo are frozen they seem very close to the abyss. And I find that the play contains two speeches-in addition to Lucky's momentous outpouring of words that deal with "the indifference of heaven" and "the shrinking of man" and "petrification," according to Beckett's tripartite division-that seem to crystallize Beckett's attitude toward life, an attitude I would call tragic.

Here are the blind Pozzo's last words before he goes "On!" and exits the stage in Act II:

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 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 On!

For Pozzo everything is happening in an instant, the same day, the same second. A short day's journey into night.

Vladimir, approaching play's end, seems to have come to a new awareness as he echoes Pozzo's words while Gogo sleeps:

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. (He listens.) But habit is a great deadener. (He looks again at Estragon.) At me too someone is saying, He is sleeping, he knows nothing, let him sleep on. (Pause.) I can't go on. (Pause.) What have I said?

Death and birth. Gravedigger and obstetrician. Shovel and forceps. Tomb and womb. Cries of tormented man and innocent babe. Watchers and watched. Those awake and those asleep. A series of balances and antitheses, but the emphasis is on death. Didi's journey is slower than Pozzo's; the crucial word is "lingeringly." His is a long day's journey into night-so painful that he says, "I can't go on!" Then a pause. A moment's reflection. Followed by "What have I said?" For here too "habit is a great deadener" -and the waiting will continue. Of course, my claim that the play is more tragic than comic falls into the trap of "neatness of identification." Beckett would dismiss me with the word in *Godot* that becomes the ultimate insult- "Critic! "

In *Godot*, with its silences and emptiness and balances, Beckett has brilliantly caught the temper of the times. A radical uncertainty informs the 20th century, a sense that we have lost our moorings, that we are centerless, purposeless, godless, that we have a need for some kind of salvation even as we seem to know it will not come. Like Didi and Gogo we are waiting for Godot, whoever he is, whatever Godot represents, and there's "Nothing to be done." The condition of man is waiting, and the activity of man is to pass the time while waiting. Small wonder that *Godot*, so incomprehensible to so many when it first appeared, seemed crystal-clear to the inmates of San Quentin in a much-discussed performance of the play in 1957. They immediately identified with their fellow prisoners, Didi and Gogo, tied to their condition and filling in the time while waiting.

Godot has the pressure of our nightmarish history behind it. When a play written in our time presents unaccommodated man, naked, helpless, waiting together with someone else but still intensely alone, talking and talking to avoid feeling the palpable, perhaps hellish, silence-well, how can we not think of those killing prisons called concentration camps? The poll's 800 who found *Godot* the most significant play of our century must have been thinking not only that it "changed theater," as the Times put it, but that it hauntingly reveals the darkest shadows of our frightening age, the grossest example in our time of man's pitiful vulnerability and unexplainable cruelty. How can we not think of the uprooted and dispossessed when we watch Lucky carrying his bag and walking slowly, head down, in a desolate landscape? The loudness and corpulence of Pozzo, whip in hand, reinforces the image of a master race persecuting its helpless victims. In that context, how could ill-fitting boots, piles of boots and shoes, not remind us of Nazi extermination camps where one could do nothing but wait? Beckett, as we learn from his biography, deplored German anti-semitism, was horrified by film footage of Nazi atrocities, worked for the French underground, lost his close friend Alfred Peron, who died as a result of his treatment by the Germans in the Mauthausen concentration camp, and originally gave Estragon the name Levy.

Because the play is so stripped down, so elemental, it invites all kinds of social and political and religious interpretation, with Beckett himself placed in different schools of thought, different movements and "ism"s. The attempts to pin him down have not been successful, but the desire to do so is natural when we encounter a writer whose minimalist art reaches for bedrock reality.

"Less" forces us to look for "more," and the need to talk about Godot and about Beckett has resulted in a steady outpouring of books and articles.

The play's significance can be measured by its impact, both as influence and inspiration, on modern playwrights. Seeing the play was an enfreedoming experience for some of our finest contemporary dramatists. Beckett forced them to re-examine the rules of playwriting, to question the conventional demands of plot and character and dialogue, to experiment with time and space, to see the possibilities of mingling comedy and tragedy. Listen to Harold Pinter, who sent his own completed manuscripts to Beckett and always received Beckett's warm attention: "He was an inspiration to all writers and certainly was to me. He was a man of immense grace as a friend and as a writer. He didn't admit to any frontiers in his writing. He was fearless in his life and in his art." Pinter's plays are strikingly different from Godot in their realistic English settings, in their psychological interest, in the quality of menace; they are more social than metaphysical. Still, the Beckettian echoes are clearly heard in *The Dumb Waiter*, *The Birthday Party*, *The Caretaker*, and *The Homecoming*, especially in the dialogue and silences, and in the way they prod an audience to fill in the empty spaces of meaning. Also admiring and imitative of Beckett is Tom Stoppard who claimed that Godot "liberated something for anybody writing plays." Although he seems to use Beckett whenever he can, openly and enthusiastically, his own plays retain a distinct originality. Witness *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*, the play that allows Shakespeare's minor characters to become Stoppard's Didi and Gogo, baffled, helpless, asking unanswered questions, stuck in a Hamlet world, and going through comic routines until they pronounce themselves "dead." Stoppard's most direct homage to Beckett comes in jumpers in a delightful parody of Didi's serious death/birth speech in Godot, previously quoted: "At the graveside the undertaker doffs his top hat and impregnates the prettiest mourner. Wham, bam, thank you Sam." This is Stoppard's witty acknowledgement of the importance of Beckett to his own creative output. No question that the Englishmen Pinter and Stoppard are the sons of Sam. So too are the Americans Edward Albee—who proclaimed that "if a playwright is uninfluenced by Samüel Beckett, then he is a damn fool or irresponsible."—and David Mamet and Sam Shepard. So too is the South African Athol Fugard, who directed Godot with an all-black cast in 1962, and told his actors that "Vladimir and Estragon... were at Sharpeville or were the first in at Auschwitz. Choose your horror. They know all about it." Fugard's beautiful play, *Boesman and Lena*, is Beckettian in every respect except its "message" and its effect. And Vaclav Havel considered Beckett "the decisive influence on my writing," as did countless lesser-known contemporary playwrights who have absorbed Beckett in their own ways.

The indebtedness of contemporary playwrights to Beckett is indisputable, and I have no doubt that Beckett will be the abiding influence on dramatists in the 21st century, confronted if not imitated. Equally influential is Beckett's presence in the appreciation and performance of drama that came before him. He has become the touchstone for a re-examination of the western dramatic tradition. There's a neat paradox here. Beckett, the modern or post-modern or contemporary (the terms become fuzzier with time) dramatist of endings, of final thoughts, is bringing us back to beginnings, embers forcing us to think of the fire that produced them. Take Shakespeare as an obvious example. The most notorious production of *King Lear* in the 20th century was directed by Peter Brook for the stage in 1962 and for the movies in 1971. He was influenced, as he acknowledged, by Jan Kott's celebrated book, *Shakespeare Our Contemporary*, which brought together Shakespeare and Beckett, allowing *King Lear* to come to life "as a highly

contemporary statement of the human condition," in the words of Martin Esslin, whose own seminal book, *The Theatre of the Absurd*, placed Beckett in the absurdist school. To give us his Beckettian vision, Brook at times rather heavy-handedly imposed Beckett on Shakespeare, omitting crucial scenes and words in order to present a bleaker view of Shakespeare's already bleak view of the world, as if we in our time have already reached "the promised end." At other times, however, he beautifully exploited the Beckettian possibilities that the comprehensive Shakespeare provides. I'm thinking, for example, of the blind Gloucester, eyes bleeding, sitting cross-legged, alone on a bare stage, unblinkingly staring ahead at the audience while the sounds of war are heard offstage. Here the audience, myself included, felt the horror of man's vulnerable position, of man's ability to go on in darkness and uncertainty even when going "On!" means to sit and wait. At that moment I saw the bewildered Gogo and the stoical Didi; at that moment Beckett and Brook allowed me to see Shakespeare more clearly. Beckett, and the world we live in, have helped to make *King Lear* the play for our time. We feel more strongly what was there in *King Lear* precisely because Beckett casts his considerable shadow on the play. Shakespeare gives us an old man, powerless, lonely, an outcast in a bare landscape, filled with anguish and questions, journeying toward death. He gives us another old man, Gloucester, blind, dependent, suicidal. He gives us a young man, Edgar, disguised as a Tom o' Bedlam, naked, exposed, searching for a hovel to sleep in. (Vladimir says "admiringly" to Estragon, who luckily found a place to sleep last night, "A ditch?") It wouldn't surprise us if *King Lear* and the Fool-wandering on that barren heath, a landscape of life at the edge met Didi and Gogo, and perhaps they do, in the persons of Pozzo and Lucky.

Staying with Shakespeare, it seems impossible, now that we have *Godot* behind us, not to feel Beckett's presence in that graveyard in *Hamlet*, with the clown/gravedigger singing while he digs up skulls. In a scene mingling death and comedy, when *Hamlet* is taken aback by a singing gravedigger who seems to have "no feeling for his business," how can we avoid Beckett's observation: "Habit is a great deadener." More important, Beckett's ghost hovers over *Hamlet*'s last moments of life. Seeing that his friend, stabbed by the poisonous sword, is approaching death, Horatio, more antique Roman than Dane, reaches for the poisoned cup in order to commit suicide. *Hamlet*, in a final burst of activity, grabs the cup away from Horatio and utters the by-now familiar words, "Absent thee from felicity awhile, / And in this harsh world draw thy breath in pain to tell my story." A memorable, and interesting, stage moment. Notice that *Hamlet* is not telling his best friend, his only friend, not to commit suicide. He's saying, don't do it now because I need my story to be told. That the told story, that reputation, is important to the prince called *Hamlet* is an unequivocally Shakespearean idea. That death is "felicity," that the "rest" that is death will be "silence," well, that's both Shakespearean and Beckettian. One can almost hear Beckett playing with that word "felicity." How trippingly on the tongue the phrase "Absent thee from felicity awhile" proceeds as contrasted to those heavy monosyllables that describe our daily lives, "in this harsh world draw thy breath in pain." Think of the exchange in the beginning of *Godot* when Gogo, referring to Didi's difficulty in urinating, tells Didi, "You always wait till the last moment." Didi replies "(musingly) The last moment." Beckett's stage direction, "musingly," gives us the tone of the phrase. "The last moment" is what one wishes for in Beckett, the last moment when we can be sure the willow leaves are dead so that there's "no more weeping," the voices are dead so that there's no more talking about it. The last moment is the desired conclusion, the welcome night after a lingering day. It's a moment that puts its Beckettian pressure, I believe, on *Hamlet*'s "felicity." The prince who fondled the skull of death, whose

whole stage life is filled with death of all kinds, now, at the end, could have said with Didi, musingly "the last moment."

These examples of Beckettian influence on how we experience Shakespeare, the greatest dramatist of any century, can be multiplied. The spare Beckett forces himself into the comprehensive Shakespeare, and Shakespeare's plays are richer and more immediate because he does so. Beckett's *Godot* can be felt even if we go further back in the western dramatic tradition than the Renaissance, as far back as we can go, to Aeschylus's *Prometheus Bound*. I do not pretend to understand Aeschylus's difficult play but I find it is more accessible and immediate because of Beckett. *Prometheus Bound* is perhaps the purest dramatization of the tragic condition. At the end of the road at the end of the world, where Prometheus is nailed to the rock-having himself reached rock-bottom even though he is on a mountain top we have the clearest view of what happened on that road. Alone, tied to his condition, puzzled by the arbitrariness of a god, filled with blind hope, suffering from physical punishment and the mockery of the gods, Prometheus, despite his god-like activity and height, seems very close to Beckett's tramps. He, like Didi and Gogo, would like to die but cannot; not dying means that he has no relief from the pain of living. He, like Didi, could have said musingly, "The last moment." Prometheus, like Beckett's characters, is filled with desperate hope, waiting for something to take its course. Uncannily, because Beckett is with us, when we contemplate Prometheus we see both Aeschylus's towering figure and Beckett's lowly tramps. *Godot* deepens our response to the ancient tragedy and opens it up to further interpretation.

Coming closer to our time, I have no doubt that the revival of Eugene O'Neill's reputation in 1956 with the production of *The Iceman Cometh*-a play he wrote in 1939, a decade before Beckett wrote *Godot*-was dependent on the arrival of *Waiting for Godot* in New York City in 1956. O'Neill's 1946 production of *Iceman*, eagerly awaited because O'Neill was absent from Broadway for twelve years, did not prove successful. But ten years later, in 1956, it was an enormous success-for a number of reasons, including the brilliant direction of Jose Quintero and the memorable acting of Jason Robards, but also because now *The Iceman Cometh* seemed absolutely contemporary with Beckett's *Godot*, which opened on Broadway one month earlier. O'Neill's play could be called "Waiting for Hickey," because in both plays the waiters are in a frozen, boundary situation, in both plays the waiters form a self-sustaining bond, in both they fill their time with repetitious talk, in both the art of the dramatists makes the waiting and the atmosphere of death reflections of the bedrock reality of human existence.

O'Neill, Shakespeare, Aeschylus-wherever we now go in our dramatic tradition Beckett is there, influencing how we think about the past even as he charts the way for the future. That *Godot* caused a revolution in the theater prodded 800 theater people to vote the play the most significant English language play of the 20th century. I believe that non-theater people would come to the same conclusion because *Godot*, once avant garde, has now become not only familiar and accessible as a play, but as a way of looking at life. The word "Godot" has entered the world's lexicon, and "waiting for Godot" has become a popular phrase to suggest the wait for anything the waiter desires or anticipates, like freedom or salvation or death or the gentleman-caller or a pay raise. The world we live in and the world of the play reflect each other. Mike Nichols, director of the controversial and immediately sold-out New York 1988 production of *Godot*, starring Robin Williams as Gogo and Steve Martin as Didi, said, "You can look at *Godot* and say

it is just another day in Manhattan." Situations are always arising in daily life that are described as "Beckettian." There is no question that *Godot* is, as Alan Schneider claimed, "no longer a play, but a condition of life." Beckett's naked play about two tramps waiting for Godot has tapped into our 20th-century public consciousness. It seems to express our deepest fears and our deepest knowledge of ourselves and our predicament.

Beckett's dark summation of the human condition, presented with compassion and humor, includes man's ability to keep his appointment, to go on, despite the hopelessness of his condition. Man is obliged to go on, just as Beckett felt obliged to continue writing even though there is "nothing to express," as he put it. After writing *Godot* Beckett continued his experimentation with theater, each new work stretching the boundaries of dramatic art. He was always ahead of his time, and we still haven't caught up with his later work, which gives more attention to movement and sound than to words, challenging an audience willing to be challenged. *Godot*, once so radical that it produced fierce reactions, is an accepted classic, taught in schools, performed by professionals and amateurs everywhere, read by millions. It almost seems conventional. A great artist changed the way we experience theater, and now we view the world differently. The play helped voters in another "poll" to award Samuel Beckett the Nobel Prize in 1969 part of the citation reading: "He has transmuted the destitution of modern man into- his- exaltation."

In the Montparnasse cemetery Beckett's modest slab, with only the essential names and dates, is situated next to a massive tall gravestone displaying a large cross and the thickly-chiselled words, "Famille E. Petit." Beckett would have smiled at this. Perhaps.