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Waiting for Godot and Man's Search for Community

DAN O. VIA, JR.

SAMUEL BECKETT's *Waiting for Godot*[1] is a play about two tramps with the rather exotic names of Vladimir and Estragon. They stand beside the road near a tree, which is dead in Act One, and wait for Godot. They are not certain whether they are at the right place or that this is the right day; nor are they sure whether Godot is coming or what they asked him for or whether they have his name right. But they wait.

They agree that nothing is left to be done; all of the possibilities have been exhausted. The thought of hanging themselves occurs to them, but they decide that the tree would not bear their weight. That one of the two thieves crucified with Jesus was saved—a pretty good percentage—offers some hope, but only a fleeting one.

While the tramps are waiting, an overbearing and contemptuous nobleman named Pozzo appears, driving at the end of a rope his slave, whose name ironically is Lucky. The rope has made a terrible sore on Lucky's neck, while Lucky himself has been reduced to a robot. He is merely a function of Pozzo's commands. The master's cruelty and lack of feeling are almost incredible, but Pozzo insists that he himself has been made in the image of God.

This encounter with a truly horrifying situation is to the tramps little more than a way of passing the time. As they go back to their unhappy vigil Estragon suggests, as he has before, that they leave, but Vladimir reminds him that they are waiting for Godot. Finally, a boy arrives with a message from Godot to the effect that he is not coming today but will certainly come tomorrow. When Estragon now suggests that they leave, Vladimir agrees, but they do not go, and the curtain falls on the first act.

As Act Two opens the next day, a few leaves have appeared on the tree beside the road, but the two hobos wait in much the same mood as yesterday. When Pozzo and Lucky come back, the former is blind and the latter is dumb. The afflicted men stagger on to the stage and fall, as Pozzo continually calls for help. After much debate, Vladimir and Estragon give him a little help, but in a half-hearted way. Finally, another boy appears with a message from Godot: He will not come this evening but will be there tomorrow. The two tramps again agree to leave, but they do not go, and the play ends.

I

Because *Waiting for Godot* is a complex play, it has evoked a variety of critical responses. Charles S. McCoy has noted that much of the comment in this country has seen in the play a message of meaninglessness, despair, and ugliness.[2] McCoy himself, however, does not agree that the outlook of the play is one of nihilistic existentialism. It may rather be that the play's point of view is essentially biblical.[3] McCoy proceeds to show that the play contains many biblical allusions, manifests a kinship with the thought of certain Christian existentialists, and is informed in its structure by a verse of

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Scripture. Vladimir's "Hope deferred maketh the something sick" is an altered version of "Hope deferred makes the heart sick; but a desire fulfilled is a tree of life" (Prov. 13:12). In light of the fact that the tree comes alive in Act Two, McCoy maintains that it is really a symbol for the life-giving power of the Cross, which in Christian tradition is often referred to as a tree. And McCoy suggests that Godot does come. Just as Jesus identifies himself with his poor brothers (cf. Matt. 25:35 ff.), so here Godot appears in the very characters of the play. The point is that there is simply no awareness on the part of Vladimir and Estragon that Godot has actually come.[4]

If McCoy is right in finding a biblical theme in the play, does that conclusion make the overall import less despairing and nihilistic—or more? I will return to this question later.

Nathan Scott suggests that *Waiting for Godot* is a most affecting dramatization of the mood of our time as one of vigil, of waiting while ultimate meaning withholds itself. While we wait, like the two hobos, "we talk to one another about our lives—which is our way of reaching after what is most really real by means of inwardness." We begin to move toward the inner mystery of Being when we consent to be present and available to one another.[5]

But do Vladimir and Estragon ever really find at all what they reach for, do they really talk to *one another*—and can they do so until Godot comes?

I would like to suggest an alternative interpretation. The theme of the play appears to be the unfulfilled search for community, for I-Thou relationships in contrast to I-It relationships. Vladimir and Estragon are trying to find a way out of the void in which they live. They know about the crucifixion of Jesus and that one of the thieves was saved, and they even refer to Jesus as "Our Saviour," but all of this has no meaning for their present existence. The emptiness of their lives is summed up in Estragon's "Nothing happens, nobody comes, nobody goes, it's awful."[6] It is not really possible to tell one place from another because when one has crawled about in the mud all of his lousy life all places look alike. Every place is just one more compartment in the endless void. In similar fashion all times are indistinguishably alike. The tramps' lives are so lacking in substance and meaning that they are not even sure they exist. They are forced to concoct out of their own resources insignificant things to do—like trying on an old pair of boots—just to give themselves the impression that they do exist. How different they are from the pearl merchant in the New Testament who on finding one pearl of great value sold all that he had and bought it, or the man who in his joy sold all that he possessed in order to buy a field in which he had found a treasure (Matt. 13:44-46). The point of these parables is not that the Kingdom of God demands the sacrifice of everything but that it confronts man in history with opportunities of such splendor in themselves that the discovery of them remakes the purposes of one's life.[7] One is enlivened to action by the very greatness of the opportunity which the Kingdom presents, not demoralized by the absoluteness of its demands. And certainly the Christian does not spin opportunities out of his own emptiness, as Estragon and Vladimir attempt to do.

The two men try to talk to each other in order to relieve the misery of the awful waiting. Just to dispel the monotony they abuse one another with name calling: "Ceremonious ape! Punctilious pig! Moron! Vermin! Abortion! Morpion! Sewer-rat! Curate! Cretin!" The meaning of the whole play is in a sense summed up in a brief scene near the beginning of Act One. Because he is lonely, Vladimir has awakened Estragon. This makes the latter a little angry, but now that he is awake he wants to tell his companion about what he was dreaming. Vladimir in no uncertain terms orders him not

to tell him; whereupon Estragon asks, "Who am I to tell my private nightmares to if I can't tell them to you?" Vladimir replies: "Let them remain private. You know I can't bear that."[8] Later on when Estragon is again asleep, Vladimir with moving kindness puts his own coat across the sleeping shoulders, but when Estragon awakes from a bad dream, Vladimir once more refuses to hear it. Similarly, when after a night of separation Vladimir wants to embrace his friend, Estragon commands: "Don't touch me! Don't question me! Don't speak to me! Stay with me!"[9] The two men feel the need for true community and want it; yet they are unwilling or unable to pay the price for it. It is really too painful to be open and available to others. Genuine involvement in other people's private nightmares is too hard to bear. But in spite of the failure there is something of friendship between the two figures. They always come back together even though they do not know just why.

The unfulfilled search for community is seen further in the meeting of Vladimir and Estragon with Pozzo and Lucky. Pozzo (the "autonomous man" in Paul Tillich's terminology) has reduced Lucky (the "heteronomous man") to a robot, and as a result both of them are dehumanized. This is symbolized by Pozzo's blindness and Lucky's dumbness, which we have seen in Act Two. That they are dehumanized is rather obvious, but in a more subtle way Pozzo does the same thing to the two hobos. He tells them that he needs the society of his likes, even when the likeness is imperfect; therefore, he proposes to dally with them for a while. He then calls for his stool and lunch basket and sits down to a meal of wine and chicken, and later he thanks them for their company. But he does not eat with them or give them anything, and there is quite a discussion as to whether it is to be Estragon or Lucky who will get even the bones. The "form" of fellowship is there in the eating, but it has no real substance. How vivid a contrast this makes with the gospel picture where Jesus makes the Kingdom of God present by eating with sinners and outcasts and finally symbolizes effectively the complete giving of himself for the disciples through the very elements of a meal. Does the mention of wine in the play suggest that Pozzo's meal is a travesty of the Eucharist? He eats alone in the presence of others.

Pozzo tells Vladimir and Estragon that if *he* had an appointment with Godot, he would wait until black night before giving up. When they ask him to wait with them, however, he insists that he must be on his way if he is to observe his schedule. For he is quite conscious of time and thinks himself the master of his time. One gets the impression that the reason he does not have an appointment is that he is actually too self-centered ever to hear an invitation. He is like the men who were too busy to respond to the invitation to the feast of the Kingdom of God: one with his field, another with his oxen, and a third with his new wife (Luke 14:15-20). Pozzo is on his way to the fair to sell Lucky for a good price. Because Pozzo thinks of the present as his own *chronos* instead of as God's *kairos,* the future turns out to be no time at all for him. The future becomes a void. When in Act Two Pozzo reappears afflicted with blindness and the tramps ask him when he became blind, he rages: "The blind have no notion of time." And then after a short interval: "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? They give birth astride the grave."[10]

In all of this the fault is not exclusively Pozzo's. Although the two tramps are at least waiting together for Godot, they too treat Pozzo and Lucky as things. Despite their being scandalized by Pozzo's treatment of Lucky, the whole episode is for them simply a means of passing the time more rapidly. The theme of the want of any real

involvement is carried forward in the conversation of the two hobos following the scene with Pozzo and Lucky. When Estragon thinks it strange that the latter two did not recognize his companion and him, Vladimir tells him that it is nothing because people always pretend not to recognize each other.

The two tramps agree that the reason they converse is to avoid having to think or to hear the dead voices. The living dead talk about their lives, but they do not talk to each other. Rather they all speak at once, and each one talks to himself.[11] Vladimir and Estragon are among these dead voices because they are not willing to hear each other's private nightmares, to be touched, to recognize others, or to think of others as anything but a diversion.

Near the end the two tramps are given one more opportunity to help, to find true community. When the blind Pozzo returns to fall at their feet and beg for pity, Vladimir recognizes in a most incisive way the pressing claim of the here and now: "It is not every day that we are needed. Not indeed that we personally are needed. Others would meet the case equally well, if not better. To all mankind they were addressed, those cries for help still ringing in our ears! But at this place, at this moment of time, all mankind is us, whether we like it or not. Let us make the most of it before it is too late."[12] Vladimir and Estragon evade the challenge, however, by raising the question of what is in it for them and by debating the merits of Pozzo's claim. After all, says Vladimir, it is as human to weigh the pros and cons of a situation as it is to act. Having decided that the real purpose of their being there is to wait for Godot, Vladimir is satisfied that they have kept their appointment.[13] As further rationalization of this flight from responsibility, Vladimir accuses Pozzo of thinking only of himself. In the midst of Pozzo's misery Estragon even suggests that they amuse themselves by calling Pozzo by other names. And the reason that the two finally give Pozzo a little half-hearted help is that it provides a diversion in the midst of their boredom.

After Pozzo and Lucky finally leave, Vladimir wonders whether he was sleeping while the others were suffering. When he was on the verge of offering help, the moment was filled with rich content, but now for him, as for Pozzo, time has become empty: "Astride of a grave and a difficult birth. Down in the hole, lingeringly, the gravedigger puts on the forceps."[14] Birth and death cannot be distinguished.

II

To return to McCoy's argument, the question of whether the biblical elements make the overall import of the play more pessimistic or less pessimistic is dependent on the question of why Vladimir and Estragon do not respond to the Christ who identifies himself with his poor brothers. If their failure to respond is a matter of free decision, we have an outlook which, while it is not optimistic, is consistent with the biblical position, since the Bible does allow that man can reject grace. If they do not respond, however, because they are victimized by a meaningless, unfriendly universe, then biblical imagery has been used in connection with an outlook which is not biblical; this outlook, moreover, is more pessimistic than would be the case in a pure nihilism lacking any biblical reference. I say this on the basis of the implication here that God's final revelation in Christ has turned out to be ineffective. The universe and history have proved also to be too much for God. On the side of freedom—and hope—is the fact that the two hobos raise the possibility of salvation, consider repenting, and ask God for pity. On the side of victimization is the thought that what one may have to repent of is his own birth, that change is not possible, and that hell is normal. Because the play ends on the note of unfulfilled hope, it would seem that

it holds these two viewpoints in tension rather than resolving the dilemma one way or the other. Hope is not dead, but there is little reason to suppose that hope will be more fulfilled in the future than it has been in the past.

Accordingly, at best and in spite of the symbol of the life-giving Cross, the waiting of Vladimir and Estragon is existentially "B.C." The living tree in Act Two may indeed express hope, but any hope which the two tramps entertain is, in Christian terms,[15] hope before the Incarnation, not hope between the Incarnation and the parousia. Man before the Incarnation is estranged from other "Thous" but not so estranged as to be wholly unaware that genuine community is possible.

The Christian, living as he does between the Incarnation and the parousia, is also waiting. He waits for the return of Christ, but his waiting is different in quality from that of Vladimir and Estragon. The situation of the Christian is paradoxical. According to the teaching of Jesus, the eschatological Kingdom of God has already dawned (Matt. 12:28; 13:16-17), and thus the world has in some sense ended. Yet in another sense it has not ended, and consequently a cosmic, apocalyptic end is still expected in the immediate future (Mark 8:38-9:1). For Paul, the sending by God of his Son into history betokens the fullness of time (Gal. 4:4), and yet the Saviour is still awaited from heaven (Phil. 3:20). Hence, the Christian lives while it is still night, yet the day is so near at hand that he lives as if in the day (Rom. 13:12-13). Paul can even say that the Christian does live in the day (I Thess. 5:4-5). And in the Gospel of John the resurrection existence is a present possibility because the Christ has come (11:25-26; 5:24), but yet it awaits the last day (5:28-29; 6:39, 40, 44, 54). Therefore, *the* hour both is coming and now is (4:23; 5:25).

The notion of the apocalyptic end of history and the glorious return of the Messiah is, of course, mythological. But it is just this standing between the end of the Old Age and the beginning of the New Age, or between the Kingdom of God which has come and the Kingdom which is to come, that defines the specifically New Testament understanding of man's paradoxical existence. Christian man is confronted by God both as Judge and as forgiving Father. He is waiting for what he has already received.[16] As one who has received salvation, the Christian's situation is very different from that of Vladimir and Estragon. But as one who is still waiting for salvation, the Christian participates in the lost, void world of the two hobos.

The waiting Christian may not presumptuously suppose that salvation is an assured possession, for the future is in God's hands and not under man's control (I Cor. 4:4-5). On the basis of what he has already experienced, the waiting one hopes for the completion of his salvation (Rom. 8:24, Phil. 3:10-13), yet the future can turn out to be a time of judgment (Rom. 11:19-22).

The waiting ones must be ever ready for a future crisis, but like the men in the parable of the talents (Matt. 25:14-29) and unlike Vladimir and Estragon, they have already met the master who will return and require them to render an account of their lives. While they wait, they can be truly open to each other and they can be forgiving of one another because they have been forgiven (Luke 15:11-24; Matt. 18:23-35). It is possible to suffer for others, to bear their hurts, to listen to their private nightmares only when we can believe that someone has borne all the world's suffering (I Cor. 4:8-13; II Cor. 4:5, 7-12; Col. 1:24). In Matthew's parable of the Last Judgment (25:31-46), the naked, hungry, and imprisoned *do* make Christ (Godot?) present because Christ has come, and the resurrected Christ identifies himself with these unfortunates. The very fact that the sheep can be brought to act in love with no thought of reward shows that they have been confronted

by the Transcendent whether or not they know it.

Estragon and Vladimir wait for one whom they do not know, and, therefore, they cannot really be open and present to each other. The man of New Testament faith waits for one whom he does know, and thus there is a transcendent ground beyond man which makes true community possible. The members of the churches to whom Paul wrote can be expected to suffer and rejoice with each other because they are members of the body of Christ. The members (branches) of the church, according to John, can be expected to bear fruits of love only because they are grounded in Jesus Christ, the true vine.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

[1] Copyright © 1954 by Grove Press. Translated from the original French text by the author, published by Grove Press, Inc., New York. Quotations from the play are by permission.

[2] Charles S. McCoy, *"Waiting for Godot:* A Biblical Appraisal," *Religion in Life,* XXVIII, 4 (1959), 595-596.

[3] *Ibid.,* p. 596.

[4] *Ibid.,* pp. 597, 601-603.

[5] Nathan A. Scott, Jr., *Modern Literature and the Religious Frontier,* New York: Harper & Brothers, 1958, pp. 84-90.

[6] *Waiting for Godot,* p. 27.

[7] Cf. Joachim Jeremias, *The Parables of Jesus,* translated by S. H. Hooke, London: SCM Press, 1954, pp. 139-140.

[8] *Waiting for Godot,* p. 11.

[9] *Ibid.,* p. 37.

[10] *Ibid.,* pp. 55, 57.

[11] *Ibid.,* p. 40.

[12] *Ibid.,* p. 51.

[13] This is comparable to the false attempt to love God without loving one's brother (I John 4:19-20).

[14] *Waiting for Godot,* p. 58.

[15] Not in Beckett's terms. Nor would I expect Beckett to have thought in the category of "existentially B.C." It is rather that the understanding of existence apparently implied in the play looks to me—from the standpoint of the Christian faith as I understand it—as if it is existentially B.C.

[16] Cf. Rudolf Bultmann, "Der Mensch zwischen den Zeiten nach dem Neuen Testament," *Man in God's Design,* Newcastle upon Tyne: Studiorum Novi Testamenti Societas, 1953 (Valence: Imprimeries Reunies), 39-43. This has been translated by Schubert M. Ogden in *Existence and Faith,* New York: Meridian Books, 1960, pp. 248-266.