

RELIGION IN BECKETT'S WAITING FOR GODOT

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Abstract

The message of the play thus seems to be that God will show divine mercy only to those who please him and damn the rest to hell. Hence life is absurd, certainly, but only for the antiheroic who refuse to embrace God's statutes. The life of meaninglessness and absurdity and vanity in waiting is thus for those who do not embrace the life of faith and learn to lean on God's promises. Indeed, what God gives us is essentially a promise- a promise of hope if we learn to lean on him and seek him, and a life of meaninglessness, vanity and empty striving if we lead the faithless life. So indeed, the play might be indeed seem to be about the vanity about waiting for God, but one should rather see it as the vanity of waiting for God without faith, because God promises a life of meaning and coherence to those who put their faith in him

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Central to Beckett's work is his notion of the absurd and his exploration of the incongruity between human constructions of meaning and the Void that lies at the core of existence, that nihilistically deflates and defies all attempts to impose order upon it, through systems of thought such as reason, language, religion and other forms of doctrine. The figure of the schizophrenic also recurs in Beckett's work, one who experiences nervous illness and mental breakdown as a consequence of this failure to decipher a coherent meaning to his existence, in spite of all elaborate semantic, logical and hermeneutic attempts to do so.

Human thought has a tendency to incline towards the systemic in its instinct towards seeking a *telos* in the universe. Elaborate constructions of meaning which qualify as such systems are religion, language, logic, science, and others that may be termed language games in Wittgenstein's terms. This tendency, however, conflicts with the chaos that is inherent in anti-heroic experience, as depicted in the absurd world of Beckett's fiction. This chaos often deflates pretensions to reason and truth. I qualify "chaos" as a universal experience, rather it characterizes the experience of the anti-hero, defined by his status as an outsider who often exists in an absurd and incomprehensible universe and often feels defeated and trapped in his life. Such antiheroes live on the fringes of society and often come from poor or working-class backgrounds. Chaos as such, may be viewed in Marxian terms as an awareness of overdetermination. In Foucauldian

terms, knowledge and truth are inextricably intertwined with power, defined by ideologies and hegemonic narratives of dominant groups who instituted such rules in law, science and religion, and as such the vagabond, or minority, fails to derive sustenance from these epistemologies.

The schizophrenic response to absurdity in human experience is, in effect, a line of flight, a molecular revolution to accommodate the chaos inherent in existence through liberation from the molar identity which has proved empty and meaningless in the face of absurdity. The de-centered subjectivity of the schizophrenic is a defence mechanism against having to adopt a single dysfunctional identity, to be essentialized in a barren world where no stable framework of meaning may be said to hold authority that may protect one from the vagaries and vicissitudes of anti-heroic existence. The psychotic break is, in effect, a coping device for the failure of pure reason to provide a satisfactory and meaningful account of existence. Psychosis involves the lapse into a private language and solipsism, the surge of the mind's subjective and constitutive tendencies over "objective", or consensual and social reality. Madness is postulated as an escape route from overwhelming suffering in the absence of divine mercy and a transcendental logos that will ensure meaningful existence. Didi and Gogo essentially strive to the space between, neither being nor nothing, neither point A or point B, living a rhizomatic existence because meaning collapses for them in Deleuzian interbeing where they do not exist at coherent points of existence but a space between, a rhizome, because all is uncertain for them. Schizophrenia, then, as depicted by Beckett, is a way of accommodating the chaos, an authentic line-of-flight towards interbeing where pure being at point A or point B has proved meaningless and futile. Schizophrenia as found in Beckett's work is an expression of pure difference in the face of the failure of Identity (as expressed by strata and organed bodies in this paper) and the collapse of the Absolute.

The schizophrenic response to absurdity involves the deterritorialization of the organic subject, liberating it and freeing it from closure. The absurd and meaningless existence of the organic body is territorialized. Deterritorialization frees the subject through allowing it to become, in effect, a body without organs (BwO). In *A Thousand Plateaus*, the organed body is one that is centred around what the authors call a "General". Its mode is arborescent. According to it hierarchies are generated and strictures imposed. The organed body is striated. The space of its existence is that of one or other spatio-temporal reference points. It is to be located either at point/site A or point/site B, essentially integral to itself. Not so the BwO. Here the arborescent mode is cast aside. The BwO, is, instead, rhizomatic. This results in the creation of a smooth space of nomadic forays, distributions and alliances as opposed to the striated one of the organed body. The rhizomatic BwO exists between rather than at point A and/or B. Didi and Gogo and schizophrenic and rhizomatic BwOs because they accommodate the chaos in existence and claim that all is uncertain for them because to them life is essentially meaningless, barren and absurd, which is why they pass time cracking jokes about suicide and the curse of being born. Yet, put in a metaphysical perspective, it is to be seen that being a rhizomatic BwO is a choice, one can choose to live a life of non foundations by claiming that all meaning is void and that everything is absurd or clinging to the Absolute cornerstone of Christ in the face of the apparent collapse of meaning in life, which is essentially the response of faith to nihilism and absurdity. I will elaborate what it is to choose the life of faith and redemption which leads to certainty in the face of apparent radical uncertainty in the next section.

Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* could be viewed less as a religious satire than as a reading of the human condition that deems it utterly meaningless without the founding foundation of Christ and the presence of God. While the waiting for Godot seems to be in vain, this could be less a commentary on God's palpable absence than a comment on the utter meaninglessness and void of those who do not wait on God. Indeed, life for Didi and Gogo is absurd because they wait in vain, but it is also their waiting which gives their lives a goal, a telos, a meaning and hope towards which they strive. At the same time there are multiple points of Christian allegory within the play. The comment that one of the thieves was saved (Beckett 7) alludes to the fact that salvation is a 50 percent chance. Faith is a gamble, in which there is half a chance you will be saved if God deigns to favour you enough to give you faith. Then there is the allusion of the boy who tends to the sheep who is treated well and the boy who tends to the goats who is treated badly (Beckett 64) implying that God is partial and treats his elect well while those who are not his elect will be cursed and treated badly. Hence God is depicted as showing favouritism and partialism as well as arbitrary favour towards those who please him. Lucky's speech is also about a divine and omnipotent God who loves us dearly but only some for reasons unknown as he damns the rest to hell. (Beckett 45). Hence it is seen that God is arbitrary and shows favour only to those who please him and damns the rest who do not please him to hell, which contradicts the predication of God as all loving, merciful and compassionate.

The message of the play thus seems to be that God will show divine mercy only to those who please him and damn the rest to hell. Hence life is absurd, certainly, but only for the antiheroic who refuse to embrace God's statutes. The life of meaninglessness and absurdity and vanity in waiting is thus for those who do not embrace the life of faith and learn to lean on God's promises. Indeed, what God gives us is essentially a promise- a promise of hope if we learn to lean on him and seek him, and a life of meaninglessness, vanity and empty striving if we lead the faithless life. So indeed, the play might be indeed seen to be about the vanity about waiting for God, but one should rather see it as the vanity of waiting for God without faith, because God promises a life of meaning and coherence to those who put their faith in him. Hence the angst, emptiness and absurdity in the play is essentially about the barrenness of a life lived without faith, without hope in God's promises of a redeemed life, where suicide attempts and jokes about life's meaninglessness ensue. God promises to redeem those who believe and put their trust in him, so divine mercy is essentially shown to those who will believe, as the tree sprouts leaves in the second half and Lucky is liberated from Pozzo in the second act, the life of belief and faith overcomes the life of absurdity by bringing it hope.

More than any other writer in the twentieth century, Beckett has persistently undermined the idea of foundations, first principles, the thing-itself. In so doing, he has explored the economy of what Derrida calls the "fonds sans fond", the fund or surplus without bottom, which "keeps itself forever in reserve even though it has no fundamental profundity nor ultimate locality" (Derrida, *Dissemination* 127-8). In the world of Beckett's antimetaphysics, the fundamental sounds we hear are best summarized by Lacan's remark: "Nothing exists except on the assumed foundation of absence" (*Ecrits* 392). Beckett does indeed invoke a world of anti-metaphysics, but reading between the lines, there is a choice to be made between responding in despair and choosing the life of faith and hence victory and certainty, because in the face of radical uncertainty and meaningless the life of faith promises the certainty of redemption and salvation.

Hence indeed, Beckett's world is inhabited by schizophrenic tramps like Didi and Godo who are rhizomatic and live at a point of interbeing rather than at point A and point B of logical coherent meaning, but I would like to argue that this is essentially the faithless life and the life without trust and faith in an omnipresent and omnipotent God and a belief in an Absolute divine origin which will provide a cornerstone and founding meaning to their lives. Faith is a choice in response to nihilism and absurdity, one can accommodate the chaos and choose the life of schizophrenic disintegration as a BwO or one can embrace the cornerstone of Christ in order to provide this missing foundation and ground to life in which one can indeed be redeemed and saved, as the tree sprouts leaves in the second act and Pozzo is redeemed from Lucky in what is essentially the narrative of hope that faith brings.

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