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En attendant Godot
(Waiting for Godot)[1]

Beckett did not set out to punctuate his fiction with a play. The holograph of his play shows much less revision than do manuscripts of his novels. In a cheap graph paper notebook Beckett's execrable handwriting runs across the recto pages, then doubles back to the book's beginning to continue on the verso pages. Only occasional crossouts and a relatively small quantity of doodles connote impediments to the creative flow. The general impression is of almost continuous writing, and indeed the play, begun on October 9, 1948, was completed on January 29, 1949. At no point in the manuscript is there a scenic breakdown, as in the aborted *Human Wishes*; nor do we find a cast of characters, as in *Eleutheria*. The improvisatory quality of the play seems to have emanated from Beckett's own quasi-improvisatory composition—at least initially.

The manuscript opens on the bare setting: "Route à la campagne, aver arbre" [A country road, with tree]—themselves horizontal and vertical coordinates on the graph page. There follows a scenic direction about a nameless "vieillard" trying to take off his shoe. Another "vieillard, ressemblant au premier" then enters. The first old man, attacking his shoe again, then speaks what was to become the most celebrated opening line in modern drama: "Rien a faire" [Nothing to be done]. The second old man, moving forward with comic spavined gait, expands "Rien à faire" to the human condition, however he may struggle against its

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fatalism, "songeant au combat" [musing on the struggle]. Addressing himself as Vladimir, the second old man effectively names himself, and immediately afterwards in the manuscript occurs Beckett's name for the first old man—Lévy—and so he remains throughout the first act of the manuscript. Early in act 2 Beckett suddenly changed Lévy's name to Estragon, but that name enters the dialogue only late in the manuscript, in Vladimir's soliloquy.

When Pozzo and Lucky first enter, they are designated as a large man and a small one; they are seen in comic contrast before they are named. Pozzo announces his name almost at once, but the name Lucky is first attached (by Pozzo) to the rightful recipient of the discarded chicken-bones. The broadly European flavor of the four names—Slavic Vladimir (meaning prince of peace), French Estragon (a bitter herb of Arabic origin), Italian Pozzo (meaning a well), and the ironic English Lucky—emerged during composition, as did the alternate names for the friends—Didi and M. Albert for Vladimir, Gogo, Macgrégor, and Catulle for Estragon. In Beckett's French fiction female names were variable, but *Godot* extends that indeterminacy to the two men who meet each evening to keep their appointment. Although Pozzo's name is stable, it resembles Godot sonically.

The manuscript of *En attendant Godot* differs in many small details from the version published by Les Editions de Minuit in 1951, some three months before the Paris premiere. However, formal symmetries are present from the start—especially the unparalleled repetition of the first act by the second: at twilight two friends meet by a tree to wait for Godot; a landowner and his knook dally with them and then depart. A boy messenger announces that Godot will not come tonight but surely tomorrow. Upon the boy's exit, night falls swiftly, and the moon rises. Finally one friend suggests that the couple leave, but they do not move.

Because of its very bareness, the plot is fertile ground for a variety of subjects, and the second act echoes the first in such disjunctive topics as food, the tree, bones, the sky, time, place, memory, pain or discomfort, suicide, offstage beating of Estragon, Vladimir's onstage welcome of Estragon, Vladimir's refusal to listen to Estragon's dreams, and the friends' sporadic nostalgia for the past that contrasts with their uncertainty about the future. The variety is camouflaged under the sprinkling of *encores* that underline the repetitiousness of word and deed.

Vaudeville turns erupt from the start. *Godot* opens with a hoary clown number: Estragon struggles to take off a tight shoe, and during the course of the play it is he who is familiarly funny. He begins a bawdy joke, speaks in baby talk or in a foreign accent or with full mouth; he delivers the two-lung number, dangles a phallic carrot, mimics Lucky as a beast of burden, tries to hide behind a frail tree, and finally drops his trousers. Despite Vladimir's superior sophistication, he buttons his fly, laughs painfully, spits disgustedly,

pulls miscellaneous objects from his pockets, imitates Lucky, and minces like a mannequin. Together Vladimir and Estragon juggle three hats, take gorilla postures, huddle in exaggerated fright, examine Lucky as an object, pose as scouts on the lookout, "do" the tree, tug at a rope that nearly knocks them down when it breaks. They manipulate their respective props—Vladimir his hat and Estragon his shoe—precisely and identically. Their nicknames Didi and Gogo are comically endearing, and their scenes of cross-talk establish the dominant dialogue rhythm of the play.

In contrast to the vaudeville of Vladimir and Estragon, Pozzo and Lucky are more erratically comic. Pozzo is ridiculous in his self-inflation. Although it is Estragon who mistakes him for Godot, Pozzo twice plays variations on that enigmatic name, but he invokes a genuine deity when he examines his new acquaintances: "De la même espèce que Pozzo! D'origine divine!" [Of the same species as Pozzo! Made in God's image!] A self-conscious performer in act 1, Pozzo sprays his throat ostentatiously, demands undivided attention for his recitation, alternates between lyrical and prosaic tones, and anxiously solicits the reactions of the two friends. Like comics of the vaudeville tradition, Pozzo misplaces his props—pipe, atomizer, and watch. It is when Pozzo boastfully contrasts himself with Lucky that the two remove their bowler hats, and Beckett first notes that all four men wear "chapeau melon" [bowler hats]. We scarcely need Pozzo to point out the contrast between himself and his rarely comic "knook"; yet the object of scrutiny hovers on the comic in the elusive question of why he doesn't put down his bags (and Pozzo's preposterous answer). When Pozzo offers Lucky's performance to the two friends, the knook at first confuses thinking with dancing. Lucky's "think," often performed as a farcical turn, is the bravura piece of the play. Beckett's manuscript reveals little difficulty in its composition, written in a single block on several pages, without the three-part division to which the author later called attention—indifferent deity, dwindling humanity, and stone-cold universe. (In revision, Beckett "vaguened" Lucky's "think" through increased sound play, repetition, and incoherence.) After silence is imposed upon Lucky, the act 1 comedy ebbs toward an end.

In act 2 Vladimir again seeks to fill time, and he is grateful for reinforcements in the return of Pozzo and Lucky. After their reentrance (from the opposite wing, although neither manuscript nor printed versions designates it), the four adult characters take comic pratfalls. That late in the play the characters have already established themselves as performers, physically and verbally—the friends in their duets, but Pozzo and Lucky in their center-stage recitations. Even the day itself has, according to Vladimir, come to the end of its repertoire.

Repertoire it is. Resolutely *ill* made dramatically, *En attendant Godot* seeks to conceal the depth below the farce, but the tragicomic blend has

appealed to imaginations throughout "this bitch of an earth." In one way or another, audiences have recognized themselves as waiting, whether in schools, prisons, theaters, or even country roads. So the overarching action of *En attendant Godot* was both new and familiar, or familiar in its novelty. As is the very setting of road and tree, each a metaphor for human life. The bare stage, thin plot, and crepuscular light hint at ghosts of cultural traditions, where each culture has recognized its own.

Although Beckett himself has pleaded that *En attendant Godot* seeks to avoid definition, he has larded it with biblical shards, starting with the neologism God-ot. Elsewhere we stumble on the two thieves, whose iconography on either side of Christ is echoed in act 1 when the friends support Lucky, and in act 2 when they support Pozzo.[2] That slave driver is not only made in God's image, but he answers to both Cain and Abel; as Estragon notes: "C'est toute l'humanité!" [He's all humanity]—both victimizer and victim. Passing phrases of *Godot* whisper about the wind in the reeds and the sheep versus the goats from Matthew, and the unanswered cries for help may reflect mordantly upon the parable of the good Samaritan. Vladimir sententiously assigns every man to his little cross, and Estragon avers that he has always compared himself to Christ. Beckett teases us with fragments of a faith that do not cohere (and they are more numerous in English, the Language in which Beckett was taught his Christianity).

Even more insistent than the Bible is the aura of mortality. The many versions of the question about Lucky putting down his bags may be applied to all humanity with its burdens. Linked obliquely to that burden is the shadow of death, however it is dissipated by farce. Early in the play Vladimir expands "Rien à faire" to the suicide that the two friends might have committed in style, jumping from the Eiffel Tower. When suicide shifts to hanging, its gravity is undercut by the anticipation of an erection. Even Estragon's recollection of Vladimir rescuing him from the river (Durance in French, Rhone in English) is squelched by that same Vladimir. At the end of the play the friends' halfhearted attempt at hanging breaks with the fragile cord, but it is vital that Estragon's trousers fall, to sustain the tragi*comic* flavor of suicide.

Suicide is not the only deathly presence in the play. Estragon is confused as to whether the Savior saves the good thief from hell or death. Vladimir warns his friend that, without him, Estragon would be a little heap of bones. We are thus subliminally prepared when Pozzo gnaws at bones, and Estragon gnaws at the gnawed bones. By act 2, we see no bones, but death is present in Vladimir's dog song, which stops each time he reaches the line about burial. When we later hear about bones, they imply the death of civilizations:

> VLADIMIR: Ce qui est terrible, c'est d'avoir pensé.
> ESTRAGON: Mais cela nous est-il jamais arrivé?

VLADIMIR: D'où viennent tous ces cadavres?
ESTRAGON: Ces ossements.

[VLADIMIR: What is terrible is to *have* thought.
ESTRAGON: But did that ever happen to us?
VLADIMIR: Where are all these corpses from?
ESTRAGON: These skeletons.]

A charnel house is the repository of the "more things in heaven and earth . . . than are dreamt of in your philosophy" but are hinted in *Godot*.

On that twilight scene the most frequent scenic directions are "Un temps" (pause) and "Silence," but their invasive force camouflages Beckett's impressive verbal range—colloquial, austere, formal, interrogative, plangent, vituperative, imaged, abstract. The repetitions—particularly the eight refrains of "waiting for Godot"—establish a groundwork of monotony, but from them blossom clichés, puns, synonyms, rhymes, as well as the friends' verbal games of making conversation, questioning each other, contradicting each other, abusing each other. Early in the play a single stressed word highlights language; Vladimir describes his confused feeling: "Soulagé et en même temps . . . *il cherche* . . . épouvanté. *Avec emphase*. E-pou-van-té" [Relieved and at the same time . . . *he searches for the word* . . . appalled. *With emphasis*. Appalled].[3] Soon afterward Vladimir seeks the antonym of *sauvé* for the bad thief. Much later he hesitates before declaring that he and his friend are "hommes." Although *En attendant Godot* abounds in pregnant monosyllables like these, it also displays polysyllabic comic catalogs—Pozzo's series of Lucky's dances, Lucky's list of sports, the several synonyms for Pozzo's pipe. In the friends' delicate duets about dead voices Vladimir seeks new sounds, whereas Estragon stalwartly repeats his first metaphor.

Beckett's stage musicality is now a critical cliché, so it is perhaps time to return to the human meaning of the tragicomedy. Beckett himself, in preparing the play for performance, noted the twenty-one cries for help, with fourteen ignored. The first meaningful repetition in the play is "Tu as mal? . . . Mal! Il me demande si j'ai mal!" [It hurts? . . . Hurts! He wants to know if it hurts!]. Before the end of the play, we know that it hurts, and we know that we hurt. Many other phrases have taken on extensible significance, outside of the immediate context of the play, from "Rien a faire" [Nothing to be done] to "Elle ne vaut rien" [Not worth a curse] and including "Pour jeter le doute, à toi le pompon" [Nothing is certain when you're about], "Il y a une chance sur deux. Ou presque" [There's an even chance. Or nearly], "Ce n'est pas folichon" [I've been better entertained], "Ça a fait passer le temps" [That passed the time], "On trouve toujours quelque chose . . . pour nous donner l'impression d'exister" [We always find

something . . . to give us the impression we exist], "Je ne veux plus respirer" [I'm tired breathing].

Vladimir's last soliloquy subsumes the dreamlike aspect of the friends' existence, the painful indeterminacy of their situation, their problematic interdependence, their objectification in the gaze of unknown others, and he whimpers: "Je ne peux pas continuer. (*Un temps.*) Qu'est-ce que j'ai dit?" [I can't go on! (*Pause.*) What have I said?]. Is he questioning the immediately previous sentence or the whole speech, with its rewording of Pozzo's memorable image: "A cheval sur une tombe et une naissance difficile. Du fond du trou, rêveusement, le fossoyeur applique ses fers" [Astride of a grave and a difficult birth. Down in the hole, lingeringly, the grave-digger puts on the forceps]? Malone was unable to sustain the spirit of play in his fiction, and Beckett diminishes play as the tragicomedy *En attendant Godot* ebbs to an end—this evening.

Soon after Beckett's return to postwar Paris, he was befriended by Georges Duthuit, who had bought from Eugene Jolas the title of the prewar *Transition*, but he changed the "mantic" orientation of the periodical toward art criticism. Duthuit contributed not only to Beckett's social life but also to his precarious material subsistence, commissioning many translations, which Beckett usually chose not to sign. Yet *Three Dialogues* is not a commission, but a distillation of the many art-critical conversations of the two men, Beckett told Federman and Fletcher that the dialogues "merely reflect, very freely, the many conversations we had at that time about painters and painting" (24). To Martin Esslin's query as to whether Beckett wrote down actual discussions with Duthuit, the author replied, "Up," in the humorous tone of the dialogues themselves. Nevertheless, the dialogues were printed in *Transition* as coauthored "by Samuel Beckett and Georges Duthuit," and perhaps Beckett scholars (including myself) have too easily ignored the contribution of Duthuit. I find it surprising that the dialogues have not been professionally performed (so far as I know). Written in English for publication in *Transition, Three Dialogues* shows Beckett's shaping eye (and ironic wit) at work even in art criticism.

Three Dialogues by Samuel Beckett and Georges Duthuit[4]

Three because the initialized discussants B and D focus on three painters—Pierre Tal Coat, André Masson, and Bram van Velde. The dehiscence of the subject–object relation is the thread (and the standard) of B's critique, although "object" is sometimes "occasion" and once "aliment." In the three-scene sketch the two speakers, B and D, articulate their thoughts in the superior, quasi-hermetic phrasing of Beckett's reviews of the 1930s. B opens each of the three

scenes; in the face of D's admiration of Tal Coat or Masson, B presents his view of an art of failure, which is an art beyond art. Each scene concludes with B's defeat, but not before he delivers sentences that critics would subsequently apply to Beckett's own work.

In the first dialogue B derides Tal Coat for merely playing variations upon the old traditional relation between the perceiving artist and the perceived object. It is in reaction against "the Franciscan orgies of Tal Coat" that B enunciates his credo of an art of the nonfeasible: "The expression that there is nothing to express, nothing with which to express, nothing from which to express, no power to express, no desire to express, together with the obligation to express" (*Disjecta*, 139). The Wattesque series of negatives are opposed by the (mysterious) obligation to express.

The second dialogue is more problematic to B, since D's Masson (aided by quotations from the painter) recognizes a crisis in the subject-object relationship, and yet he cannot paint the void. D appreciates what Masson *can* paint, causing B to exit, weeping.

By the third dialogue, D is impatient with B, demanding an explanation of his view of van Velde's "art of a new order," which eliminates "occasion, in every shape and form, ideal as well as material." D then cannily suggests that that very elimination, van Velde's predicament, becomes a new occasion, and he thereby forces B to correct his earlier phrase for Bram van Velde as a painter of predicament (presumably referring to his *Peintres de l'empêchement*). In provoking B to a "connected statement," D admonishes him: "Try and bear in mind that the subject under discussion is not yourself" (144), which suggests to the reader that that is indeed the subject. B's longest speech contains an old Beckett theme: "But if the occasion appears as an unstable term of relation, the artist, who is the other term, is hardly less so." The new rendition of that old theme is, however, more extreme and dogmatic than heretofore; it leads to the inevitable failure of the artist: "to be an artist is to fail, as no other dare fail, that failure is his world and the shrink from it desertion, art and craft, good housekeeping, living" (145). This often quoted espousal of artistic failure must, however, be situated in the context of the anxious relation between subject and object, without converting that relation into a new occasion for art.

Three Dialogues, like Lucky's speech, concludes without conclusion. B seems to elevate van Velde's painting above art. When D requests the second part of B's argument, he, "Remembering, warmly," admits that he is mistaken, but B has been so discursive in his argument that it is impossible to locate the mistake. What is unmistakable is the unstable aesthetic that links B's van Velde with the crisis in Beckett's own fiction, where the occasion, and even the subject, gradually dissolves into the writing process of the protagonists, Molloy, Moran, and Malone.

Notes

1. The holograph of *En attendant Godot* is contained in a single notebook, dated October 9, 1948, on the first page, and January 29, 1949, on the last. Beckett kept it in his possession (but not in his home) to the time of his death. A photocopy was made available to (selected) scholars by Les Editions de Minuit. Excerpts of *Godot* were taped for *Le Club d'Essai* on February 6, 1952, and broadcast on February 17. The play was originally published by Minuit in October 1952, before the stage premiere on January 5, 1953, and during rehearsals Beckett made minor changes in his prompt copy, now at TCD. Beckett's translation into English was first published by Grove in 1954 and by Faber in 1956. There are so many editions of *Godot* that I forgo page references.

2. Beckett traced the arbitrary salvation-damnation of the thieves to a passage in Augustine, which he quoted to Harold Hobson, the English critic: "Do not despair, one of the thieves was saved. Do not presume, one of the thieves was damned." However, no one has been able to find that sentence in the works of Augustine. C. J. Ackerley convincingly argues that Beckett drew it from Robert Greene's "The Repentance of Robert Greene," which ends: "To this doth that golden sentence of S. Augustine allude, which hee speaketh of the theefe, hanging on the Crosse. *There was* (saith hee) *one theef saved and no more, therefore presume not; and there was one saved, and therefore despaire not*" (1998, 213.2).

3. The French *pou*, or louse, causes Vladimir to reexamine his hat for a foreign body. This pun is lost in English translation, but the new pun on "pall" enhances the death imagery. Much later, when they speak of being bound—*lié* in French—Vladimir does not "fait la liaison" phonetically between *pas* and *encore*; this subtle soundplay is lost in translation.

4. First published in *Transition Forty-Nine* (December 1949), under the joint authorship of Samuel Beckett and Georges Duthuit, the *Three Dialogues* are annotated confusingly in Federman and Fletcher (24). Beckett translated part of the third dialogue into French, for a Bram van Velde exhibition in 1957. The full text of that dialogue appeared in *Georges Duthuit*, 1976. *Trois Dialogues* was published by Minuit only in 1998, with the first two dialogues translated by Edith Fournier, *Masson* for the first time and *Tal Coat* reprinted from a 1996 catalog in Aix. I inadvertently (but inexcusably) dropped Duthuit's name in the reprinting of the three dialogues in *Disjecta*, to which my page numbers refer.