

The Psychic Structure of the Couple in *Waiting for Godot*

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With *Waiting for Godot*, Beckett expands the concept of the “pseudocouple” that he had begun in *Mercier and Camier*. He returns also to the problem of the self as a succession of always subverted beings, ever subject to the process of a continually decanting time—the same problem he had probed in his very early *Proust* (1931). The playing at master and servant, the switching of roles, and the manipulation of props in order to achieve mastery (which make up the bulk of *Mercier and Camier*) do not concern him here as much as the sense of failure and incompleteness that these activities, so feverishly engaged in, seem to evoke.

While *Mercier and Camier* relate to each other through their objects, Vladimir and Estragon interact through their language. Aside from the tree, their language behaves as the major dramatic prop, and it creates a blurring in their characters because language is (im)material to begin with and works through time, habit, and memory. What permits their language to become an object is the presence of the absent third party, Godot, who affects an unresolved duality in the structure of the pseudocouple’s consciousness. Their existence is an example of the Berkeleyian dictum, *esse est percipi*, in that their conception of To Be is to belong to and be seen by someone else. But their state of waiting elicits an absence *within* them because Godot is not there. In this way Beckett comes closer to the center of *being*, which Sartre tells us, in now classical existentialism, is haunted with nothingness, although we are in these post-Heideggerian times jaundiced about the existence of being and more inclined, as in Lacanian thought, to approach whatever it is that is not there as a *lack*, which produces never-ceasing *desire*.

Yet *Waiting for Godot* nevertheless posits a slender hope, despite overwhelming evidence to the contrary, that communication will be possible, and

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with communication a chance that the real self, the Essence, will at last appear. This play depends upon the tension stemming from the sense that non-communication may not always be the rule, but that something will be said or done that will release the subjects simultaneously bound to each other, yet perpetually alone. But Vladimir and Estragon are held in stasis. Because they are suspended in waiting, their every attempt to reach the "ideal core of the onion"¹ is denied them. And even if all their frantic attempts to peel away its successive layers were within their grasp, they would discover that there is in fact nothing there. For the state of waiting produces a sensation of absence in the core of the self, and its paradoxical configuration endows the subject with free will and slave will at the same time. They wait for the Other; they indeed incorporate the Other into themselves. Vladimir and Estragon adopt slave will by constituting themselves and their language as an object which substitutes for the Other (who is absent). All the events and the levels of consciousness in *Waiting for Godot* may be contained within this context. But to understand these implications fully, we must now consider what lies beyond these existential/phenomenological concepts (with their Hegelian underpinning), and move on in another way to describe the dematerialization of the pseudocouple. In this play, Beckett searches for the means of finding an image for inner states of breakdown, disintegration, and merging.

The dissolution of the pseudocouple's seeming stability into a fluent continuity comes about through fear and laughter. The darkness of the night that causes Vladimir the greatest anxiety is emblematic of his fear of facing the other—Godot. Secondly, Vladimir's laughter, or more correctly, his gaping grin and the burst of laughter that he always stifles, exposes the unreachability of the matrices through which both he and Estragon have become fossilized. Vladimir's urgent need for Godot and for his companion, yet Godot's absence and Estragon's uncooperativeness, seem to say: there are two hells on earth; one is called Together; the other is called Alone, and it is the worse of the two.²

To avoid the latter horror, Vladimir collapses into comedy, in consequence of which he "liberates" himself by "enslaving" himself. Vladimir, though very funny at times, is never far from tears because of his awareness of his essentially tragic situation, that of his own insufficiency. Because he realizes that nothing can be altered (or that Nothing can never be altered), his laughter bursts whenever he is most deeply troubled. For example, when he mentions that one of the thieves was saved, and ventures so far as to suggest they repent (but does not want to go "into the details" of *what*), Estragon boldly blurts it out: "Our being born?" (8). The stage directions and the dialogue which follows bear some examination. "*Vladimir breaks into a hearty laugh which he immediately stifles, his hand pressed to his pubis, his face contorted. One daresn't even laugh any more. . . . Merely smile. (He smiles suddenly from ear to ear, keeps smiling, ceases as suddenly)*" (8). This burst of laughter, which occurs very early in the play, is the almost-nothing into which the entire meaning of the play sinks. And further, because the basic plot is so simple and sparse, the fact that we are given the play, in a sense, twice, from slightly different angles in each act, indicates that Beckett attaches importance to nothing *happening*. Whereupon Vladimir, after his stifled laugh, echoes Estragon's opening line and

concludes likewise, "Nothing to be done." He then proceeds to pick up the issue of the Bible and the Gospels once again, refusing to relinquish the question of the two thieves. Shortly thereafter, when Estragon asks if they've "no rights anymore," we hear once more the "*Laugh of Vladimir, stifled as before, less the smile.*" He then says, "You'd make me laugh if it wasn't prohibited" (13). Because he stops it in midflow, his burst of laughter never really takes place, but its substitutes do, and they are: waiting, "killing" time, and Godot. These three "devices" provide the sense of continuity of place, or space, in the play. At the same time they uncover the increasing impairment of the couple's bond.

Over against this, however, we are given an image of survival, for Vladimir and Estragon continue to hope to be reunited through communication with a self they imagine exists somewhere outside time. And surely that is why it is so crucial for Vladimir to inform Pozzo that "Time has stopped" (24) when the latter consults his watch with monotonous regularity. In the meantime, however, they need a purpose in time to erect a structure for their actions, and especially for their *habit*, to which they have become addicted. This habit is Godot. And this habit moreover depends on time. They obey the calls of their habit to escape solitude, even when that habit produces no hope; for their habit itself is their pitiless master.

Their waiting is like any waiting for an event to take place, an arrival or departure of someone or something, when the present moment assumes a kind of hallucinated reality. Michael Robinson tells us that "time is only sufferable when it is given the illusion of value."³ Vladimir and Estragon embark accordingly on their various repetition compulsions. Their activities are not the products of unhinged minds (and perhaps are not even absurd), for Freud has taught us that compulsive repetition is something that a subject is not conscious of. The compulsive element is not neurotic at all, and "it is just as or no more compulsive than breathing or the changing of the seasons."⁴ Hence, Vladimir "minces like a mannikin," (46) and rummages through his pockets; they do their exercises; they play at Pozzo and Lucky; they permute their hats and examine their boots.

But their most spectacular compulsion is their "artificial" struggle: "That's the idea, let's contradict each other" (41); or later, "That's the idea, let's abuse each other" (48). This fake struggle affords them two reliefs. In naming and being named—"Vermin!" "Sewer rat!" "Abortion!"—and so on, they live in a state of reciprocity. Their pretend fight gives them an opportunity to "make it up" afterwards and embrace.

Secondly, this synthetic argument is also an entertaining way to fill in the deadly hours they put in when Godot is not there, to Vladimir's great relief. "How time flies when one has fun!" (49). Under these circumstances, their verbal struggle is a marvelous replication of Freud's famous *fort da*. They resemble the child who compensates for the disappearance of his mother by staging himself the disappearance and return of the objects within his reach. By creating absence as a game in order to make up for the mother's actual absence, and by repeating it, unpleasurable though it was, the child enabled himself to master what once overwhelmed him. Given this view, will it be possible for us to ask: does the word "Godot" represent the absent mother in the fabric

of Vladimir and Estragon's verbal *fort da*? Might it also be said that his *maternal* "Godot" (like the tree which brings forth leaves in the second act) thus assumes inverted phallogocentric attributes? The replication is also harbored in the two-act structure in which "nothing" happens twice, the *fort da* being a two-act drama. Their repetitions also prevent them from "thinking;" and their little activities kill time, according to Estragon, "so we won't hear . . . all the dead voices" (40). Without their repetitions, Vladimir and Estragon would otherwise feel overcome and disrupted by time. Their repetitions thus seem to indicate two identities sharing the same consciousness in one happening (of nothing) in time.

For example, as in a train travelling from A to B and pausing unscheduled at C, the unexpected interruption in time suspends the traveller in the middle of nowhere acutely conscious of the minutes that are slipping away. Similarly, Vladimir and Estragon are uneasy with the diffuseness of a time which they cannot master, and so suffer an urgent need to preserve homeostasis. Thus when their little games fail them, they frantically begin others. "That passed the time," says Vladimir after Pozzo's first visit. "It would have passed in any case," Estragon counters. But Vladimir refuses to relinquish his sense of mastery over anxiety: "yes, but not so rapidly" (31).

What enables Vladimir and Estragon's language to function in essence as an exercise in *fort da*? Roland Barthes observes that absence is constituted in waiting. Waiting means that the other is not there; he is absent.

Absence persists—I must endure it. Hence I will *manipulate* it: transform the distortion of time into oscillation, produce rhythm, make an entrance onto the stage of language (language is born of absence: the child has made himself a doll out of a spool, throws it away and picks it up again, miming the mother's departure and return [and] a paradigm is created). Absence becomes an active practice, a [stage] *business* (which keeps me from doing anything else); there is a creation of a fiction which has many roles (doubts, reproaches, desires, melancholies) . . . To manipulate absence is . . . to delay as long as possible the moment when the other might topple sharply from absence into death.⁵

Absence here bespeaks the muted urgency of Vladimir and Estragon's efforts to endure not only each other through their doubts and reproaches, but it also yields a tiny hope that a larger Other might exist, and in existing, return to their world and help them tolerate the alternate "suffering of being" and the "boredom of living" (P. 8) in which they find themselves. But there is no Other beyond them, for the two will become, tormentingly, one through that third party. Godot. Hence the "Proustian equation" of subject and object is fused again in the binary system: the "primary" Godot, though absent, is the zero through which the "base" two (Didi and Gogo) become yet another "primary": one. But this one is inadequate. For, though what happens is the coming in contact, touching and being touched, the cutting off of contact comes about through the subterfuge of memory and habit, which make up the "Time Cancer."

Their deceptive management of time, a ritual manipulation, is marked by stereotyped and compulsive features. These repetitions reveal that Vladimir

and Estragon are subordinated to habit to an even greater degree. They imagine they are free agents, but their habit of waiting forces them to forfeit their freedom. They are not entirely aware of their collusion with habit, and each says in effect, I have no hope, but all the same I *continue*. Of the two, Estragon is more disturbed by this habitual exercise. "We're not tied? . . . To your man" (14). But Vladimir is more comfortable with habit and responds, "I get used to the muck as I go along" (14).

Like Robinson, Barthes discerns that delirium inhabits waiting. The being that Vladimir and Estragon are waiting for is not real; they therefore hallucinate him. Their waiting moreover *requires* that they do nothing. They behave as though they have received "*orders not to move*" (LD 38). With this punctilious reasoning they invest Godot with power, and thereby assume an aggressive link with him. I am speaking here of aggression in the sense that Freud uses it when he detected an element of revenge in an active manipulation of absence. The child's game says in essence to the absent one, "Go away then! I'm sending you away myself!" Thus Godot's nonpresence (which makes them wait) reveals *their* subjection, for they depend "on a presence which requires time to be bestowed . . . *To make someone wait* [is] the constant prerogative of all power" (LD 40). The phantom Godot does not make time for them at all, of course, and Vladimir is only kidding himself when he tells Estragon that they have waived their rights rather than lost them when the latter grows restless about his status of waiting and threatens to walk away. Yet even as they speak they are aware that they have forced language into an object to be manipulated. Within the context of the timelessness in which they find themselves (because Godot does not bestow any on them), they realize subconsciously at least that progress is impossible. "Nothing to be done"—the antiphonal response to their every litany—has the same unsettling effect as an unresolved plagal chord.

At this point, it may be useful to ask: what enables Beckett to make a sanctuary of Nothing? A return to the end of *Proust* might provide a clue. In his reference to the *da capo* he says, "these considerations explain the beautiful convention of the 'da capo' as a testimony to the intimate and ineffable nature of an art that is perfectly intelligible and perfectly inexplicable" (P. 71). Like the music that Beckett refers to, Godot is apprehended not in space but in time only.

But in *Waiting For Godot* a mutation of the *da capo* takes place. Beckett informs us that Proust's Swann spatializes what is extraspatial in identifying the sonata of Vinteuil with Odette. But Vladimir and Estragon identify Godot and their dialogue about him (in other words, their language) with their repetition compulsions. The couple expect that the *word* Godot will unveil some invisible reality and give order to the objects and language they manipulate. "Let's go." "We can't." "Why not?" "We're waiting for Godot," demonstrates that nothing changes. The word slides away, and the image remains dull and all too familiar. They listen to their voices; whereupon their relationship to language is inverted: the word ceases to be an indicator, it becomes a thing. Whenever the pseudocouple invoke the word Godot, they do not discover a new image of themselves (their "invisible reality"), for the word is just another *object*. Beckett conducts us to the inevitable conclusion

that although Proust recognized the ideal, "invisible reality" in music, it is this very inaccessible invisible reality itself "that damns the life of the body on earth as a pensum and reveals the meaning of the word: 'defunctus'" (P. 72). The *word* in *Waiting for Godot* relates, therefore, to the repetition compulsions that Vladimir and Estragon engage in. It also affects *their* location in space and any possible connection they might make with Godot. Since the *word* Godot originates from within them, their suffering and pain is the necessary complement of their pleasure. This pleasure is simultaneously their own, as well as the other's (Godot's), because he is incorporated. We are witnessing in their stichomythia, which is ultimately a questioning of the value of words, the very breakdown of the couple.

Unity with Godot is complicated additionally by time. Beckett says in *Proust* that even if the "object of desire . . . is achieved by the subject, then the congruence is so perfect, the time-state of attainment eliminates so accurately the time-state of aspiration, that the actual seems the inevitable, and, all conscious effort to reconstitute the invisible and unthinkable as a reality being fruitless, we are incapable of appreciating our joy by comparing it with our sorrow" (P. 4). And finally, because Vladimir and Estragon imagine that the object of their desire is a being that can be materialized in a body, they cannot possibly make contact with all the points of space and time that Godot occupies, even if he were real.

We may approach the binary nature of the pseudocouple's consciousness from yet another perspective. Hegel long ago concluded that thought and the object of thought are identical and reached through an experience of difference: for the master does nothing; he is. And the slave is not; he does. Hegel places his concept of master and servant within the notion of subject and object, and expands it. In Hegel's dialectic of pure being we first come to face the idea of nothing. If we think of the notion of pure being, we find that it is emptiness, nothing. Yet nothing *is* in the following way: The notion of pure being and the notion of nothing are opposites; and yet each passes over into the other. But the way out of the contradiction is at once to reject both notions separately, and to affirm them both together; that is, to assert the notion of becoming, since what becomes both is and is not, at once. In this way, Estragon's "Nothing," and the couple's activities are yet a further example of the blurring of their characters.

We are now in a position to inspect more closely the collapsing borders of the pseudocouple's selves. Vladimir appears to be the master because he attempts to think things through and reason them out. With Estragon's bald "Nothing to be done" at the opening of the play, Vladimir concurs but elaborates. "I'm beginning to come round to that opinion. All my life I've tried to put it from me, saying, Vladimir, be reasonable, you haven't yet tried everything. And I resumed the struggle" (7). What struggle? we might inquire. The stage directions are of no help: "(*He broods, musing on the struggle. . .*)". It would appear that Vladimir's reasoning puts him in charge in a situation where nothing *can* be done. His struggle would then consist in avoiding Nothing by *doing* it, in liquidating Nothing from the scene, for he cannot bear the torment of "pure being" that Nothing brings on. His struggle for mastery perhaps lies here rather than in an effort to lord it over his partner.

Vladimir's preoccupation is therefore mental, and he suffers more deeply than Estragon from the habit of reason which will not let his mind find rest. Again, his tendency to think analytically gives him the appearance of an assumed leadership. When he implies that he once dealt with Godot, it is strength of character and assertiveness that he wants to convey. It is he who assures Estragon they are in the right place, and it is he who dispenses the food. He is the more cultured. He quotes Latin and racks his memory for the correct word in his phrasing—"He searches for the contrary of saved"—the stage directions tell us (9). It is also Vladimir who tries to converse politely with Pozzo.

But unfortunately his thinking is faulty. When they discuss hanging themselves, Estragon sees at once that the branch will not hold both of them, but Vladimir pays no attention to this basic principle of gravity. He looks beneath the surface of words in hope of finding the Absolute answer. For example, in trying to figure out the branch issue, he "*uses his intelligence*," the stage directions note with irony, and then he concludes, "I remain in the dark" (12). His compassion likewise is as inconsistent as his thinking. He is outraged when he sees the sores on Lucky's neck and remonstrates with Pozzo: "and now you turn him away? Such an old and faithful servant?" But when Pozzo gives way to grief he turns on Lucky: "how dare you!" It's abominable! Such a good master!" (22-3). Each time he needs to think he takes off his hat and peers into it as if looking for the incarnated idea itself to pop out. Whenever he does this, his hat is much more than the vaudevillian prop it later becomes when he engages in an Abbot-and-Costello gag with Estragon. Unlike his predecessor, Sterne's Trim, Vladimir uses his hat as a dramatic prop which invests him with an inverted, ironic, and ultimately, failed mastery.

Estragon, however, often destroys Vladimir's painstakingly built intellectual "certainties" and forces him to cry out angrily, "Nothing is certain when you're about" (10). When Lucky leaves his hat (without which *he* cannot think) Vladimir snatches it up and says he prefers it to his own, which "irked" him. Wishing a simple compliment from his friend, he inquires how he looks in his new hat. Estragon meanly replies, "Hideous" (46). Thus when their little games break down they invariably end in cruelty or rejection.

Estragon, by contrast, is the more easily satisfied in their diversions, or else he is *desperately* trying to believe in them. "We always find something, eh, Didi, to give us the impression we exist?" (44). He is also the more physical of the two. He explains the difference between Vladimir and himself to Pozzo: "He has stinking breath and I have stinking feet" (31). Here their physical differences invite us to see the two as one body. Estragon's stinking feet, planted firmly on the ground (and in pain if the boots pinch), will remind us of the body's occasional predominance over the mind.

Estragon is also more interested in food and sleep and unashamedly grovels after discarded chicken bones. At other times he is egotistical, petulant, and childlike. He sulks inert on a mound while Vladimir paces nervously to and fro, scanning the horizon for yet another answer, ("*looking wildly about him, as though the date was inscribed in the landscape*" [11]). Estragon's imagination, by contrast, is spontaneous and his habit is to personalize the

universe. Thus he compares his sufferings to those of Christ, or, in looking at his tattered clothes, imagines himself to have once been a poet. Though neither reads Scripture for spiritual edification, Estragon prefers the colored maps of the Holy Land in the Bible to the text itself, which may suggest that language means less to him. Vladimir, on the other hand, reads the Bible for logical clarification, but receives none. What disturbs Vladimir about the two thieves is the fact that one was saved and the other was not. The arbitrary laws of the universe create a deep disturbance in his rationalist sense of justice. He does not concur with Kierkegaard who remarked that this world is in bondage to the laws of indifference, but also added that it was different in the world of spirit. But since Vladimir is not concerned with the world of spirit, he cannot understand the illogic in the question of the thieves. He is not seeking a Christian solution to this dilemma, but simply wants a way out of death rather than damnation.

Estragon's sufferings are almost entirely physical. He is concerned with his own pain and does not worry about others. His feet hurt. He is often hungry and sleepy. He delights in the body and physical coarseness and will not pass up a joke at Vladimir's expense when he has to relieve himself. Vladimir's agonized agitations also provide an entertaining spectacle for him. When Lucky is to "perform," Estragon prefers to see him dance, while Vladimir wants him to "think." Because of his childlike ways, Estragon is unfortunately more easily the victim. But he is as inconsistent as his mate, for he can just as easily turn tormentor. When Lucky kicks him, he is of course hurt, and he spits on him in Act One. In Act Two, he vents an unspeakable physical fury on Lucky, and hurts himself in the bargain. Vladimir, on the other hand, contains his cruelty coolly. When he strikes Pozzo, the blow is executed with studied method, which he attributes to a "simple question of will-power" (54).

But while Vladimir seems to be master and in charge of their appointment with Godot, it may in fact be Estragon who is closer to the Proustian ideal because of his bad memory. It is very tempting to accord authority to Estragon, even though he is the needy one, and prefers eating and sleeping to intellectual Scriptural exegesis. Estragon may be more the master if we remember what Beckett states in *Proust* regarding memory. Because his memory is defective it is therefore less a function of the "clothesline" of habit, and more a function of discovery. Estragon's forgetting is therefore his virtue. In this way he thinks less of Godot as a habit, for he cannot even remember why he is waiting there at all.

But Vladimir is the more insightful about habit. He realizes that time swamps them, 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" (51). He nevertheless grows more willing to trade in "reason" and its concomitant suffering in time for the boredom that Beckett speaks of in *Proust*. He is Beckett's embodiment of the person who sees that "habit is a great deadener" (58) of the pain endured by the successive adaptations of one's sensibility to the condition of the world. Vladimir also realizes that these transitions between habit's little "treaties" are symbolized as birth and death. "Astride of a grave and a

difficult birth. Down in the hole, lingeringly, the grave-digger puts on the forceps. We have time to grow old" (58).

Accordingly, it is important to remember that habit is intimately linked with survival in both Proust and Beckett. Though we are made dull by habit, its evil structure is necessary and constitutes the core "of our smug will to live, of our pernicious and incurable optimism" (P. 5). Stated dialectically, the knowledge obtained by habit's compromises is acquired through acts whereby one "suffers" the "endurance" of them. Here suffering implies sufferance, the power to survive one's sufferings.

But we are also under pressure to realize that Estragon's preference for sleep over philosophical discussions or the need for "certainty" reminds us also of Beckett's observation in *Proust* that the subject who is able to "escape into the spacious annexe of mental alienation, in sleep or the rare dispensation of waking madness" (P. 19) is better off. Indeed he informs Vladimir at one point that "we are all born mad. Some remain so" (51). Is Estragon blessed with just enough "waking madness" not to be disturbed by meaningless chitchat, while Vladimir chafes under his many crosses? Or is there a possibility that he is conscious of a determination *not*-to-think when he suggests conversing calmly, "since we are incapable of keeping silent It's so we won't think. . . . [or] hear. . . . all the dead voices" (40)?

Estragon appears to realize that there is no release in death, for the voices go on talking. The stage notes seem to confirm Estragon's understanding of the value of sleep and mental alienation as a defense to life's terrors. When Vladimir wakes him in Act One, Estragon is unhappily "*restored to the horror of his situation*" (11). Here once again fear which collapses into comedy is the groundwork upon which their uncoupling is built.

Vladimir, though more intellectually solid than his companion, is greatly dependent on Estragon's simply being there, in the literal sense. He does not so much require an audience, as does Pozzo, or Hamm later on in *Endgame*, but simply needs the mere presence of Estragon to endorse his own existence, to give some rational meaning to his life. When Estragon shows up again in Act Two, Vladimir wants him to say he is happy to be back with him again "even if it's not true" (39). Realizing that "one is not master of one's moods" (38), it is sufficient comfort merely to "mouth" words of encouragement. Estragon enjoys their diversions to give him the impression they exist, but Vladimir is even more alien and alone when his partner is asleep or not emotionally in tune with him. Here we have the feeling that there are *no* vehicles of communication in Beckett's world. Even friendship is marked by features of absence: it is no more than the negation of that "irremediable solitude to which every human being is condemned" (P. 46).

Just as the physical props in *Mercier and Camier* decayed and signalled the emotional dissolution of their relationship, it is perhaps some originary fault in language itself which provokes the couple's shared activity of non-communication in *Waiting for Godot*. Vladimir's song of the dog, for instance, is maniacally circular and never-ending; sentences trail off; stories, such as the one of the Englishman in the brothel, are never finished. This state of incompleteness is brought about by habit, time, and memory. As I have stated before, time means very little to Estragon, who cannot even remember what

took place the day before. His thoughts fit neatly into the infinite number of repeated present moments, and he is content with improvisations. For this reason, he has more confidence in the tomorrow, unlike Vladimir who dreads the coming of the night.

It is through reasoning, and ultimately through language, that their conflict finally rests. Their dialogue thus functions at once as an attractant and a repellant, a demand and a rejection, a possession and an eluding of each other. At the same time it reveals a friendship, for they speak of its endurance. "How long have we been together all the time now?" (35). Vladimir's memory also recalls a time when things nevertheless were better in the nineties. Then too, he remembers when he fished Estragon out of the Rhone when he threw himself in it. Now, however, their friendship approaches the boredom that Beckett speaks of in *Proust*. "Friendship implies an almost piteous acceptance of face values . . . It has no spiritual significance" (P. 47). Beckett points out that Proust "does not agree with the Nietzschean conception that friendship must be based on intellectual sympathy, because he does not see friendship as having the least intellectual significance . . . For him the exercise of friendship is tantamount to a sacrifice of that only real an incommunicable essence of oneself to the exigencies of a frightened *habitué* whose confidence requires to be restored by a dose of attention" (P. 47-8 [emphasis my own]).

Thus when Vladimir says, "There you are again . . . (*Indifferent*) There we are again . . . (*Gloomy*) There I am again" (38), Estragon recognizes his partner's habitual boredom: "you see, you feel worse when I'm with you" (38). They are uncomfortable with each other yet continue their relationship, one which repeatedly stresses their isolation. Both feel pain and want the other to see it, but neither can help the other. Estragon appears not to understand Vladimir's intellectual anguish, and Vladimir seems not to comprehend Estragon's physical suffering. "Will you stop whining!" (46), Vladimir nags him. "Help me!" Estragon cries out. But Vladimir only mocks him with a sarcastic "It hurts?" (7). Yet at other times, when Estragon calls out for help, he excludes his friend. "God pity me!" "And me?" Vladimir inquires depressingly (49). Suffering does not provide either of them with insight because, as two "separate dynamisms," they cannot share it.

Because they are such experts at hurting each other, their friendship is reminiscent of that "desert of loneliness and recrimination" that Beckett speaks of in *Proust* (P. 38) with regard to love. Estragon is always the one who threatens to leave, or who suggests they might be better off parting, while Vladimir cuttingly retorts, "Then why do you always come crawling back?" (38), rather than admit his genuine need for him.

And despite the suffering and isolation they feel in each other's presence, their mutual but largely unacknowledged need for each other sometimes manifests itself in compassion or tenderness. Vladimir craves someone to listen to him and to help him sort out his tangled web of confused thoughts. "Come on, Gogo, return the ball, can't you, once in a way?" (9). Estragon wants protection. So while Estragon at first repels him, Vladimir needs and depends on him. It is always Vladimir who makes the first move for emotional togetherness, for his tormented mind is less easily satisfied by physical reliefs.

He wakes Estragon because he is lonely, but in irritation will not listen in turn to his nightmares. But later on when Estragon sleeps, Vladimir sings a lullaby of sorts and covers up his friend with his coat and holds him closely when he wakes up terrified.

Why, then, does Estragon cry out at the beginning of Act Two "Don't touch me! Don't question me! Don't speak to me! Stay with me!" (37)? Here we have the sense of words not being able to cope with the psychic stress that pushes them out. For, it should be noted, more than any other piece of dialogue, this one expresses the conflicting nature of their partnership. This outburst signifies their acute separateness, and particularly Estragon's abjection. It also shows the flimsiness of their language, and ultimately, of their partnership. It is as though Estragon realizes that what holds them together is just a "pseudo-object"—Godot—and that they are, consequently, no more than a pseudocouple.

Indeed, when Estragon asks "We've lost our rights?" Vladimir prefers to avoid facing the problem squarely and puts it this way: "We got rid of them" (13). He imagines that their isolation is voluntary and that they are self-directed. Beckett reveals his own irony through this comment, of course, for he had already stated in *Proust* that we are not free. Vladimir wants to believe that what they do is unique, but their very waiting belies them. And his insistence that they have waived their rights implies that he, anyway, is trying to see the two of them as independent things and not creatures of habit, despite what he admits later on. Habit, unfortunately, has them in its grip. Godot, as I have already stated, is habit, but they need him to give their lives meaning. Godot's very absence demonstrates the overwhelming presence they have accorded him.

The *word*, Godot, brings us again to the recognition that it is language which is at the heart of their struggle. We are again reminded of Lacan's comparison of language to the game of *fort da*, of words "coupled" in presence through absence, where the world of meaning gives birth to a particular language in which the world of things will come to be arranged. Their language thus engenders the thing—Godot, who is the apotheosis of the pseudocouple in a single figure whose absence is the predicate of their (questionable) being.

Because Godot is absent, Vladimir and Estragon suffer the emotion of loss, of what they desire Godot to bestow on them, and also the loss of their own structural integrity as a couple. Herbert Blau has said, "Even if the emotion of loss, amortized, were to vanish in time, the gradual labor of mourning would not . . . relieve the pain. It is the economics of grief, . . . which is the obsession-compulsion of all of Beckett's work, driven as it is by the desire for what is *not-there* and, chances are, never will be."⁶ And here again Beckett's thinking is binary. Godot is because he is not. By asserting this unity, Beckett denies it. It also echoes the binary nature of the pseudocouple's dialogues, such as the "we can't" which must of necessity follow the recurrent "let's go."

Both Beckett and Proust attempt to pin down the isolated self whose essence would be reached in a leap beyond the shackles of time. And both realize that the self becomes aware of a need for an other, whose presence

might offer some comfort to the multitude of his continually changing selves and thus remove the doubt that perhaps he is nothing or not totally alone. Proust felt he reached a solution through his idea of involuntary memory.

Beckett is not so hopeful. He seems bent in this play on assessing the quality of life of the couple, which he finds arduous and often inadequate. At the same time, he seems to suggest through Vladimir and Estragon that coupling can indeed survive even where there are no common interests. They are of very little importance. Common values, on the other hand, are essential, such as their *assumption* of permanence. And their knowledge that what bothers each of them about the other is never going to change seems to be a mark of their maturity. Their mutual dependency is also a feature of their success in staying together. It is as though the illusions of a dream of perfection in partnership that drew them together in the first place are not damaged when they begin to find the annoying or irritating flaws in each other.

But ironically, the more secure Beckett was to become after *Waiting for Godot*, the more his works become open-ended, abutting on unanswered and perhaps unanswerable questions. And even the developing formalism that he began with this work does not disguise its basically personal meaning: that of the instability of long-term coupling between "two separate dynamisms," decanted and contaminated by time.

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Notes

1. Samuel Beckett, *Proust* (New York: Grove, 1931) 16. Other references will be abbreviated as P.
2. Samuel Beckett, *Endgame* (New York: Grove, 1958). Indeed, Clov also mentions that outside the room he shares with Hamm is hell as well: "Beyond is the . . . other hell" (26).
3. Michael Robinson, *The Long Sonata of the Dead* (New York: Rupert Hart-Davis, 1969) 246.
4. Sigmund Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, trans. James Strachey (New York: Norton, 1961) xiv.
5. Roland Barthes, *A Lover's Discourse*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1978) 16. Otherwise noted in the text as LD.
6. Herbert Blau, "Barthes and Beckett: The Punctum, the Pensum, and the Dream of Love" (publication forthcoming) 4.