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## Chapter 3

# Plays

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### ***Waiting for Godot***

The scene, and the action (or lack of it), are unmistakable: a bare country road with a mound and a tree, two elderly tramps wait for their appointment with a man called Godot, who never comes. This spare, nondescript setting for Beckett's first performed play has become one of the iconic images not just of modern drama but of the twentieth century itself. The meaning of the play is less certain. One of the first questions that spectators of the play often ask is who (or what) is Godot? Perhaps he represents 'God'? The boy who appears at the end of each act claims that Godot has a long white beard, like some pictorial representations of God in the West (or like a child's image of God) and that he keeps sheep and goats. (According to the Gospel, God will separate the righteous from the damned by putting the 'sheep' on his right side, 'goats' on his left (Matthew 25: 32–3).) After all, Godot gives Estragon and Vladimir a sense of direction and purpose in their lives (however misplaced), in a manner analogous to religious belief. Could the play, then, be an allegory for a post-theistic existence? Written in the shadow of the Second World War, God/Godot seems to have deserted a world mutilated by barbarism, mass destruction and genocide. His absence has left a hole which unavailing desire and expectation vainly try to fill.

But caution is required here. Beckett's work always resists singular explanation. Beckett's answer to the question 'Who is Godot?' was always, 'If I knew, I would have said so in the play.' When the eminent actor Ralph Richardson, a prospective Vladimir in the first London production, inquired of Beckett if

Godot was God, Beckett responded that had he meant God he would have said God and not Godot.<sup>1</sup> Godot's name resembles, but at the same time is more than, 'God'. Given that the play is replete with biblical allusion and deals with fundamental issues of time, desire, habit, suffering and so on, it is not too extravagant to recognise a religious element to the play, and to the figure of Godot, while still drawing back from a complete identification.

There might be a lesson here as to how we might read the play as a whole. *Waiting for Godot* is full of suggestion, but it is not reducible to exact allegorical correspondence. Beckett described it as 'striving all the time to avoid definition'.<sup>2</sup> The play will not be pinned down or located, a clear meaning will not arrive for us, just as Godot does not arrive for Vladimir and Estragon. They can be confused and uncertain about where they are, where they were and where they will be, and the audience, by extension, can feel bewildered by the elusive themes of a play which, while orbiting around philosophical and religious issues, tends to keep them at a distance, to keep us in a state of interpretative suspension.

To tie *Waiting for Godot* too closely to the religious metaphor might be to restrain its suggestive power. There are philosophical and psychological as well as theological dimensions to Godot's non-arrival. He can be seen to stand in for all striving, all hope, the tendency for us to live our lives geared towards some prospective attainment. Most human beings live in a constant state of yearning (low- or high-level) and fix onto some hope or desire for the future: the holiday just round the corner, the right job, the well-earned retirement. Once that hope is achieved or desire fulfilled, it moves on to some other object. As Beckett puts it in *Proust*,

We are disappointed at the nullity of what we are pleased to call attainment. But what is attainment? The identification of the subject with the object of his desire? The subject has died – and perhaps many times – on the way. (P 13–14)

According to the pessimistic philosophy advanced in Beckett's early essay (heavily influenced, as it is, by the nineteenth-century German philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer), the self is fragmented and distended through time and is better understood as a series of selves. Once one ambition or urge is fulfilled, desire shifts promiscuously on to another prospective attainment. Ultimately it cannot be fulfilled: 'whatever the object, our thirst for possession is, by definition, insatiable' (17). Life then becomes about a vain, future-orientated expectation of a Godot who does not arrive. We fill our days with routines and habits in expectation of this arrival, rarely stopping to confront the desperate situation in which we live – the scarcity and provisionality of

fulfilment, the terrible destructiveness of time, the inevitability of death from the very moment of birth ('the grave-digger puts on the forceps' (90–1)).

At least three features of the play, however, redeem this bleak and pessimistic view of life. First, there is a fellow-feeling and kindness between Estragon and Vladimir. Second, the play is extremely funny, with that distinctly Beckettian comedy – dark, daring, intelligent and disturbing – that has the same roots as tragedy, rather than simply providing comic relief from it. As Nell remarks in Beckett's next play, *Endgame*, 'nothing is funnier than unhappiness' (20). Third, the writing and theatrical structure are meticulously poised and often beautifully crafted. It is frequently the case in Beckett's work that the form, which is always so scrupulous, precise and painstaking, has a symmetry and a serenity which brushes against the seemingly chaotic and miserable life conditions that are being described. *Waiting for Godot* does not have the quasi-musical shapes and patterns of Beckett's later minimalist 'dramaticules'. But the dialogue and the action here have a precision and a spare beauty that, one could argue, counters the ostensibly pessimistic subject matter. Without these finely honed techniques, Beckett could not have taken drama into the unexplored territory of boredom and stasis, while still maintaining theatrical energy. This is a play after which world drama would never be the same again. Many commentators would now hold it up as the most important play of the twentieth century. Deservedly or not, it is the single work for which Beckett is most well known and the work that transformed him, at forty-seven years of age, from a relatively obscure experimental novelist into a figure of global cultural importance.

The question of what or who Godot might be is only one of the perplexities in a play replete with meanings withheld and explanations denied. It is a play which can still confound students and theatre-goers, just as it did many of the initial audiences, who often responded with bewilderment and hostility. Why do the men seem incapable of leaving this spot? What separates the two acts? Why are there leaves on the tree in the second act but not the first? Why does Lucky allow himself to be so abused by Pozzo? What are we to make of the allusions to the crucifixion and to the Garden of Eden? It might be worth bearing in mind that the audience's lack of certainty is also shared by the two leads:

ESTRAGON: We came here yesterday.  
 VLADIMIR: Ah no, there you're mistaken.  
 ESTRAGON: What did we do yesterday?  
 VLADIMIR: What did we do yesterday?

ESTRAGON: Yes.

VLADIMIR: Why . . . (*Angrily*) Nothing is certain when you're about. (14)

The desperate unreliability of memory is reinforced in Act II, as Estragon and Vladimir once again falteringly try to figure out whether they were there the day before or not. Estragon, who is less certain and less interested in the past than Vladimir, can't recognise his boots in the middle of the stage. Vladimir is discomfited by the leaves that have appeared on the tree. It is partly as an antidote to this bewilderment that they embrace the one guiding principle of which they can be sure: '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 –' (80).

From the audience's point of view, one effect of the lack of definition, the withholding of a clear meaning, is to shift the attention on to the dramatic qualities of the play rather than the significance of its message, its function rather than its meaning. It is clearly an innovatory and experimental play, removed from the conventions of naturalist drama. The notion of plot is fairly routed here. A clear relationship between cause and effect, the sequence of exposition, complication and resolution, is thwarted, as we would expect in a play which makes withheld knowledge not only its theme but also its method. That the second act is so suggestive of a repetition of the first (together with intimations that both 'days' might be part of an endless cycle) complicates the relationship of cause and effect, or the progression from beginning to middle to end, that audiences weaned on the well-made-play would expect. And the tightly knitted plot, where all the strands of the play are tied neatly into an intricate and satisfying pattern, is far more ragged here, with jokes and stories left unfinished, information continually withheld and events occurring with no seeming cause or connection. By whom and why does Estragon get beaten every night? When did the two men make their appointment to see Godot? Or is this just a figment of their unreliable memory? Why does Godot beat one of the boys but not his brother? Why was one of the thieves saved, but not the other? Why does Godot not come? We too will wait in vain for definitive answers to these questions.

In order to make theatre of this condition, Beckett must rewrite the rule-book, strive for a new grammar of the stage, more anti-dramatic than dramatic, which will resist exposition, climax and dénouement and incarnate boredom, inaction and opacity. In order to understand his method, one could point at the very first line of the play, 'Nothing to be done' (9). Action presupposes a reasonably autonomous self and a world of intelligible causality,

and, since neither is available in Beckett's plays, there is little action on his stage. Estragon's famous description of the play in which he appears – 'Nothing happens, nobody comes, nobody goes, it's awful!' (41) – is wryly summed up by the critic Vivian Mercier's pithy quip that this is a play in which, 'nothing happens, twice', probably the most commonly quoted critical remark about *Waiting for Godot*.<sup>3</sup>

But on the other hand is 'waiting' itself not a sort of action? To be sure the notion of action is here extended into an area previously deemed ineffective in the theatre. Inertia, punctuated with inconsequential dialogue, sustains a large part of the play. But, against Mercier, it is clearly not the case that *nothing* happens here. Even apart from the arrival of Pozzo and Lucky, which brings a welcome injection of energy into both acts, a range of movement and activity takes place: playing with boots, exchanging hats, trousers falling down, characters running on and off. Moreover, the conversation and physical exchanges between the two leads constitutes a sort of dramatic activity. Surely interaction cannot be so wholly severed from action? Yes, there is much that is trivial and uneventful – mocking the gestures towards religious and philosophical profundity – but there is action in this play. Not just action, but a lot of rather vivid farce occurs on stage, pratfalls and antics that we might associate with the music hall or vaudeville (one of the acknowledged popular influences on which the play draws).

Realist drama hides its fictive, theatrical nature in its efforts to reproduce the appearance of the 'real' world. But *Waiting for Godot* is theatre which continually declares its own theatrical artifice. The idea of play and of play-acting operates within it on a number of levels. First, we have many self-conscious performances, the idea that the dialogue between Vladimir and Estragon is a kind of a 'game': 'Come on, Gogo, return the ball, can't you, once in a way?' (12). The performative quality is especially evident in Act II, when, to pass the time as usual, the pair 'play' at being Pozzo and Lucky. This metatheatrical element – the play's awareness of itself as a play – refuses the suspension of disbelief central to realism on the stage. If Vladimir and Estragon can pretend to be Pozzo and Lucky, then how can we be sure that Pozzo and Lucky are not just doing the same thing? Given that this *is* a play, we know of course that they are doing so – actors are playing all five parts and will do so again and again until the end of the run. There are several suggestions that the two acts are part of an ongoing cycle, and not just because of the many similarities between both days on which the acts supposedly take place. At the end of Act I, Vladimir remarks that the appearance of Pozzo and Lucky has changed, as if he and Estragon have met them before. At the end of Act II, he anticipates that they will be returning to the same

spot tomorrow. So, in a sense, the repetition *in* the play, the suggestion that the activities are part of an ongoing cycle, reproduces the repetition *of* the play, the fact that the play is put on night after night.

Most people's lives involve a cycle or a routine of some sort, whether this is as prosaic as the working day or the rituals of getting up, eating and going to bed. Most of us develop habits or recurring patterns of behaviour that we follow rather unreflectively until some crisis or unusual event in life breaks through them. 'Habit', Vladimir declares, 'is a great deadener' (91). So the idea of repetition resonates with a certain aspect of day-to-day life at its most remorselessly mundane. However, at the same time it obviously reflects what actually happens in a play: actors turning up night after night to deliver lines that they have delivered before and will deliver again. In this way *Waiting for Godot* brings its own status as a piece of theatre into thematic alignment with a pessimistic view of life as repetition and habit. If conventional realist drama strives to mirror life, then this play, by contrast, shows how much life mirrors drama.

There are other metatheatrical techniques in the play subtly integrated into the action and texture of the language. So we do not have characters marching on stage from the auditorium (as we do, say, in Beckett's *Eleutheria*, the Pirandellesque play he wrote just before *Waiting for Godot*, unpublished during his lifetime and as yet unperformed), but we do have lots of activity within the play which self-reflexively borrows theatrical language. So, for instance, Vladimir runs off-stage in answer to one of the urgent calls of his defective bladder and the two actors playfully pretend to be fellow spectators of a performance:

ESTRAGON: End of the corridor, on the left  
 VLADIMIR: Keep my seat.  
 (*Exit Vladimir*) (35)

Throughout the play the characters make remarks, usually pejorative, about the way their exchanges are going: 'This is becoming really insignificant,' Vladimir disdainfully points out at one point (68). We also have more overt self-reflexive exchanges such as the following:

VLADIMIR: Charming evening we're having.  
 ESTRAGON: Unforgettable.  
 VLADIMIR: And it's not over.  
 ESTRAGON: Apparently not.  
 VLADIMIR: It's only beginning.  
 ESTRAGON: It's awful.  
 VLADIMIR: Worse than the pantomime  
 ESTRAGON: The circus.

VLADIMIR: The music-hall.  
 ESTRAGON: The circus. (34–5)

This exchange is a comment on the sort of play-acting that the two vagrants get up to in order to pass the time while waiting for Godot. But at the same time as it passes judgement on these exchanges, it also forms a part of them – it is just such a music hall exchange itself. Furthermore it humorously operates as a parody of the sort of snobbish conversation that might take place in the bar of the theatre during the interval. This brings the performance on stage, with all its inherent pretence, into alignment with the pretence and affectations of the world off-stage. So, again, the stage here is not passively seeking to reproduce ‘real life’ in the manner of naturalist drama. Rather it is demonstrating how the pretences and repetitions of drama are themselves reflections of life. So *Waiting for Godot* is a play that does something more radical than simply bringing reality into a performance – it is showing the performative, theatrical and repetitive aspects of what we call reality.

Often these metatheatrical aspects to the play take on the quality of parody, especially when aimed at the jaded theatrical traditions that are being overturned. So, for instance, Pozzo’s attempt at an elegy for the setting sun seems like a send-up of portentously lyrical or poetic language:

It is pale and luminous like any sky at this hour of the day. (*Pause.*) In these latitudes. (*Pause.*) When the weather is fine. (*Lyrical.*) An hour ago (*he looks at his watch, prosaic*) roughly (*Lyrical*) having poured fourth ever since (*he hesitates, prosaic*) say ten o’clock in the morning (*Lyrical*) tirelessly torrents of red and white light it begins to lose its effulgence, to grow pale (*gestures of the two hands lapsing by stages*) pale, ever a little paler, a little paler until (*dramatic pause, ample gesture of the two hands flung wide apart*) pppfff! finished! it comes to rest. (37–8)

The intertwining of the pretentiously lyrical and the mundanely prosaic, here reinforced by the shifting stage directions, comically deflates this elegy. As Pozzo will bitterly come to realise when he himself is devastated by the ravages of time, loss and degeneration cannot be sweetened by pat lyrical eloquence.

There is a sense in which any language which strives to be over-expressive, whether in the lyricism of Pozzo or the philosophising of Lucky, is derided. Lucky’s ‘think’ is a parody of academic rhetoric and the blunt instrument of theological and philosophical inquiry:

Given the existence as uttered forth in the public works of Puncher and Wattmann of a personal God quaquaquaqu with white beard

quaquaquaqua outside time without extension who from the heights of  
divine apathia divine athambia divine aphasia . . . (42–3)

Showy soliloquy and bluntly abstract philosophical ideas are ungainly expressive mechanisms for Beckett. The key Beckettian principle, which will lead to the ever greater diminution and ‘purification’ of his work as he gets older, is that expressive language is not to be trusted, that shape and silence are where artistic impact lies. Even as early as 1937, long before his post-war revelation, Beckett has registered his dissatisfaction with language, his desire to find expressiveness in the spaces in between words. In a famous letter to Axel Kaun, he speaks of his quest to tear holes in language: ‘more and more my own language appears to me like a veil that must be torn apart in order to get at the things (or the Nothingness) behind it’ (D 172). Not surprisingly, then, the most expressive moments in his plays often occur in the pauses and silences, indicating, at turns, repression, fear, anticipation or horrified inarticulacy. This pressing reality of the silence in *Waiting for Godot* is, as Beckett put it, ‘pouring into this play like water into a sinking ship’.<sup>4</sup> Much of what Beckett has to say in his drama lies in what is omitted, when his characters cannot muster the words or the play-acting to forestall the encroaching silence, or the ‘dead voices’ that haunt Vladimir and Estragon when they stop speaking:

ESTRAGON: In the meantime let us try and converse calmly, since we are  
incapable of keeping silent.  
VLADIMIR: You’re right, we’re inexhaustible.  
ESTRAGON: It’s so we won’t think.  
VLADIMIR: We have that excuse.  
ESTRAGON: It’s so we won’t hear.  
VLADIMIR: We have our reasons.  
ESTRAGON: All the dead voices.  
VLADIMIR: They make a noise like wings.  
ESTRAGON: Like leaves.  
VLADIMIR: Like sand.  
ESTRAGON: Like leaves.  
(*Silence.*)  
VLADIMIR: They all speak together.  
ESTRAGON: Each one to itself.  
(*Silence.*)  
VLADIMIR: Rather they whisper.  
ESTRAGON: They rustle.  
VLADIMIR: They murmur.  
ESTRAGON: They rustle.  
(*Silence.*)

[. . .]

VLADIMIR: They make a noise like feathers.

ESTRAGON: Like leaves.

VLADIMIR: Like ashes.

ESTRAGON: Like leaves.

*(Long silence.)*

VLADIMIR: Say something!

ESTRAGON: I'm trying.

*(Long silence.)*VLADIMIR: *(In anguish.)* Say anything at all!

ESTRAGON: What do we do now?

VLADIMIR: Wait for Godot.

ESTRAGON: Ah!

*(Silence.)* (62–3)

The economic rhythms of this passage and the careful combinations of repetition and variation combine with a soothing susurration to eke out a compelling dissonance between the language and the characters' guilty torment. Vladimir and Estragon are too close: they listen to the dead voices while we listen to the poetry. Hence Vladimir's desperate 'Say something!' after the long silence at the end of the exchange. The passage does not express their torment directly, but rather catches those dead voices elliptically, in the excruciating pauses.

Here as elsewhere the exchanges have an eerie, pre-ordained quality, reinforcing the point about the performative, repetitive, self-consciously theatrical dimension to the play. It is as if when Vladimir says something Estragon's reply has already been decided (which of course it has, since both speak from a memorised play script). Their exchanges are often constituted of one- or two-word utterances, carefully shaped into repetition and variation, giving them a poetic, estranging quality that unsettles the colloquial banality. Nonetheless, performance in a theatre renders the *unsaid* as present as the said, and, for all their spare beauty, these carefully pruned exchanges are scarcely enough to block out an encroaching and terrifying silence. This is why, presumably, Estragon and Vladimir are so desperate to keep the conversation alive, to block out the sound of the dead voices. Or perhaps to keep back the realisation that the silence brings: their conversations, like the waiting games they play, are a futile distraction from the destructiveness of time and the insatiability of desire. They are merely a 'habit' which protects them from the stricken awareness of their own abjection and solitude:

VLADIMIR: All I know is that the hours are long, under these conditions, and constrain us to beguile them with proceedings

which – how shall I say – which may at first sight seem reasonable, until they become a habit. (80)

‘Habit’, once again, is a ‘great deadener’. It deadens the suffering that too much awareness, too much reflection on the conditions of existence would bring. The daily routines, the various distractions of conversation and play-acting, are forms of self-protection.

There are clear differences between the two tramps. Estragon is preoccupied with physicality, the body, the earth. Not insignificantly, he tends to sit down far more than Vladimir. He is obsessed with his boots, whereas Vladimir often inspects his hat. Vladimir thinks, Estragon feels. At rehearsal, Beckett remarked of the pair: ‘Estragon is on the ground; he belongs to the stone. Vladimir is light; he is oriented towards the sky.’<sup>5</sup> It is Vladimir who wonders about the two thieves crucified alongside ‘Our Saviour’, he who reflects on the nature of time at the end of the play. He who always answers Estragon’s question about the purpose of their attendance at this spot:

ESTRAGON: Let’s go.  
 VLADIMIR: We can’t.  
 ESTRAGON: Why not?  
 VLADIMIR: We’re waiting for Godot.  
 ESTRAGON: Ah! (78)

It is Vladimir who addresses the young boy at the end of each act, who experiences the philosophical insights. Many spectators record the impression that the two tramps feel like an old married couple, who bicker and quarrel – ‘but for me . . . where would you be . . .?’; ‘I’m tired telling you that’ – and even threaten to leave each other. But underneath their irritations and impatience there is a close bond, and a recognition of their shared plight. ‘We don’t manage too badly, eh Didi, between the two of us?’ (69). Vladimir is generally the protective one in the relationship. It was he who, they recollect, saved Estragon from drowning in the Rhône many years before, and he who, in one of the tenderest moments in the play, wraps his coat over the shoulders of the sleeping Estragon before walking up and down swinging his arms to keep warm. There are few enough consolations in a play about the futility of hope and desire, but these small moments of kindness, frail and unavailing though they may be, reveal shards of fellow-feeling and human decency that are at some level redemptive.

But if the play recognises moments of kindness brought on by adversity, it also highlights the brutality and domination that so often characterises human relations. Most obviously this occurs in Pozzo’s treatment of Lucky,

but even from Vladimir and Estragon the impulse to exploit emerges on occasion. When Pozzo reappears in Act II, Vladimir is intrigued to see his incapacity: 'You mean we have him at our mercy?' (78). The master-slave opposition between Pozzo and Lucky, the material exploitation of the latter by the former, is so elaborate that one is tempted to see it as a parody of the sort of social domination of which political radicals and reformers might complain. So exaggerated is Pozzo's maltreatment of Lucky, so hyperbolically and gratuitously brutal, that the niceties, formality and scrupulousness of his conversation with the two tramps seems comically anomalous. For all the refinement he shows to them – and in contrast to the utter inhumanity he shows to the hapless slave – he is aware of the difference in his own social rank and that of the two tramps: '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' (21). The two vagrants also recognise social superiority when they see it. Pozzo is addressed as 'Sir', while Lucky only merits the less deferential 'Mister'. Such locutions as 'Oh I say!' or 'My good man' identify Pozzo as well-to-do English or, possibly, Anglo-Irish. Another facet of the power dynamic worthy of note here is that Lucky, while clearly standing in as an oppressed servant or slave, may also be the artist and intellectual figure. In the relationship of Pozzo and Lucky can be discerned a shadow of class relations between the land-owners or the wealthy and those that provide them with intellectual and aesthetic diversions: 'But for him all my thoughts, all my feelings, would have been of common things (*Pause. With extraordinary vehemence.*) Professional worries! (*Calmer*) Beauty, grace, truth of the first water, I knew they were all beyond me. So I took a knook.'<sup>6</sup> (33)

Pozzo remarks at one point that he could have been in Lucky's shoes, and vice versa, 'If chance had not willed otherwise' (31). It is a telling use of this cliché. How can chance 'will' something? Of its nature, chance is will-less, and inanimate, outside the operations of even a blind determinism. If something happens by accident or chance, then an act of will has nothing to do with it. But *Waiting for Godot* is a play which, from the beginning, seeks to probe the 'why' of suffering. Or, perhaps more accurately, seeks to dramatise the condition of not knowing the answer to this question. It begins, after all, by asking why one of the thieves was saved but not the other. On what basis was the selection made? At the end of Act I, we discover that Godot beats one of the boys but not his brother, but for what reason? The boy does not know. The refrain within Lucky's speech, a parody of academic or philosophical attempts to understand the source of human suffering, is that human beings suffer 'for reasons unknown'. Here is another echo of

the non-arrival of Godot. Vladimir does not receive an answer to his initial questions about the crucifixion. The mystery remains unsolved.

It is not enough simply to declare that Beckett's characters are 'innocent' sufferers. The problem is rather that their crime, the source of their guilt, is elusive. Punishment and damnation are dished out for seemingly inscrutable reasons. In Western culture the ultimate source of guilt, the primal transgression, is Original Sin. This is the stain with which, in the Judeo-Christian tradition, each person is born. *Waiting for Godot*, as we have seen, playfully alludes to this Edenic source but simultaneously deflates it. Early in the play, the pair consider what it is they should repent:

VLADIMIR: Suppose we repented.  
 ESTRAGON: Repented what?  
 VLADIMIR: Oh . . . (*He reflects.*) We wouldn't have to go into the details.  
 ESTRAGON: Our being born?  
 (*Vladimir breaks into hearty laugh which he immediately stifles, his hand pressed to his pubis, his face contorted.*) (11)

Years before, in *Proust*, Beckett has made another allusion to the sin of birth as part of a definition of tragedy:

Tragedy is not concerned with human justice. Tragedy is the statement of an expiation, but not the miserable expiation of a codified breach of local arrangement, organized by the knaves for the fools. The tragic figure represents the expiation of the original sin, of the original and eternal sin . . . of having been born. (67)

This excerpt is full of philosophical confidence to the point of pomposity: true tragedy is original and eternal and not at all concerned with 'local' issues such as justice or history. This disdain for politically motivated art in Beckett's early critical work would seem to strengthen the hand of those commentators who read *Waiting for Godot* as about a universal human condition. However, there are important differences between the notion of birth as sin in *Proust* and its recurrence in *Waiting for Godot*. In the later instance the assertion that original sin ought to be 'expiated' (how the expiation is effected is not explained in *Proust*, though the implication is that it has something to do with the catharsis of tragedy) has become a joke. The grandiosity of the aspiration is immediately undercut first by Vladimir's guffaw and then by his attempt, prompted by his painful urinary complaint, to stifle it. Once again the 'big idea', that might give us an interpretative hook on the play, is punctured as soon as uttered.

There is little uncertainty about the tone of *Proust* which, as the disdain for the merely 'local' above attests, assumes a universal validity for its pessimistic pronouncements. 'Life' itself, marred as it is by destructive time and insatiable desire, is about boredom, habit and suffering. Blaming the debased condition of humanity on any political or social arrangements would be equivalent, to borrow a phrase of Vladimir's, to blaming on the boots the faults of the feet. From the earliest critical reception of *Waiting for Godot*, many commentators claimed that it had something fundamental to say about what it means to be human. In other words, the play does not simply have to do with particular people at a particular moment in history – it says something about the 'human condition' as a whole, outside history or politics, or any particular social situation.

The seeming withdrawal of *Waiting for Godot* from a world of specifics gives succour to this ahistorical view. The play is so bare and shorn of recognisable geographical reference that one might be tempted to read this as a sort of an archetypal space that can stand in for everywhere or anytime. The sparseness of the setting and the simplicity of the narrative suggest the play might be dealing with elemental truths. Admittedly there are a few scant references to particular places – to the Eiffel Tower, or to the River Rhône – which betray the original French in which the play was written. Lucky's reference to the 'skull in Connemara' gestures towards Beckett's Irish roots (though this is 'Normandie' in the original French version). Similarly Estragon asks Pozzo for ten francs. But at the same time there is a careful rootlessness in the staging and presentation. If Estragon's name has a French quality (it means tarragon), Vladimir's sounds more Russian. Pozzo's name sounds like a clown's and Lucky's like a household pet. In terms of their dialect, the two tramps speak English with an Irish cadence. So the national cues come from the various different parts of Europe with which Beckett was familiar. It leaves a plurality of sourcing that encourages the notion that this is everyplace. Vladimir ponders on Pozzo's call for assistance when he is prostrate in Act II: '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' (79). A little later, Estragon remarks of Pozzo, 'He's all humanity' (83), just after the latter has answered to both the names Abel and Cain. We might remember that in the first act, Estragon has claimed his name is 'Adam', and of course one of the echoes of the lone tree on-stage is to the Garden of Eden. This association with the mythic origin of humankind allows the play to resonate, once more, with the elemental, the original and ultimately the universal. The answer, then, as to the representative status of the characters on stage is given by Estragon:

VLADIMIR: We have kept our appointment, and that's an end to that.  
 We are not saints, but we have kept our appointment. How  
 many people can boast as much?  
 ESTRAGON: Billions. (80)

Lines like this are further encouragement to read the play as a sort of an allegory of the human condition.

'The key word in my plays', Beckett told Tom Driver, 'is "perhaps".'<sup>7</sup> It is paradoxical that a play with such an investment in the withholding of certainty, in the processes of confusion and bewilderment, would make such grandiose claims as to how things are. But, as ever, if this universal reading is suggested, it is like the idea of Godot as God, only one of many interpretative possibilities, all of which contribute to the overall aesthetic effect. The Edenic allusion is often so flagrant here that it teeters into irony, undoing through comic exaggeration any symbolic meaning it might hold. Moreover, how can we trust Estragon? His assertion that 'billions' keep their appointment is contradicted by his ignorance in almost all other facets. He cannot even remember what happened the previous day, so why should we take uncritically his assertions of catholicity? He is less reflective and intellectual than Vladimir and is mostly motivated by his next carrot or chicken bone. Vladimir thinks about the Bible, whereas Gogo simply admires the illustrations of the Holy Land. It is telling that the references to Eden come from the unreflective Gogo, rather than the cerebral and contemplative Vladimir. From this source, the allusions to the mythic origins of humanity are no sooner uttered than ridiculed.

The play is not translatable to a series of philosophical formulae nor, simply, to a pessimistic view of the human condition. Just as Beckett was uncomfortable with the label of 'Theatre of the Absurd', he disowned the idea that he had a systematically negative view of life, or any sort of synoptic overview from which judgement could be made:

If pessimism is a judgement to the effect that ill outweighs good, then  
 I can't be taxed with same, having no desire or competence to judge.  
 I happen simply to have come across more of the one than the other.<sup>8</sup>

There is too much uncertainty in his work, too much doubt and bewilderment, for clear interpretations to provide pat certainty. This is a play in which Godot does not arrive. Beckett renounced the abstract philosophical pronouncements of his younger self and, as we see from Lucky's 'think', came to regard academic philosophy and theology with scepticism. One suspects that Beckett was frustrated that the passages on time and habit in the play have

been continually used as interpretative hooks. He felt, significantly, that ‘the early success of *Waiting for Godot* was based on a fundamental misunderstanding, critics and public alike insisted on interpreting in allegorical or symbolic terms a play which was striving all the time to avoid definition.’<sup>9</sup> *Waiting for Godot* is all about this avoidance of definition. Like Vladimir and Estragon, the audience and critics of the play are attendant on a meeting that is continually deferred.

### **Endgame**

*Endgame* is set in a world even more unfamiliar than that of *Waiting for Godot*. All outside, if we are to believe the testimony of Clov and his telescope, is grey, deserted and lifeless. The characters have memories of a world similar to our own, but the one they live in is depleted and belated. Their memories are more attuned than the characters in *Waiting for Godot*, so their awareness of current dereliction is all the more of a torment. Physical debility is clearly a motif in the earlier play but in this world of the amputated, the paralytic and the blind, the sense of decrepitude and entrapment is far more oppressive. Outside, all is ‘corpsed’. This desolate landscape resembles a post-apocalyptic scene, prompting some commentators to speculate on whether some of the anxieties of the Cold War, with the threat of nuclear extinction, can be felt in this play. The reason for why the world is at this point of expiration, why all outside is grey and flat and lifeless, is not given. Nor is the behaviour of the characters explained. Why does Clov do Hamm’s bidding when he resents it so much? Why are Hamm’s parents, the legless Nagg and Nell, confined to ashbins? What is the relationship of Hamm’s chronicle to the play? Does it, as many have suggested, relate to the arrival of Clov in the house? At a production in the Riverside Studio in Hammersmith in 1980, directed by Beckett, Rick Cluchey, playing Hamm at the time, asked Beckett directly if the little boy in the story is actually the young Clov. ‘Don’t know if it’s the story of the young Clov or not,’ was Beckett’s characteristic response. ‘Simply don’t know.’<sup>10</sup>

Spectators on the look-out for a meaning in the play will encounter the following metatheatrical snub: ‘HAMM: We’re not beginning to . . . to . . . mean something? CLOV: Mean something! You and I, mean something! (*Brief laugh.*) Ah that’s a good one!’ (27). If everything is coming to an end, if all is run down and exhausted, this does not just apply to painkillers and bicycles but to the less tangible qualities of meaning and clarity. The stage directions tell us that there is a picture facing the wall in the room where the