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RELIGIOUS LANGUAGE IN *WAITING FOR GODOT*

V. A. Kolve

VLADIMIR: Did you ever read the Bible?
ESTRAGON: The Bible . . . (*He reflects.*) I must have taken a look at it.
VLADIMIR: Do you remember the Gospels?
ESTRAGON: I remember the maps of the Holy Land. Coloured they were. Very pretty. The Dead Sea was pale blue. The very look of it made me thirsty. That's where we'll go, I used to say, that's where we'll go for our honeymoon. We'll swim. We'll be happy. (p. 8)

I

THE CHARACTERS OF SAMUEL BECKETT are rarely allowed so simple and elegaic a relationship to the Bible, and even Gogo is not permitted it for long.[1] I propose in this essay to probe at some depth into Beckett's use of Christian material in *Waiting for Godot,* but I wish to assure the reader at once that my subject is not "Beckett's Christianity:" he is not a Christian, nor a Christian writer, and I am wholly content that he be excused from such affiliations. If the matter were ever in doubt, Tom F. Driver's valuable account in *Columbia University Quarterly,* Summer, 1961, of a conversation with the writer sets it firmly at rest:

> Given a theological lead, I asked what he thinks about those who find a religious significance to his plays.
>
> "Well, really there is none at all. I have no religious feeling. Once I had a religious emotion. It was at my first Communion. No more. My mother was deeply religious. So was my brother. He knelt down at his bed as long as he could kneel. My father had none. The family was Protestant, but for me it was only irksome and I let it go. My brother and mother

[1] Page references to Beckett's works are based on the following editions, all published by the Grove Press, New York: *Waiting for Godot,* 1954; *All That Fall,* 1957; *Endgame,* 1958; *Proust,* 1931; *Watt,* 1959; *Molloy, Malone Dies,* and *The Unnamable* (in one volume), 1959.

got no value from their religion when they died. At the moment of crisis it had no more depth than an old-school tie. Irish Catholicism is not attractive, but it is deeper. . . ."

But do the plays deal with the same facets of experience religion must also deal with?

"Yes, for they deal with distress."

The author admits only one present relationship with the religious system: it is concerned, in different ways, with the same subject.

Yet anyone who took this statement as a sufficient guide to Beckett's writings would be hard-pressed to explain the quantity of Christian material they employ. There is, on the one hand, openly blasphemous comedy, such as Moran's "questions of a theological nature"—"What value is to be attached to the theory that Eve sprang, not from Adam's rib, but from a tumour in the fat of his leg (arse?)?" and the sixteen questions that follow, ending in a parody of the Lord's Prayer. (*Molloy,* p. 227) But this kind of joke-making, though it is important to Beckett's work, has no deeper reverberations. He does it often, he does it superbly: it creates pages of extravagant, mocking laughter. His most important use of religious language, in strong contrast, is seldom explicit and never straightforward. A fair amount of it has perhaps not been noticed by even the best critics of his work.

For though much has been written about this beautiful and enigmatic play, no comprehensive attempt has been made to estimate the extent of its use of Christian materials; nor has there been any full or satisfactory explanation of Beckett's steady recourse to the language of a faith which is for him dead.[2] We have learned that to receive his art most fully we must know something of Descartes, something of Berkeley, something of modern existentialism; but we must

[2] Ronald Gray, "*Waiting for Godot:* A Christian Interpretation," *The Listener,* January 24, 1957, pp. 160-161; Charles McCoy, "*Waiting for Godot:* A Biblical Approach," *Florida Review* (Spring, 1958), pp. 63-72; and G. S. Fraser, "Waiting for Godot," *TLS,* February 10, 1956, p. 84, all have addressed the problem.

also possess a moderately sophisticated knowledge of Christian theology and iconography. For Beckett is well-read in the Bible, in Augustine, in Dante, to name only a few sources that can be documented with assurance.[3] He sends his characters to Biblical texts, armed with a medieval urgency and the best modern textual knowledge, to worry (like Mrs. Rooney) about whether it was an ass's colt or a hinny that Christ rode into Jerusalem, or (like the tramps) about whether one or neither of the thieves was saved, or (like all three together) about whether knowing the answers to those questions would matter anyway. In *Waiting for Godot,* he works in a dramatic mode that began in the Middle Ages, and bases much of his invention on Christian material. The philosophic elements have had close attention; the Christian not.

Before we can examine the religious language of the play, and the larger purposes it is made to serve, some brief introduction to the play's method is necessary, for Beckett's concern is never with explicit meaning. In Tom Driver's fine phrase, he has "repented of the desire for certainty," and that fact has governed the creation of every line and image we shall consider. Furthermore, his work is heavy with internal contradiction—an image is defined only in order to be made doubtful by subsequent detail—as a means of making the textures of his art answer to his view of human experience as a nightmare of confusion and mistake. He is interested in a subtler kind of contradiction than discursive writing can readily express, and he finds his means not in strict thesis, counter-thesis, but in images undergoing constant and uneasy metamorphosis. He eschews the hard, concise outlines of allegory in order to work on a corner of the mind seldom exploited by dramatists: he seeks to drop anchors into the deepest areas of our unconscious, to haunt us with the shadows of actions half-understood yet portentous with meaning. We may observe the method in small in this speech

[3] See Driver, p. 23, and Walter A. Strauss, "Dante's Belacqua and Beckett's Tramps," *Comparative Literature,* XI (1959), 250-261.

from the radio-play, *All That Fall.* Mrs. Rooney is speaking of a lecture she once heard delivered by a mind-doctor:

> I remember his telling us the story of a little girl, very strange and unhappy in her ways, and how he treated her unsuccessfully over a period of years and was finally obliged to give up the case. He could find nothing wrong with her, he said. The only thing wrong with her as far as he could see was that she was dying. And she did in fact die, shortly after he washed his hands of her.

Mr. Rooney asks, "Well? What is there so wonderful about that?" and Mrs. Rooney answers: "No, it was just something he said, and the way he said it, that have haunted me ever since." (p. 51) Mrs. Rooney cannot tell what this story means, nor could she explain why she remembers it, nor why it should have been recollected at precisely this moment in the play. And yet for all its lack of meaning, its resonance suggests the presence of a truth important beyond those truths whose meaning can be formulated. She here provides, I think, Beckett's own commentary on the anecdote, and it can guide us to the kind of meaning which alone we may find in *Waiting for Godot:* as he has said in his own person, "I am interested in the shape of ideas even if I do not believe in them.... It is the shape that matters."[4]

The artist is haunted by his own parable; he builds his world from within, constructing it out of his own inattention, wondering at the way the imagination can frame happenings significant beyond its own power of comprehension. He calls attention to that fact, directly, in his novel *Molloy:*

> And what do I mean by seeing and seeing again? An instant of silence, as when the conductor taps on his stand, raises his arms, before the unanswerable clamour. Smoke, sticks, flesh, hair, at evening, afar, flung about the craving for a fellow. I know how to summon these rags to cover my shame. I wonder what that means. (p. 15)

Clancy Sigal attended rehearsals of a recent English production of *Endgame* with Beckett, and has written about the

[4] Martin Esslin, *The Theatre of the Absurd* (New York, 1961), p. 20.

extraordinary way in which the dramatist *listened* to his play. In twelve days of rehearsal, Beckett occasionally worked with the actors on movements and tempo, but much of the time just sat, silent and tense, *listening,* obsessed with the fiction, pondering it as for the first time: here, from Sigal's notes on the eighth day as reported in the *Sunday Times Magazine,* March 1, 1964: "Beckett develops a different facial expression as the rehearsals go on. He looks older. He cocks his head, and especially in Hamm's big speeches now, silently enquires his way; Hamm now gently obsesses him; he is listening for something, seeking something." In rehearsal, Beckett's attention to detail is fanatic, and almost always concerned with "doing." Like a priest instructing acolytes in a ritual whose efficacy depends not upon what it means but upon what is done, he seeks a performance characterized by clarity and single-mindedness. "His interventions are almost always not on the side of subtlety but of simplicity. . . . The actors tend to want to make the play abstract and 'existential;' gently and firmly Beckett guides them to concrete, exact and simple actions. . . . At the end of the day, Beckett says: 'Don't look for symbols in my plays.' Magee [the actor playing Hamm] lights a cigarette and grins, *sotto voce:* 'He means don't play it like symbols.' " Beckett's single response to questions concerning "meaning" is always of the following sort: "I only know what's on the page," he will reply; or, "I don't know what's in Hamm's head," moving away from that sort of question. He has created, in his text, a kind of ritual, and there is no reason to think him either perverse or untruthful when he says he does not know what it means: as an artist he must work through particulars, but he is chiefly interested in the fluid, the illimitable, the unnamable in experience, and he writes in ignorance of his own meaning as a way of searching for those things. His touchstone of achievement is a certain resonance in the mind.

The major metaphysical and epistemological assumptions behind his work seem to be these: that human personality is essentially discontinuous; that every moment is new and

foreign; and that habit, which deadens our faculties to this terrible flux of things and person, prevents our seeing reality for what it is. Therefore he seeks an art that can catch novelty, that can apprehend the moment between the death of an old habit and the birth of a new when we feel the terror of experience most vividly. Toward this end, he has created a kind of theater that violates our deepest theatrical expectations: he offers us a play that is all "middle," whose beginning is shadow and fog, and whose ending offers no conclusion, a play composed of many small, hard-edged movements or conversations, each enigmatic and complete, often unrelated to what follows or what went before. The frequent stage-direction, *"Silence,"* serves to separate them, to let them sink into the consciousness like stones in a lake, for he knows that "when the object is perceived as particular and unique and not merely the member of a family, when it appears independent of any general notion and detached from the sanity of a cause, isolated and inexplicable in the light of ignorance, then and then only may it be a source of enchantment." (*Proust,* p. 11)

And so we return to the fact that there is religious language in his work, but no religious underpinnings. As he says in *Molloy:*

> For all things hang together, by the operation of the Holy Ghost, as the saying is. And if I failed to mention this detail in its proper place, it is because you cannot mention everything in its proper place, you must choose, between the things not worth mentioning and those even less so. (p. 51)

Sacred words, but no traditional syntax: in that lies much of the power of *Waiting for Godot,* and much of the perplexity. It is a totally agnostic work, agnostic about *all* human experience—its ironies embrace far more than Christianity alone—but it is written like a medieval gloss, between the lines of a Christian Bible, or rather, written over them in a stronger ink, so that those lines disappear though something of their influence remains. I shall be looking at the religious language only, though that language is crossed

and undercut by the language of the music hall—its props, jokes, songs, routines, its bowlers, baggy pants, and belts that cannot be trusted. These latter have had their critical due, but the religious elements need further attention, for the play requires a meditated response, a reading delicate yet precise, which can preserve the mystery—we must not wash clean the shadows—while attending as fully as possible to the resonance of Beckett's language.

The language of drama is, of course, multiple in kind: it speaks by means of setting, stage-action, character-relationships, as well as by enunciated speech (in the present case, a kind of prose poetry). The particular vision of any play is created by all of these working together, and it will be convenient to explore Beckett's religious language in terms of these several categories.

II. The Language of Setting

"*A country road. A tree. Evening.*" The stage is almost completely bare: there is a low mound, on which an actor can sit, there is a moon that rises at the end of each act, there is a tree. And the symbolic importance of the tree in the play is fully as great as the emptiness surrounding it would suggest. The tramps have been told to wait for Godot by it—it is the single physical authentication of their appointment—but that fact, which gives the tree its importance, is itself undercut by the tree's woeful inadequacy simply *as* a tree. They think it a bush or a shrub; they think he must have meant some other; in the first act, they think it dead. The tree is always there and it is always ambiguous.

Beckett clearly intends it to bear a multiplicity of identifications—unsteady, elusive, sometimes opposed to one another. Its central metaphoric relationship is, we shall see, with the tree of the crucifixion, the cross of Christ. But the cosmic meaning and mystery of the cross have suffered a diminution on Beckett's stage. The tree is frail and scruffy, and its relation to human history and the cosmos (which depends, finally, on its relation to Godot) may prove embar-

rassing for us all. When it puts out a few green leaves, *"four or five,"* between Acts I and II, it furnishes one of the few "events" of the play—one of the few occurrences that distinguish Act I from Act II. Corrosive explanations are offered ("It's never the same pus from one second to the next") but the leaves, for all that, are a sign of vitality and life. We can take the event as signifying Christ's cross enduring still, our defense against the doom: or alternately (for Beckett does not weigh the scales) as a symbol of the feeble, failing validity of the Christian defense against death and judgment, heaven and hell. Its mean and measured life —four or five leaves—offers no decisive support for either reading.

The constant talk of Christ that occurs in its shadow—talk that will be examined in detail below—makes the identification with the cross necessary, just as other conversations will relate it as well to the Tree of Knowledge, whose forbidden apple brought death into the world and intellectual disobedience. St. Paul was the first to relate the two trees typologically to each other, in defining Christ as Second Adam. That tradition gives birth to, and is the logic of, exchanges like these:

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.
VLADIMIR: Tell me that.
ESTRAGON: True.
VLADIMIR: We must have thought a little.
ESTRAGON: At the very beginning.
VLADIMIR: A charnel-house! A charnel-house!
ESTRAGON: You don't have to look. (p. 41)

Beckett's deepest relationship to James Joyce is to the Joyce of the early works, to *Portrait of the Artist* especially, for Beckett too has the apostate's hangover: having renounced God, he is nevertheless unable to understand the human condition without reference to something like ori-

ginal sin. The Creator-Redeemer-Comforter is dead, but the Fall remains—what we might call the neurosis of St. Augustine without the remedy. In *Proust,* he defined it thus: "Tragedy is not concerned with human justice. Tragedy is the statement of an expiation. . . . The tragic figure represents the expiation of original sin, of the original and eternal sin of him and all his '*soci malorum,*' the sin of having been born." (p. 49) And in *Malone Dies,* when Macmann's identity begins to merge into the archetypal Beckett hero, and share that hero's permutated name—Moran, Malone, Moll, Molly, and so on—Malone admits he is not certain he is still writing about Macmann: "No matter, any old remains of flesh and spirit will do, there is no sense in stalking people. So long as it is what is called a living being you can't go wrong, you have the guilty one." (p. 356) But without a God, guilt that precedes action is inexplicable: "Without knowing exactly what his sin was he felt full well that living was not a sufficient atonement for it or that this atonement was in itself a sin, calling for more atonement, and so on. . . ." (p. 328) Didi and Gogo play and suffer in the neighborhood of a tree that once claimed to explain all human experience.

Yet it is more, a hanging tree as well, and that must invoke the person of Judas directly, though he is never mentioned by name. For in the Christian myth, just as the tree of the Cross can negate the significance of the Tree of Knowledge (the medieval legend of the Oil of Mercy tells how the one grows from a seed of the other) so can the tree of Judas negate the tree of the Cross. Suicide is the sin against the Holy Ghost, the very greatest of sins, for it asserts there can be no adequate comfort, no sufficient salvation. Theology holds that Judas was damned for that, not for the betrayal of Christ. Near the end of each act, the tramps plan to hang themselves tomorrow—*unless* Godot comes, and *if* they can find a decent piece of rope. What was the Tree of Knowledge remains a tree of death, despite the history of Jesus in between.

But the iconographic symbol itself, as single stage property, is meant to undercut by its scruffy inadequacy every meaning I have been examining without in turn establishing the priority of its own literalness. That is, Didi and Gogo may share their world with a *mere* tree, signifying only itself—a tree puny and dying, like the tramps and their universe, unrelated to any system of meaning. No tree can bear the importance of the Tree of Knowledge, or the Rood-Tree, or the Judas-Tree, unless Adam, Christ, and Judas as men could have born the singular roles our legends assign them. If our legends created them, rather than their truth our legends, then the physical insignificance of this tree is a direct reflection of its symbolic unimportance. In the nonshelter of its sparse leaves, the action of the play takes place.

III. The Language of Action

Indeed, the tree is judged most clearly in the play by action, not by words. Its suitability as a hanging-tree is never put to proof: the tramps' inadequacy as potential suicides prevents that. But its power to protect and cover—to save—is tested unmistakably. In Act II, when they think Godot is coming at last, they once again search desperately for something to protect them from his arrival:

> VLADIMIR: . . . Your only hope left is to disappear.
> ESTRAGON: Where?
> VLADIMIR: Behind the tree. (*Estragon hesitates.*) Quick! Behind the tree. (*Estragon goes and crouches behind the tree, realizes he is not hidden, comes out from behind the tree.*) Decidedly this tree will not have been the slightest use to us. (pp. 47-48)

Godot is here cast by their expectations in the role of the wrathful God of the Old Testament, whose Justice must be satisfied. And Christ's cross, which satisfied that Justice and which has promised to plead for man, in this rehearsal of the Last Day is found miserably wanting. Such a judgment is reiterated a few moments later in the form of a music hall *divertissement:* in doing their exercises to pass the time, the

tramps grotesquely stagger and wobble about on one leg in what they call "doing the tree." (p. 49) It is neither large enough, nor secure enough, to be of use.

These are small actions, though they have a remarkable clarifying force. Looming much larger, indeed furnishing the center of each act, is a ritualized playing-out of one of the most important of Christ's parables—that of the Good Samaritan. I shall put it down here in full, for it underlies much of the invention of *Waiting for Godot:*

> . . . A certain man went down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell among thieves, which stripped him of his raiment, and wounded him, and departed, leaving him half dead.
>
> And by chance there came down a certain priest that way: and when he saw him, he passed by on the other side.
>
> And likewise a Levite, when he was at the place, came and looked on him, and passed by on the other side.
>
> But a certain Samaritan, as he journeyed, came where he was: and when he saw him, he had compassion on him.
>
> And went to him, and bound up his wounds, pouring in oil and wine, and set him on his own beast, and brought him to an inn, and took care of him.
>
> And on the morrow when he departed, he took out two pence, and gave them to the host, and said unto him, Take care of him; and whatsoever thou spendest more, when I come again I will repay thee.
>
> Which now of these three, thinkest thou, was neighbour unto him that fell among the thieves?
>
> And he [a certain lawyer] said, He that shewed mercy on him. Then said Jesus unto him, Go and do thou likewise. (St. Luke, 10:30-37)

This parable seems to lie behind the mystery of Gogo's nights:

VLADIMIR: May one inquire where His Highness spent the night?
ESTRAGON: In a ditch.
VLADIMIR: (*admiringly.*) A ditch! Where?
ESTRAGON: (*without gesture.*) Over there.
VLADIMIR: And they didn't beat you?
ESTRAGON: Beat me? Certainly they beat me.

VLADIMIR: The same lot as usual?
ESTRAGON: The same? I don't know. (p. 7)

A similar conversation occurs at the beginning of Act II, and there too it is significantly incomplete: in this play there is no Good Samaritan, nor is there any reason for the attack. The parable helps define Gogo's life without making it comprehensible.

These however are merely preludes to actions in which the dramatist tests this part of Christ's counsel against what we know of real life, using ordinary experience to illuminate the parable and complete it in new ways. His two ritual rehearsals of the Samaritan's action constitute a double-revision of its ending, and in this the play offers yet another provisional judgment on the value of Christ's teaching, on the significance of His ministry and suffering. For the parable was spoken in response to a question from a certain lawyer: "Master, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?" When Christ told him he must love God and his neighbor, the lawyer asked then, "And who is my neighbor?" Christ's answer in the parable is consonant with His teaching elsewhere that in just such terms the Son of Man will judge on the Last Day, saying then to the righteous:

> I was an hungred, and ye gave me meat: I was thirsty, and ye gave me drink: I was a stranger, and ye took me in:
> Naked, and ye clothed me: I was sick, and ye visited me: I was in prison, and ye came unto me.
> [For] Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these brethren, ye have done it unto me. (St. Matthew 25: 35, 36, 40)

The damned are weighed on this same balance and found wanting: for not helping those in sorrow and need, they are punished eternally. The Middle Ages built upon this text a system known as the Seven Corporal Deeds of Mercy, defining what a man must do on earth if he would share in Christ's victory over death. Godot's tree, as I have already suggested, exists in part to query the metaphysical victory; the encounters with Lucky and Pozzo are staged in part

to examine what happens on earth if man follows Christ's teaching. Two answers are suggested, one in each act.

In the first, Lucky images the man fallen among thieves, the naked stranger, sick, hungry and in bondage. He arrives intolerably burdened, at the end of a long rope knotted about his neck, driven and abused like an animal. His arrival furnishes a test of the tramps' charity, an appeal to their curiosity and an affront to Didi's liberal humanism: "To treat a man . . . (*gesture towards Lucky*) . . . like that . . . I think that . . . no . . . a human being . . . no . . . it's a scandal!" (p. 18) This sentiment is soon translated into action—in Christian terms, the highest *kind* of human action. Pozzo becomes particularly cruel ("The truth is you can't drive such creatures away. The best thing would be to kill them"), Lucky weeps, and the tramps can bear no more: they enact the parable of the Good Samaritan:

> ESTRAGON: He's crying!
>
> POZZO: Old dogs have more dignity. (*He proffers his handkerchief to Estragon.*) Comfort him, since you pity him. (*Estragon hesitates.*) Come on. (*Estragon takes the handkerchief.*) Wipe away his tears, he'll feel less forsaken. . . . Make haste, before he stops. (*Estragon approaches Lucky and makes to wipe his eyes. Lucky kicks him violently in the shins. Estragon drops the handkerchief, recoils, staggers about the stage howling with pain.*) . . . He's stopped crying. (*To Estragon.*) You have replaced him as it were. (*Lyrically.*) The tears of the world are a constant quantity. For each one who begins to weep somewhere else another stops. (pp. 21-22)

To love your neighbor is to become his victim; to give him comfort is to furnish him with something he does not want; to stop his tears is to find cause for weeping yourself. The Good Samaritan gets kicked so hard his shin bleeds.

Here the spectacle is played out before Pozzo, but in the second act, he is himself directly involved, and the tramps' attempt to succour him is more circumspect than before. They have learned caution now, and they image another

kind of first response to suffering. Pozzo and Lucky come on again, but now Pozzo is blind, Lucky mute, and in a kind of music-hall go-bump farce they end up prostrate and helpless: "*Lucky falls, drops everything and brings down Pozzo with him. They lie helpless among the scattered baggage.*" (p. 49) The distress is extravagant, theatrical: "*Pozzo writhes, groans, beats the ground with his fists.*" And the tramps this time are prudential, calculating. Realizing that Pozzo is at their mercy, and thinking of their hunger and his bag full of roast chicken, they wonder if they should "subordinate our good offices to certain conditions." (p. 50) Before the rescue is played out, Vladimir, in a long speech, explores its implications. It is charity and compassion, he reflects, that make us human, that define our species: all mankind is our neighbor; we must love our neighbor; we must begin by helping those nearest us; let us represent our nature at its highest. (The Good Samaritan has grown introspective and somewhat self-conscious.) But this Good Samaritan is also compromised by too much knowledge of men, by knowledge of other metaphysical systems:

> It is true that when with folded arms we weigh the pros and cons we are no less a credit to our species. The tiger bounds to the help of his congeners without the least reflexion, or else he slinks away into the depths of the thickets.

The terms have changed: now it is the capacity to reason, to decide by the head instead of by the heart, that make us truly human. By not going to the fallen man's aid we also (and as perfectly) represent our species. The two suppositions are wholly opposed, the action loses its purpose, the fallen man is forgotten, and we lapse once again into original and incontrovertible solipsism:

> But that is not the question. What are we doing here, *that* is the question. And we are blessed in this, that we happen to know the answer. Yes, in this immense confusion one thing alone is clear. We are waiting for Godot to come—. (p. 51)

Ronald Gray has suggested that Pozzo is God and Christ,

and that the tramps are judged by this action: "The failure to help him, however evil or misshapen he is, is a failure to help Christ." And this may be true, at least as a description of what has so far been spoken. But they *do try* to help him, and the end of their action is equally important: Vladimir *"tries to pull Pozzo to his feet, fails, tries again, stumbles, falls, tries to get up, fails."* And Gogo, after some distraction, comes to the aid of his comrade: *"He stretches out his hand which Vladimir makes haste to seize. . . . Estragon pulls, stumbles, falls. Long silence."* (p. 52) The parable has been re-enacted and to a new conclusion: imitate Christ, enact the Good Samaritan, and end in the ditch with the other victims. Your attempt will not help the object of your charity, but it will bring you down to his miserable estate. Once they have joined Pozzo, they abuse him for crying for help. They strike him and kick him until he crawls away, crying with pain. The possibility of pity between equals is called into question. The play would bring us all to earth, and show us what compassion looks like from there. The two-fold statement by Vladimir of man's highest nature receives a double-negation: the attempt to be compassionate, like the attempt to be rational, seems doomed to a preposterous and bathetic failure.

This figure of the Good Samaritan, whom we must imitate to inherit heaven, is part of a larger discipline called the Imitation of Christ, and the idea of suffering, so very important to this play, draws resonance from the larger concept as well:

> ESTRAGON: The best thing would be to kill me, like the other.
> VLADIMIR: What other? (*Pause.*) What other?
> ESTRAGON: Like billions of others.
> VLADIMIR: (*Sententious.*) To every man his little cross. (*He sighs.*) Till he dies. (*Afterthought.*) And is forgotten. (p. 40)

Gogo's silence here is important: he refuses to name "the other," just as earlier he is unable to find a name for the condition he shares with whoever will value the boots he leaves

behind. (p. 34) Christ is one possible name for both, but in the play it lacks qualitative exclusiveness. Christ is one among many victims. His importance is not as an incentive to compassion and love of one's fellow, but as an archetypal figure for an ordinary situation. Gogo compares himself to Christ in suffering, and in this alone—not in the victory over death, nor in the goodness—does Christ's life illuminate the human condition. The crucifixion image for human life, "To every man his little cross," is purposely banal.

IV. The Language of Poetry

Even the action's "moment in time," a part of its meaning that can only be created by verbal reference, depends on a masked and disturbing use of Christian materials. Beckett has been called a kind of literary geriatrician, obsessed with old men in an old world, but it is no mere caprice. In part Beckett is interested in the aged and dying because to their condition of senility and inattention he credits that vision of things as surprising, illogical, and discontinuous, which he claims is the nature of reality. And in part he has simply seized upon the Christian notion of millenium as a basis for his invention. The calendar-date, so to speak, is the Sixteenth Day Before Doom, for preceding the death of a man and the death of a world is a similar period of confusion in which nothing is understood in its habitual mode.

Millenial warnings are intricately woven into the stuff of the play, not least among them Pozzo's difficulty with his watch. When Didi suggests that "Time has stopped," Pozzo (desperately checking his timepiece) answers "Don't you believe it, Sir, don't you believe it. . . . Whatever you like, but not that." (p. 24) In his second visit, he loses his watch, and discovers that the beating of his heart has replaced it for him: time is inescapable, but will end. More important to the poetic resonance of the play is its use of signs traditionally associated with the Days Before Doom, Fifteen Signs for Fifteen Days in the medieval tradition. Because they are now little known, I shall list them here in their customary or-

der: the sea will rise forty cubits above the hills, then sink almost from sight; great fish will lie on top of the waters, roaring hideously; the sea and all rivers will burn; trees and plants will be covered with a dew like blood, and all buildings will fall; rocks and stones will fight each other, earthquakes will level the hills, men will lose their power of speech and go mad, graves will open and the dead stand above ground; on the twelfth day, stars and fire will fall from the sky; on the thirteenth, all men will die and rise again; on the fourteenth, all will be burned, heaven and earth alike; and on the fifteenth day, there will be a new earth, a new heaven, and Christ in majesty to judge. This conception of a time filled with nightmare disorder preceding the ultimate peace, is represented in *Waiting for Godot* in ominous fragments. Lucky's "thinking" includes phrases closely akin: "fire the firmament," "in the plains in the mountains by the seas by the rivers running fire," "the great cold," "the great dark." (pp. 28-29) Gogo in his confusion thinks the setting sun has reversed itself, in order to rise from the west (p. 55); the radishes (in the last act) are black, hinting perhaps at a vegetable world already charred with fire and turning to coal. (p. 44) And the dead are making restless noises—a noise (says Didi) "like feathers." The tramps talk inexhaustibly to shut that noise out:

> It's so we won't hear./ We have our reasons./ All the dead voices./ They make a noise like wings./ . . . They all speak at once./ Each one to itself./ Rather they whisper./ They rustle./ They murmur. . . . What do they say?/ They talk about their lives./ To have lived is not enough for them./ They have to talk about it./ To be dead is not enough for them./ It is not sufficient./ They make a noise like feathers./ Like leaves./ Like ashes./ Like leaves. (*Long silence.*) Say something. (p. 40)

And in a rehearsal of the general resurrection, they suddenly see the earth as a charnel-house, corpses and skeletons everywhere. (p. 41)

The fall of night is therefore a crisis, terrible in its suspense. Darkness confuses, even more than day, and in it,

Pozzo is taken for Godot. Apologies are in order: "the dusk . . . the strain . . . waiting." (p. 16) And Pozzo, in his description of "what our twilights can do" describes an apocalypse: the gentle sky grows paler and paler, "but behind this veil of gentleness and peace night is charging (*vibrantly*) and will burst upon us (*snaps his fingers*) pop! like that! (*his inspiration leaves him*) just when we least expect it. (*Silence. Gloomily.*) That's how it is on this bitch of an earth." (pp. 24-25) Because each darkness may be the last darkness, there is great fear before night falls to end each act.

V. Character As Language

I have reserved for this category the two most ambiguous characters in the play, Pozzo and Godot. We must look first at the more shadowy and insubstantial of the two, for the question of who this Godot is that two other characters wait for, and for whom Pozzo is twice mistaken, is a cloud that hangs over the whole play, shutting out the light of any sun that may shine behind it. Though I have detailed some of Beckett's borrowings from the language of Christian apocalypse, Beckett's subject, of course, is not the end of the world as it is anticipated by Christianity. He uses that language instead to create a parable about our desperate need for a final event that could give meaning to life, that could reveal order and purpose in it. Godot is likewise a name for that.

Though Beckett has said we must not read Godot as God, there is a certain amount of disingenuousness involved in his remark: he wrote the play first in French, where Godot has no *native* "God" overtone, but the overtone exists nonetheless, just as if he had written the play in English and called it (say) *Waiting for Dieuton.* The identification, unavoidable, enriching, is just able to survive the fact that the words in French nearest Godot in sound—*godenot, godichon, godelureau, godasses*—are low, insulting words: "runt," "lout," "country bumpkin," "clumsy boots."[5] Language is made to

[5] Gray, p. 160. (The verbal coinage is exactly like Moran's name for his mother in *Molloy,* pp. 17-18.)

enshrine our deepest confusions and despairs: there is both the need to say God, and the need to abolish that syllable. Pozzo fumbles at the name, "this Godet . . . Godot . . . Godin . . . anyhow you see who I mean," where the root is God and the rest destructive morphology. The root-word is inescapable, because it has been used so long by western civilization to figure our need for an external repository and source of meaning. Beckett would not have us strictly equate Godot with God, for the tramps do not know *what* they are waiting for, anymore than they know *whether* there exists something worth waiting for. "God" would offer false certainty about the question of identity, even though the question of his existence would still remain open. It is necessary that both be doubtful. This is so even though Beckett goes on to attribute to Godot the same Justice-Mercy polarity that separates the God of the Old Testament from the God of the New. Didi, early in the play, muses while shaking fleas out of his hat: "The last moment . . . Sometimes I feel it coming all the same. Then I go all queer. . . . How shall I say? Relieved and at the same time . . . appalled." (p. 8) The advent which could assert meaning is so utterly unknown that they can only guess at the mood proper to its occasion. Gogo at the end of Act I cheers himself with the thought that Godot will surely come tomorrow, and "all we have to do is to wait on here." Didi replies: "Are you mad? We must take cover." (p. 35) Mercy or justice, love or wrath, either could give meaning, neither is sure.

Now Pozzo in his turn is clearly not Godot—Lucky's master is not enough to confer meaning, reveal order, harmonize, and reassure—but he is the person who comes twice instead of Godot, and he offers images (in action, speech, and character response) which answer to some of our expectations of the other. His potency as character is carefully prepared in several areas, the political and economic important among them. But I shall examine only that which relates him to the submerged matrix of Christian motif that is my present subject, for it is only in their common relationship

to that material that Pozzo and Godot relate to each other.

Some of the images Pozzo presents to us are swift and subordinate. We might notice for instance that his picnic of chicken and wine, with the hungry tramps looking on and hoping for bones, re-enacts the parable of Dives and Pauper. (Luke 16:19 ff.) But the larger characterization of Pozzo is as a chrestomathy, black and embittered, of traditional ideas of God. We might say that in this function he represents the unknowable at two removes: Godot, as a conception, has already sullied the mystery and purity of our need; Pozzo as the man who comes instead of Godot degrades it further.

Some details from the first of the "divine" images he offers. Pozzo decides to rest with the tramps for a time, though he is furious that they are ignorant of him:

> I am Pozzo! (*Silence.*) Pozzo! (*Silence.*) Does that name mean nothing to you? (*Silence.*) I say does that name mean nothing to you? (p. 15)

He condescends to become acquainted with them, on the basis of a certain likeness:

> ESTRAGON: (*hastily.*) We're not from these parts, Sir.
> POZZO: (*halting.*) You are human beings none the less. (*He puts on his glasses.*) As far as one can see. (*He takes off his glasses.*) Of the same species as myself. (*He bursts into an enormous laugh.*) Of the same species as Pozzo! Made in God's image! (p. 15)
> . . . Yes, gentlemen, I cannot go for long without the society of my likes (*he puts on his glasses and looks at the two likes*) even when the likeness is an imperfect one. (p. 16)

Of course one must hear behind this the verse, "And God said, Let us make man in our image, after our likeness," (Genesis 1:26) a relationship further defined by Pozzo's cynical acknowledgment: "I am perhaps not particularly human, but who cares?" (p. 19) It is a power relationship, in which apologies are only made in one direction. Though he has admitted a kind of equality, in admitting likeness, he soon challenges their rights ("Here? On my land?") if only

as a reminder where the real authority lies. We learn he lives in a manor—the tramps live on a roadside—and we recall that Godot, earlier, has also been described in a way invoking the same notions of class and privilege. When the tramps try to remember their petition to Godot, together—antiphonally—they recollect his reply so:

> That he'd see./ That he couldn't promise anything./ That he'd have to think it over./ In the quiet of his home./ Consult his family./ His friends./ His agents./ His correspondents./ His books./ His bank account./ Before taking a decision./ It's the normal thing.

Pozzo is landlord, like the God of Genesis, and he travels his land, superb and all-powerful. When Gogo asks why Lucky does not put down his bags, Pozzo assumes—*deus tyrannus*—the voice heard by Job out of the whirlwind:

> A question! Who? What? A moment ago you were calling me Sir, in fear and trembling. Now you're asking me questions. No good will come of this! (p. 20)

The stage-direction orders that Pozzo speak these lines as though "*delighted,*" but the mood intrinsic to the verbal echo is very different. And we realize that the picnic which enacts the rich man-poor man parable does also (in a way not intended by St. Luke) image the God of Sabbaoth and his lordly dealings with men: He can be prevailed upon now and then for a bone.

Pozzo proposes to dally with them a moment before he ventures any further, (p. 17) like a businessman about to write off a bad debt, like a God about to get on to creating something better; and one of his most trival actions seems to be a grotesque rehearsal of the conflicting claims of Justice and Mercy as a traditional idea of God. Having cursed man eternally for Adam's sin, it was not easy for Him to change his mind. The original solution, we are told, was the Incarnation and Atonement by the Son. But the difficulty *can* be read on its own as revealing God victimized by His own nature, immobilized by the past. That embarrassment seems to be behind Pozzo's decision to leave, then not leave, the tramps:

> I am impertinent. (*He knocks out his pipe against the whip, gets up.*) I must be getting on. Thank you for your society. (*He reflects.*) Unless I smoke another pipe before I go. What do you say? (*They say nothing.*). . . .
> But perhaps you don't smoke? Yes? No? It's of no importance. (*Silence.*) But how am I to sit down now, without affectation, now that I have risen? Without appearing to —how shall I say—without appearing to falter. (p. 19)

It is a kind of transition—on this level of masked images—between the confident, stern, patriarchal God which is his first *persona* (the God of Genesis and of Apocalypse) and the suffering God which he next becomes: a new hypothesis shapes his character, and he is shown tormented, saddened, by creatures meant to love and serve him but who have gone wrong. Lucky when young was marked by beauty, grace, and truth, but he has aged his master:

> Pozzo: (*groaning, clutching his head.*) I can't bear it . . . any longer . . . the way he goes on . . . you've no idea . . . it's terrible . . . he must go . . . (*he waves his arms*) . . . I'm going mad . . . (*he collapses, his head in his hands*) . . . I can't bear it . . . any longer. . . . (pp. 22-23)

A pre-lapsarian time is remembered after the Fall, and lamented by God as much as by man, for both were losers. "He even used to think very prettily once, I could listen to him for hours. Now . . . (*he shudders.*) So much the worse for me." (p. 26)

And this becomes a kind of transition in turn—for Pozzo sporadically regains control, becomes his old self, but then leaves that identity to surprise us with images very different —into an image of God deflated and ruined. He shows us what is left of Jehovah in an age of disbelief: though we hear no Nietzschean cry of "God is dead," a blind, helpless, unmannerly cripple, like an ancient relative who missed his time to die, enters in Act II and collapses in a way that brings them all to the ground. He used to be able to see into the future; he had "wonderful, wonderful sight" once, but he

"woke up one fine day as blind as Fortune." (p. 55) And again some knowledge of theology is necessary to respond fully to this fact. The Goddess Fortuna was traditionally pictured sightless, most often with her eyes covered by a blindfold. She turns a wheel, with men strapped to it as to an instrument of medieval torture, and by it they rise and fall. That Fortune (or Chance) confers her favors haphazardly, without regard for good or evil, can be little doubted, and medieval philosophers were greatly exercised to relate her power over a sublunary world to a Christian God who must be (among other things) the servant of a stricter justice. The great solution was formulated by Boethius in the sixth century, and credited by men for at least a thousand years after: Fortune, in her blindness, could be read as seeing only through God's eyes, and executing only His will. If we cannot know that will, we can at least by faith assent to its goodness, and thus even to those malevolent acts of Fortune that must be part of a larger and just intent. Beckett (through the image of Pozzo) refers the traditional blindness of Fortune back one step further, to God Himself, and cuts Him off from all claim to omniscience, or indeed, to any knowledge at all:

> Pozzo: *(violently.)* Don't question me! The blind have no notion of time. The things of time are hidden from them too. (p. 55)

We seem to be left with a ruin, a chaos, a mythopoeic void, but even that is not certain. Pozzo says he is blind, he suffers as a blind man, and yet the tramps (and through them, we as audience) are finally not sure. Didi says, after Pozzo's second exit, "It seemed to me he saw us."

VI. Conclusion

This sustained sub-text of Christian imagery is an important source of the play's paradoxical unity and cohesiveness. It serves Beckett formally, for every moment is thus linked with every other, even though the surfaces are at the same time broken, disjunctive, and deliberately noncontinuous. He has

said that the present problem of art is to find forms that can admit chaos without being themselves part of that chaos, and without trying to pretend that the chaos is really something else. We have been looking here at one of his solutions to that problem.

Christian tradition has provided Beckett with a mine of haunted language—with words, phrases, images, with questions and answers—that has a curious power still, a power that has survived Christianity's death as a system, and is able still to touch something central in the mind and heart of man. Seldom has so revolutionary a play mounted the stage with such authority and sureness, and this is so partly because the language is as wholly traditional as the forms and the purposes to which it is put are unique to Beckett's modernity. An unexpected and unrelieved image of waiting is made to grow out of the total experience of the human race, rooted in all we have been and all that we are. More than anything else it is Beckett's genius with language—with a new kind of language that is obscure, not through meaninglessness, but through an agonizing surplus of possible meanings—that separates him from what is merely fashionable in twentieth-century postures of despair, and allows him to voice instead a threnody for a permanent human condition.

But *Waiting for Godot* is not threnody merely, though that is perhaps the most inclusive term we may use. For it includes grotesque comedy as well, and rage. All of them, the sadness, the laughter, the anger are focused on the perversity of man: on our perverse need for certainty (Godot is a name for that); on our perverse need for self-importance ("Tell him you saw us"); on our epistemological confusion (do I remember the place? have I invented the appointment? am I awake or sleeping?); and on the perversity, the crude anthropomorphism, of our religious ideas. The last of these perhaps requires further comment.

Beckett, I take it, rejects Christianity not merely for its deceptive comfort but for its confusion and viciousness as well. The re-enactments of Christian parables, the shifting

use of religious images serve to call their originals into question, to reveal them as contradictory, unrealistic, and above all as imbued with those very qualities that make us on our own so dangerous and untrustworthy. Pozzo is at once a dreadful man and a series of images of the divine. There can be no doubt that the latter have their origin in the former. So too in the second act, we are shown Didi and Gogo (here the tone is more muted and sad) creating their own messages from Godot. The boy who comes as messenger is again very agreeable, he says almost nothing but "Yes Sir" and "No Sir," and they invent the message they need to hear. That fact is crucial to an understanding of the play.

Beckett has said that the key word in his plays is "perhaps" and though we are held responsible in his theater for the anthropomorphism of our gods, for the shabbiness of our religious conceptions, the possibility is kept open that the real thing may exist out there untouched by these travesties and unknowable through them. He would insist that we keep the "perhaps" of that speculation vigorous and alive, but to do so we must be willing to live without certainty, subject to fear, subject to despair. His agnosticism can give no comfort to either believers or unbelievers: his world exists independent of so easy an antithesis.

There were two chief kinds of religious drama in the later Middle Ages, and *Waiting for Godot* bears an interesting kinship with both. Its characters are out of a morality-play tradition, the two tramps together a kind of Everyman undergoing an "action" common to us all and meeting a common end. But the specific action it employs can perhaps be better defined in terms of the other tradition, that of the Corpus Christi plays. For the moralities essentially portray a journey—a pilgrimage of the soul through the several ages of man to death and judgment. *Waiting for Godot* portrays a stasis: the tramps enact a very small piece of the cycle-drama—Holy Saturday—that concerns the hours between the death of Christ and His resurrection. It is a time when nothing can be known, nothing can be done, and when even those disciples

who are strongest in faith despair. The cycle-plays move on to Easter morning, but Beckett offers his modern rehearsal of that prior time as the eternal and irremediable human moment.

His vision is fiercely negative, and utterly clean. He has no values, except perhaps the negative virtue of not being fooled. There is neither beauty nor stability nor altruism in his world, and as such, his world could be easily dismissed as a neurotic distortion, interesting, if at all, only in a clinical way. But his genius is such that he gives us a poetry compounded of doubts, confusions, desires, and despairs, in language heavy with the religious experience of the race. His poetry has, in consequence, an almost ritual use. To think, on occasion, the very worst about things is to assert in the only way we can our spiritual independence of them. To look into the void is neither to see anything, nor to alter in any way the face of that void. But in some peculiar way, the courage to do so aggrandizes the human spirit.