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THE ANTI-AESTHETICS OF  
*WAITING FOR GODOT*

*Stephen M. Halloran*

THE AWARDING OF THE NOBEL PRIZE to Samuel Beckett, underlined by the recent revival of *Waiting for Godot*, confers a certain legitimacy on his work that Beckett himself in all likelihood finds embarrassing. It is no doubt one of the supreme ironies of our relentlessly ironic century that dilettantes, critics, and graduate students now make the pilgrimage to New York to venerate Beckett's first dramatic masterpiece. Beckett would say with Artaud, "No more masterpieces!"

For, like Ionesco, who was quite serious when he called *The Bald Soprano* an "anti-play," Beckett calls into question the assumptions implicit in the development of western art. My intention is to recall just how and why he does this by examining *Waiting for Godot* against a background of traditional aesthetics.

I

In the established theatrical convention, everything that happens on stage presents itself to us as a self-contained reality. The stage becomes all the world, and we become voyeurs standing outside all the time and space that matter, watching people who show no awareness of our presence as they act out their tragic, comic, or, all too often, dull lives. When the curtain comes down, those lives are finished. The brief illusion is ended; we are free to tell ourselves that Willie Loman was a mere fiction, to chat about the artistry of the production, and to get on with the practical business of our own lives. If we say of such a play that it was not "convincing," we mean the remark as adverse criticism.

If we say of *Waiting for Godot* that it is not convincing,

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we state a self-evident fact. What little action there is seems pointless, and there is a constant effort to remind us that it is all only make-believe anyway. In act I, for example, just at a point when something like a convincing action seems to be developing, Vladimir leaves the stage to go to the lavatory, asking Estragon to "Keep my seat." (p. 23a)<sup>1</sup> For a moment, he assumes the role of a spectator at a play to remind us that we are just that. Again, in act II, after a prolonged scene of Pozzo, Lucky, Vladimir, and Estragon thrashing around on the ground, trying desperately but always unsuccessfully to get up, Estragon says "Let's pass on now to something else, do you mind? . . . Suppose we got up to begin with." The two tramps do get up with no trouble at all, and Vladimir comments, "Simple question of willpower." (p. 54) Just when we are convinced that their episode on the ground constitutes a reality in the play, a genuine problem for them to grapple with in an aesthetically analyzable way, Vladimir and Estragon demonstrate to us that it was only a game. In fact, most of the "action" proves to be a series of games—play within the Play—that the two characters use to kill time, and the sole theatrical reality we are left to be convinced of is that they are indeed waiting for someone or something called Godot. One can easily imagine a dissatisfied spectator concluding that this Godot they are waiting for is a playwirght who will give them a proper script.

What are we to make of this? Traditional aesthetics tells us that the work of art constitutes a kind of world for us to contemplate disinterestedly. Traditional drama defines for us a certain level of reality, a certain "convincingness" that we can properly expect of a play. Viewed in these terms,

<sup>1</sup> Page references to Beckett's works are to the Grove Press Evergreen paperback editions. The incident of Vladimir's going to the lavatory is interesting when juxtaposed with his previous comment on the auditorium as "that bog" (p. 10a), "bog" being British slang for a toilet. Is Vladimir symbolically urinating on the audience? The prominence of scatological imagery in the play would tend to support this view, and perhaps Beckett intended an esoteric play on the Aristotelian notion of catharsis. Vladimir achieves his catharsis at the expense of the audience.

*Waiting for Godot* gives us three hours in which to contemplate the fact that two characters waited on two successive nights for a third who never came. If this is all that is going on in the play, it would seem that disinterested contemplation can only degenerate into uninterested contemplation, and ultimately no contemplation at all—no audience.

This notion of the disinterestedness with which a work of art is to be regarded deserves further examination. So far as I know, the idea that aesthetic pleasure is wholly disinterested, that is, entirely unrelated to any appetitive faculty, was first made a central point in aesthetic theory by Kant in the *Critique of Judgment*.<sup>2</sup> This position, at the time it was enunciated, represented a sharp break with the neoclassicist theory that art should instruct and delight, and certainly poets like Pope, writing not too many years before Kant wrote the *Critique*, had something very unlike disinterested contemplation in mind for the eighteenth century audience they addressed. Kant's theory of aesthetics was symptomatic of the romantic revolt that overturned so many of the rationalist assumptions of the early eighteenth century, and his influence on artistic practice and theory has remained strong down to the present day. The low regard in which overtly didactic art is held by many critics today is no doubt traceable to Kant. The increasing interest in such things as protest music, and the fact that some critics are beginning to take this kind of creation seriously as art are clear signs that the grip of Kantian aesthetics is beginning to weaken.

Following Kant, the notion of disinterestedness was further refined into the concept of aesthetic or psychical distance. In the early part of the present century, Edward Bullough proposed that "psychical distance," by which he meant a kind of disengagement of the self from all its

<sup>2</sup> For the relevant sections, see Immanuel Kant, *Analytic of the Beautiful* (from the *Critique of Judgment*) trans. by Walter Cerf, Indianapolis: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, Inc., 1963, pp. 5-12.

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practical needs and ends, is an essential factor in aesthetic enjoyment. This implies:

interpreting even our 'subjective' affections not as modes of *our* being but rather as characteristics of the phenomenon . . . [and] . . . the cutting-out of the practical sides of things and of our practical attitude to them.<sup>3</sup>

In other words, in some psychological sense we "lose" ourselves in the contemplation of the work of art.

Some aestheticians seemed to feel that the distance to be maintained between the work and the self should be more than just psychological:

[T]his is the sin against works of art and against beauty in general: that we destroy the circle of austere separateness which it has established to preserve its peculiar nature. . . . Never attempt to make the images of great art the companions of your daily life; do not permit their mute splendor to pervade your everyday dreams. Rather, keep them apart from the dust and trivialities of daily life and linger with them only in the rare moments of elevated joy of living.<sup>4</sup>

True art exists on a plane far above the humdrum concerns of everyday life. The artist must withdraw to a kind of Platonic cave and there contemplate beauty incarnate. In certain rare moments, we may be granted the supreme grace to join him in contemplating, through the lens of his work, images of beauty.

In fairness to Kant, it should be added that this elitist view of art seems to represent a perversion of his own aesthetic theory. His minute characterization of the "pure judgment of taste" was entirely hypothetical; he meant merely to describe what an aesthetic judgment must be like in order to fulfill the claims made for it that it is at once non-cognitive and universally valid. He never meant

<sup>3</sup> Bullough, Edward, "Psychical Distance as a Factor in Art and an Aesthetic Principle," *British Journal of Psychology*, V (1912). Reprinted in Elisio Vivas and Murray Krieger (eds.), *The Problems of Aesthetics*, New York: Holt, Rinehart and Company, Inc., 1953, pp. 397-99.

<sup>4</sup> Mehlis, Georg, "The Aesthetic Problem of Distance," *Logos*, VI (1916-17). Reprinted in Susanne K. Langer (ed.), *Reflections on Art*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1961, p. 82.

to imply that every experience claiming the name aesthetic is wholly disinterested, and he seems to have suspected that a *pure* judgment of taste is an ideal that is never fully realized. Furthermore, his work was intended as phenomenological and not normative. The judgment of taste represented a viewpoint one might take toward an object—a poem, a painting, a tree—but it was by no means the only valid viewpoint for looking at an object. Kant did not mean to tell us how we ought to approach a play, but rather how we are approaching it if our aesthetic talk about it makes sense.

In a very real sense, the extensions of the Kantian view could never operate in the theater, for they said, in effect: To hell with the audience; ignore them and work out the internal rightness of the play. A painter or a poet can lock himself away in a garret, forget about the public, and concentrate only on the demands of the work in progress. A play, however, is not complete until it is performed before an audience. There are, of course, “plays” that were never intended to be performed, such as Byron’s *Manfred* and Shelley’s *Prometheus Unbound*, but we tend not to regard such works as drama. It is interesting to note, too, that “closet drama,” as the form is called, achieved prominence in the romantic period which had already produced the *Critique of Judgment*.

Yet there was a tendency in the nineteenth and early twentieth century theater to bow to the demands of the dominant aesthetic theory. The stage became a self-contained reality, standing over against the audience, concerned only with its internal symmetry and consistency. The audience sat in mute contemplation and the players showed no awareness of being watched. An invisible fourth wall was built between stage and auditorium. True, the theater of social critics like Shaw commented topically on the world beyond the stage, but in form it maintained the established aesthetic assumptions.

In the twentieth century, playwrights began theorizing

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about a new kind of theater, a theater that would tear down the fourth wall and bury the old aesthetics in the debris. Brecht asked whether we shouldn't simply abolish aesthetics and stated forthrightly, "A theater which makes no contact with the public is a nonsense."<sup>5</sup> His ideal was an "epic theater" very much in the classical tradition of art that instructs and delights, pointed toward political and social reorganization. He used projected titles to control the audience's attention and praised the highly stylized Chinese technique of acting:

Above all, the Chinese artist never acts as if there were a fourth wall besides the three surrounding him. He expresses his awareness of being watched . . . The performer's self-observation, an artful and artistic act of self-alienation, stopped the spectator from losing himself in the character completely, i.e., to the point of giving up his own identity, and lent a splendid remoteness to the events.<sup>6</sup>

It should be noted that this "splendid remoteness" is not at all the same thing as psychical distance, which implies a disengagement of the self to the point of self-loss in the contemplation of the work. The self-alienation that Brecht wanted to achieve was a very much *interested* stance, in the sense that the spectator would relate the drama unfolding before him to his practical life.

Artaud was another dramatist who wanted to overturn the old aesthetics, though with a different end in view. Brecht's epic theater was a highly intellectual one, but Artaud proposed a "theater of cruelty" that would assault the audience on a primitive, sensuous level with sight and sound. He denigrated the traditional theater for "making the stage and auditorium two closed worlds, without possible communication" and advocated a "revolving spectacle" that would physically surround the audience, with actors, lights, and sound on all sides and even crossing on ramps

<sup>5</sup> Brecht on Theater, ed. and trans. by John Willett, New York: Hill and Wang, 1964, pp. 20-22 and 7.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 91-3.

above them.<sup>7</sup> Like Brecht, Artaud was concerned with contemporary problems and felt that art should somehow deal with those problems, in defiance of accepted aesthetic norms. Unlike Brecht, he saw these problems as rooted far beneath the level of political and social structures:

If Shakespeare and his imitators have gradually insinuated the idea of art for art's sake, with art on one side and life on the other, we can rest on this feeble and lazy idea only as long as the life outside endures. But there are too many signs that everything that used to sustain our lives no longer does so, that we are all mad, desperate, and sick. And I call for us [i.e., artists] to react.

This idea of a detached art, of poetry as a charm which exists only to distract our leisure, is a decadent idea and an unmistakeable symptom of our power to castrate.<sup>8</sup>

For Brecht and Artaud, the idea of disinterested contemplation, of an art that permits the spectator to lose himself for a brief period after which he goes back to the same old world—for both these men such a conception of art was an obscenity.

## II

It is my feeling that for Beckett, too, such a conception of art is perverse and obscene. If *Waiting for Godot* succeeds in keeping our attention fixed for three hours to two people who await someone who will never come, it is not because we are disinterestedly contemplating images of beauty, but because we are passionately involved in the deepest metaphysical significance of what it is—not what it *means* but what it *is*—to be in the world. The statement I offered earlier as a summary of the play in terms of the old aesthetics—two characters waited on two successive nights for a third who never came—is thus inadequate on two counts. Vladimir and Estragon are not characters in the same

<sup>7</sup> Antonin Artaud, *The Theater and Its Double*, trans. by Mary Caroline Richards, New York: Grove Press, Inc., 1958, p. 86.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 77.

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sense that Garcin, Estelle, and Inez, the characters who awaited a diabolical Godot in Sartre's *No Exit*, are characters; and it is not true that they waited. They are still waiting. Beckett addresses the consciousness of his audience in such a way that Vladimir and Estragon come alive at an entirely different level from the one I spoke of earlier as the "convincingness" of conventional drama. For me, one of the central lines of the play is the answer given by Vladimir when Pozzo asks, "Who are you?". He replies, "We are men," and the line is punctuated by silence. (p. 53)

That silence, like so many others in the play, is eloquent. They are not mere characters who deceive us for a brief time and then receive our applause as if the act of deception were laudable. They are not symbols; they do not mean anything. They are no less than they are, and they could not possibly be more. They are men, and we come to the play to sit and look, to really see men. That is why when Vladimir comments, "This is becoming really insignificant," Estragon replies, "Not enough," and the line is again followed by silence. (p. 44) Significance would only detract attention from the impossible fact that two men are on that stage, trying desperately to exist.

So what? If the play has no meaning, if Vladimir and Estragon are nothing but ordinary men, why bother to spend money and time watching? We can see men every day. We live surrounded by them. Don't we?

Before I answer that question, let me go back for a moment to the theory of psychical distance. Bullough recognized the peculiar character of the drama as an art form, and he knew that the theater presented a special problem with regard to this theory. How is the spectator to keep his own private affections disengaged when palpable flesh-and-blood people are actually there before him? The solution to the problem is really quite simple, provided we confine ourselves to talking about traditional drama. The audience simply *does* maintain the appropriate distance. We know that characters and events of the play are fictions, and so

we see not people on the stage but characters acting out roles.<sup>9</sup>

By a horrifying case of nature imitating art, the world we live in has become precisely like this sort of theater. We have mechanized ourselves to the point where family, business, and social life are scripts. All the world's become a stage, and we are surrounded by characters acting out roles. This is the madness that Artaud spoke of, and this is why *Waiting for Godot* is theatrically valid. When our lives have been tortured into a series of well-made plays, there is simply no point to the traditional theater. We live in a traditional theater, so why waste time going to another?

We do not see "ordinary men" every day, and this is why *Waiting for Godot* is a profound reality in our world. Vladimir and Estragon differ from us in that they are not permitted to evade life. They try to invent scenarios to kill the time, but it never works because, unlike us, they are always conscious of the fact that they are playing games:

Vladimir: And yet . . . (pause) . . . how is it—this is not boring you I hope—how is it that of the four Evangelists only one speaks of a thief being saved. The four of them were there—or thereabouts—and only one speaks of a thief being saved. (Pause.) Come on, Gogo, *return the ball*, can't you, once in a way? (p. 9, italics mine)

It is this awareness that makes them men and not mere characters. Like us, they are trying to be characters, but they are less successful than we. They are even aware of our presence. In act II, Estragon hears someone coming and Vladimir tries to help him escape:

(He takes Estragon by the arm and drags him towards front. Gesture towards front.) There! Not a soul in sight! Off you go! Quick! (He pushes Estragon towards auditorium. Estra-

<sup>9</sup> Bullough, *op. cit.*, pp. 399-400. What Bullough actually says is somewhat more complicated than I have implied. He claims that distance is not produced by the knowledge that the play is a fiction, but *vice versa*. I am not really sure I know where he finds the distance being produced if not by our recognition of the play as a play and not life, but the point is not really important in the present context.

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gon recoils in horror.) You won't? (He contemplates auditorium.) Well I can understand that. (p. 47a)

Bad as their lot is, they would rather remain on stage and be men than join the lifeless automata in the audience.

Vladimir and Estragon, then, are superior to us in that they are more conscious than we are. The important point about Vladimir and Estragon's make-believe is that it is just that for them as well as for us. They are fully aware that they are making-believe, and they comment on their performances in the language of literary criticism. While Estragon is trying to find out what Pozzo's name is, Vladimir remarks, "I begin to weary of this motif." (p. 53a) And even Pozzo, who is generally less honest with himself than the two tramps, at one point asks them, "How did you find me? . . . Good? Fair? Middling? Poor? Positively bad?" (p. 25a)

By commenting critically on their own performances, Beckett's people force us, the audience, to assume the stance of the critic too. Here again, *Waiting for Godot* represents a radical break with the old aesthetics. According to the theory of psychical distance, "the expert and the professional critic make a bad audience, since their expertness and critical professionalism are *practical* activities, involving their concrete personality and constantly endangering their Distance."<sup>10</sup> Brecht, however, would approve heartily at least this one aspect of Beckett's theater. He advocated devices that would transform the audience into "a theater full of experts."<sup>11</sup> If it is valid to postulate that Beckett is trying to make a point, trying to teach us something, it is this: that we must become critics. Despite the fact that Estragon pronounces the ultimate insult when he dubs Vladimir "Crritic!" (p. 48a), the only message we can carry away from *Waiting for Godot* is that we must become critics of the absurd theater we live in. We must become conscious of the fictions that surround us, of the structures we invent to "give us the impression we exist." (p. 44a)

<sup>10</sup> Bullough, *op. cit.*, p. 401.

<sup>11</sup> Brecht on Theater, p. 44.

And yet, even though Vladimir and Estragon are more conscious than we, the ultimate consciousness evades them. There will always remain Godot. In his essay on Proust, Beckett scorned as a product of "the haze of our smug will to live" the notion of a future "in store for us, not in store in us." (p. 5) The remark is particularly illuminating in regard to *Waiting for Godot*: whatever else we might say about him, Godot clearly represents to Vladimir and Estragon a future that is in store *for* them and he thus permits them to remain unconscious of what is in store *in* them. The dissatisfied spectator I postulated at the beginning of this essay was right. This Godot the two tramps are waiting for is a metaphorical playwright who will provide them with a neatly plotted script to follow. They will not or cannot face the terrifying existential fact that they are condemned to make the future, just as they have made their past. There will be no Godot to redeem the time, and they will simply wait, night after night, improvising the present into the past. Vladimir almost achieves this ultimate, unbearable consciousness when he says "At me too someone is looking, of me too someone is saying, He is sleeping, he knows nothing, let him sleep on. (Pause) I can't go on!" (p. 58a) But at this moment the boy enters, dangling before Vladimir the hope of Godot.

But perhaps Vladimir does achieve the final awareness. In act I, he questions the boy:

Vladimir: It wasn't you came yesterday?  
Boy: No sir.  
Vladimir: This is your first time?  
Boy: Yes sir.  
Boy: (in a rush) Mr. Godot told me to tell you he won't come this evening but surely tomorrow. (p. 33a)

When the boy enters in act two, Vladimir says exactly the same words to him, but the two sentences are ended by periods instead of question marks. And then,

Vladimir: He won't come this evening.  
Boy: No sir.

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Vladimir: But he'll come tomorrow.

Boy: Yes sir.

Vladimir: Without fail.

Boy: Yes sir.

Again the apparent questions are punctuated as statements. Perhaps Vladimir is fully conscious of his situation, of his "dreadful freedom," and living out the fiction of waiting for Godot, *knowing that it is a fiction*, is simply his way of going on. Like Camus' Sisyphus, he meets his fate with scornful consciousness and thus rises to the level of tragedy.

I hope that what I have written is not an interpretation of *Waiting for Godot*, for I believe that to interpret this play would be to destroy it. Vladimir and Estragon, Pozzo and Lucky, the boy and even the mysterious Godot are precisely what they are and nothing else. If they were something else, if they "meant" something, they would be less, not more, than they are. As the French novelist Alain Robbe-Grillet has pointed out,

We suddenly realize, as we look at them, the main function of theater, which is to show what the fact of *being there* consists in. For this is what we have never seen on stage before, or not with the same clarity nor with so few concessions and so much force. A character in a play usually does no more than *play a part*, as all those about us do who are trying to shirk their own existence. But in Beckett's play, it is as if the two tramps were on stage without a part to play.<sup>12</sup>

The point of the play, then, is that for three brief hours, in our theatrical lives, we are *not* asked to suspend disbelief. Every day we suspend disbelief to get on with the stage business of life. Students pretend they are interested in what goes on in class. Teachers pretend they have some answers to make-believe questions. Salesmen pretend the product they are selling is worth buying, and the buyer pretends a new car will make him happier. Politicians pre-

<sup>12</sup> "Samuel Beckett, on 'Presence' in the Theater," in Martin Esslin (ed.), *Samuel Beckett: a Collection of Critical Essays*, Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1965, p. 113.

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tend they believe passionately in the Bill of Rights and voters pretend to believe the politicians. But in this play, for three short hours all the pretense is gone. What we suspend is not disbelief but belief. *Waiting for Godot* simply is, and we can either accept it or reject it.