

The Biblical Subtext in Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*

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More has been written on Samuel Beckett and his opus than on any other twentieth century author. There are over 2500 entries on Beckett in the MLA bibliography. Yet despite this intense critical attention, the Nobel prize laureate's use of Biblical material remains controversial. Some critics dismiss its importance, basing themselves on his famous remark: "Christianity is a mythology with which I am perfectly familiar, and so I use it."¹ Others clearly overestimate it, placing Beckett in the tradition of Old Testament prophets.² Still others, perhaps most, acknowledge its importance but debate its meaning or significance. All the major Beckett scholars have commented on this material in the context of broader critical considerations, but few have given it their undivided attention, which is what I propose to do here.

*A country road. A tree. Evening.*³

As I revisit the Biblical material in *Waiting for Godot*, I begin by noting the significance of the scenic indications. The setting, *A country road*, prepares us to comprehend that we will be considering *homo viator*. The image of the road, or way, implies movement with no arrivals or permanent stopping. It is the itinerant nature of the human condition which will be portrayed—a tireless search, an unending wait, a personal itinerary. Despite our love of conclusions, arrivals, safe havens, permanent abodes; none will be provided here.

In light of some of the comparisons that we will encounter, it is also pertinent to note that Jesus called himself "the way."⁴ We know that Estragon tells us that he has compared himself with Jesus his whole life. Jesus indeed claimed to be the way or path to the Father and his followers are described as those on the way, those engaged in a journey, or a process. On another level, we should also remark that the Gospels are unanimous in depicting Jesus as a peripatetic teacher, an itinerant master. He travels from place to place and has no dwelling of his own. Many of his stories and parables also concern travelers and wayfarers, the most famous of which is, of course, the parable of the good Samaritan.

A Tree. Much has been said of the tree. It is perhaps the richest and most obvious of the Biblical symbols in the play. It reminds us of the tree of life mentioned

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in both Genesis and Revelations, the tree of the knowledge of good and of evil, Christ's cross which is often referred to as a "tree" (I Peter 2:24), the tree on which Judas hung himself, and the fig tree that Jesus cursed for its lack of fruitfulness. We know that the tree seems dead in Act 1 and yet comes to life in Act 2. This clearly bespeaks death and resurrection—hope amidst hopelessness; a hope, in fact, that does not deny hopelessness; a hope that must pass through hopelessness, a hidden hope. Some would claim that this is precisely the type of hope that is at the heart of Christianity. It is also the very substance of this play.

Evening. Here we are clearly alerted to the fact that we will be dealing with last things—old age, diminishment, long journeys, impending death, thoughts of the hereafter. Light is waning. Darkness approaches, yet there is still light, even for our protagonists; and to prove as much we have a second act which once again takes place in the evening, demonstrating that light has indeed reappeared. There is both darkness and light; just as there is both hope and hopelessness. The darkness does not negate the light and the light does not dissipate the darkness. Beckett said that "if life and death did not both present themselves to us, there would be no inscrutability. If there were only darkness, all would be clear. It is because there is not only darkness but also light that our situation becomes inexplicable. . . . The key word in my plays is 'perhaps'."⁵ Claims that the play is "unmitigatedly pessimistic"⁶ are then seriously flawed.

Beckett has also associated light with the tree;⁷ both bespeak life, albeit hidden or diminished life. It is interesting to remark that some contemporary existential thinkers have spoken of light as the ultimate ontological given.⁸ And then it must be stated that the Gospel according to John says of Jesus that "in Him was Life, and the Life was the Light of men" (John 1:4). Finally, we also learn later on in Act 1 that it is autumn, the evening of seasons.

Act 1

As the play begins, the ambiguity of Estragon's very first words sets the tone for what will follow. He says: "Nothing to be done." He is referring to his struggle to take off his boots. Vladimir's response, however, immediately broadens the significance of those words and we come to think of them as a commentary on the human condition itself. He says: "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 tried everything. And I resumed the struggle"⁽⁷⁾—the struggle of life. We are immediately confronted with hopelessness and a resistance to it, an effort to overcome it at least on Vladimir's part.

We soon learn that our two protagonists have apparently been together for many years although they do not spend their days or nights with one another. Nights for Estragon are spent in a ditch and involve violence by unnamed assailants whom he has difficulty identifying. Both men suffer physical ailments—Estragon's feet

hurt him; Vladimir has difficulty urinating. Time is relative; the nineties are “a million years ago” (7+). The two meet at dusk and are happy to see each other again. Vladimir would embrace his friend; Estragon, who is in pain, resists although he does ask for help. When Estragon reproaches him for not buttoning his fly and for waiting until the last moment to relieve himself, Vladimir latches on to the phrase “last moment” as he did with “nothing to be done” and begins to meditate on death which will occasion reminiscences of Scripture. He misquotes Proverbs 13:12; “Hope deferred maketh the heart sick” becomes “Hope deferred maketh the something sick,” followed by the question: “Who said that?” (8). His reflections distract him from the task at hand and Estragon’s pleas for help go unheeded. He tells us that he sometimes feels death approaching and, as a result he feels relieved, but also appalled. Fear and expectation are mingled, as are hope and the temptation to despair.

Estragon’s success in removing his boot and his discovery that nothing in it accounts for his discomfort prompts Vladimir to pass a remark which I believe to be pivotal to our understanding of these two characters: “There’s man all over for you, blaming on his boots the faults of his feet”(8) and we understand that those who blame their boots rather than their feet will consider themselves to be the victims of circumstance or of some cruel deity. There is no willingness to acknowledge personal responsibility on their part. When Vladimir then adds: “. . . One of the thieves was saved. . . . It’s a reasonable percentage” (8+), it becomes clear that his thoughts of death have led him to thoughts of salvation and that he identifies with the two thieves; that is, he sees himself as a sinner, one responsible for his errors, failings and shortcomings. He is counting the odds, his chances of salvation—two thieves, one was saved; the odds seem to be fifty/fifty. All of this prompts him to suggest: “Suppose we repented.” In the Christian context there is no salvation without repentance. But Estragon, who, as we said, is of those who blame the boot, asks: “Repented what? . . . Our being born?” (8+). Vladimir, however, is not dissuaded and begins to speak explicitly of Scripture. He asks Estragon if he has ever read the Bible, the Gospels in particular. Estragon remembers only the maps which stirred his imagination. For him the Scriptures have the value of travel brochures—the holy land as honeymoon destination. Vladimir persists, however, and begins to tell the story of the two thieves, one of whom was saved, the other damned. The very concept of salvation scandalizes Estragon who threatens to leave although he does not move. Vladimir continues, remarking that only one of the four Evangelists speaks of a thief being saved. “From hell?” asks Estragon. And here Vladimir calls him an imbecile and insists that salvation is from death. He is of course theologically correct, as he was before when he affirmed that salvation is from hell. (In Scripture hell is referred to as the second death. [Revelation. 20:6]) However, what counts is the fact that because only one Evangelist tells of the thief’s salvation, the sinner’s odds seem to

diminish—from fifty/fifty they dwindle to one in four.

Vladimir's theological reflections are cut short by Estragon's painful rising and subsequent suggestion that they leave. It is at this point that we discover that departure is impossible because they are waiting for Godot. We also learn that the place of assignation is by the leafless tree which is perhaps a willow, perhaps a bush; perhaps dead, perhaps not in season. There is much that is uncertain. Have they come to the right place? He did not say for sure that he would come. And if he does not come, they will return the next day and the day after; just as they came the day before? Yet is it certain that they came the day before? Didn't he say he would come Saturday? But what Saturday, and what day is it, any how?⁹

At this point they decide to stop talking and then, strangely, Estragon falls asleep and dreams. And this calls to mind Jesus' admonition when he found his disciples fast asleep in the garden of Gethsemene prior to his arrest. They had left him to suffer alone and he chided them: "So you were not able to watch with me a single hour? Watch and pray, so that you may not fall into temptation: the spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak" (Matthew 26:40-41). There is also another Scripture which seems to pertain: "Observe this in consideration of our times because the hour has struck for us to wake up, for our salvation is now nearer than when we first believed. The night is well advanced and the day approaches; so let us put off the works of darkness and let us put on the armour of light" (Romans 13:11-12). It is Estragon, the one who blames the boot and who takes no thought of salvation who has fallen asleep and Vladimir feels lonely and abandoned. It is Estragon, the poet, who has dreamed and would now recount his nightmares to his friend. But Vladimir will have nothing of it. And it is this exchange which provokes Estragon's first Biblical allusion. When he suggests, once again, that they part Vladimir remarks that he would not go far and Estragon retorts: "That would be too bad. . . . When you think of the beauty of the way. . . . And the goodness of the wayfarers (11+). The language is Biblical, alluding perhaps to the parable of the good Samaritan in which the wayfarer is robbed, beaten, and left for dead. The tone is bitter and ironic.

If Estragon cannot recount his nightmares, he insists on telling the story of the Englishman in the brothel. But, once again, Vladimir will have nothing of it. When Vladimir's anger is aroused, Estragon asks for forgiveness and pleads for the embrace which he had previously eschewed. He then suggests that they hang themselves. Too risky. Better wait and see what Godot says, what he has to offer and whether they will take it or leave it.

There has, of course, been much speculation on who Godot is. Is he God? I will return to this question later and we will see that there is much to suggest this interpretation. At this point, however, I would like to comment on the significance of the prime activity of our two protagonists—waiting, and also on the possible outcomes of an encounter with Godot.

Scripture is replete with exhortations to wait on the Lord. In the Old Testament we find: “For Thee I wait all day” (Psalm 25:5); “I am waiting for the Lord; my soul is in expectation, and in His word do I hope” (Psalm 130:5); “Wait for the Lord and He will save you” (Proverbs 20:22); “Blessed are they that wait for Him” (Isaiah. 30:18); “Wait on the Lord, wait I say on the Lord” (Psalm 27:14). In the New Testament we read: “And the Lord direct your hearts into the love of God, and into the patient waiting for Christ” (II Thessalonians 3:5). Perhaps most important, however, is the following: “. . . We ourselves groan within ourselves waiting for the adoption, to wit, the redemption of our bodies. For we are saved by hope: but hope that is seen is not hope: for what a man seeth, why doth he yet hope for? But if we hope for that we see not, then do we with patience wait for it” (Romans 8:23-25).

Theatergoers as well as critics have found the fact that Vladimir and Estragon are waiting unsettling, to say the least. Waiting can be torture and a play about waiting can be boring and depressing, especially if the one awaited never comes. But the Biblical text provides a different perspective on waiting. Waiting in its very essence is hopeful, as is faith. Both are anchored in the unseen. Were the unseen to be seen then both hope and faith would disappear. They would be replaced by fulfillment. There would be no more waiting. Hope and faith only have meaning within the context of the unseen which is believed in and hoped for. Considered in this light, the fact that Vladimir and Estragon are waiting is immensely hopeful, despite their weariness or their temptation to despair.

It is important to note, too, that the envisaged or hoped for encounter with Godot will not necessarily produce any magical transformations. In fact, our pair’s expectations are confused. They do not recall what they asked him for in their prayer; their supplications were vague. But they are clear on one point—they can accept or reject what he may offer. The importance of this is obvious. There has been no coercion, nor will there ever be any—on either side. They cannot be compelled to accept what Godot offers, nor do they have any rights to assert. Their position is that of supplicants, on their hands and knees. It should be remarked as well that it is Vladimir who seems to know Godot. He remembers their prayer to him and Godot’s response; Estragon does not because he was not listening. It is also Vladimir who feeds Estragon, and it is he who assures his friend that they are not tied to Godot; in other words, their relation to him does not resemble Lucky’s relationship to Pozzo. Once again—there is no coercion.

When Vladimir thinks he hears Godot approach, Estragon panics, loses his balance and almost falls. He clutches Vladimir’s arm for support. Both sigh with relief when they realize that they were mistaken. Godot’s coming is clearly both anticipated and dreaded. Estragon’s panic occasions his second Biblical allusion. When Vladimir says, “I thought it was he.” Estragon asks, “Who?” At Vladimir’s response, “Godot,” Estragon exclaims, “Pah! The wind in the reeds” (13+). Jesus

refers to John the Baptist, the one who announced his coming, as a reed shaken with the wind (Matthew 11:7). Interestingly enough, shortly after these remarks Lucky and Pozzo make their first appearance.

Lucky, who is driven by Pozzo by means of a rope tied around his neck, falls when Pozzo cracks his whip and then stops short. Vladimir makes a move to help Lucky, but Estragon holds him back. Pozzo warns them that Lucky is wicked, at least with strangers. At this, Estragon asks Vladimir, under his breath, if Pozzo is Godot. Vladimir, who, as we said, has knowledge of Godot, responds vehemently: "Not at all! . . . Not at all!" (15+). Apparently, Godot does not subjugate people, or tie them to himself, nor does he crack the whip.

Here, it is pointed out that we are among men—all four created in the image of God, although Pozzo denies that status to Lucky and will admit himself later that he is not particularly human (19+). Only one of the four knows Godot, however, and imperfectly at that. That is Vladimir. But Estragon, his friend, who seems indifferent, is waiting too. The rest of humanity—Lucky and Pozzo—are occupied with violence, subjugation, and servitude. The land is Pozzo's; but as he himself is forced to concede, the road on which Vladimir and Estragon travel is free to all. Their marginalized, homeless status frees them in a certain sense. Their only bonds are the bonds of friendship to one another and their common purpose to wait for Godot. Those on the way possess nothing and sometimes suffer violence but they are also exempt from the bondages of domination and subjection.

Lucky in a sense is Estragon's counterpart—they both fall asleep, they both have been poets; and they both seem hostile and/or indifferent to God/ot. Vladimir and Pozzo both distribute food, but in markedly different ways. Pozzo eats voraciously first and then leaves the bones for Lucky; although in this instance, it is Estragon who will devour them. Vladimir, instead, feeds his friend before he himself eats; he also tries to give Estragon what he requests. It is he who is scandalized by Pozzo's treatment of Lucky and will protest vehemently, after which, he will want to leave. When Lucky weeps because Pozzo threatens to sell him at the fair, *au marché de Saint-Sauveur*—the Holy Savior's fair in the French,¹⁰ both Vladimir and Estragon would comfort him, but it is Estragon who does and in recompense Lucky kicks him violently in the shins (demonstrating, it would seem, the difficulties involved in succoring those who are in pain). Vladimir then offers to carry his wounded friend, if necessary.

In the midst of the conversation with Pozzo, Vladimir repeatedly gives voice to his longing for the night. Time has stopped, he says. When Lucky is to perform, Estragon who fusses with his boot, wants him to dance; Vladimir who fiddles with his hat, wants him to think. Lucky will begin by dancing, a dance which Estragon calls The Scapegoat's Agony and which Lucky himself calls "The Net" because he thinks he is entangled in a net. It should be noted that there are frequent allusions in Scripture to the snare of the fowler who artfully spreads his net to catch birds.

Such a reference is found in Psalm 57:6: “They have prepared a net for my steps; my soul is bowed down: they have digged a pit before me. . . .”

On the other hand, The Scapegoat’s Agony may be linked to the Holy Savior’s fair where Pozzo wants to sell Lucky and also, interestingly enough, to Pascal’s wager. In “The Wager,” Pascal presents salvation as an exchange or trade—something is put up or given in order to get something else. To attain salvation we wager, or risk, our life—a finite one—in the hope of gaining another life, an infinite one. That is, we trade or exchange our finite life in this world for eternal life in the next.¹¹ But it should be noted that Pozzo wants to trade someone else’s life, not his own. Lucky is the scapegoat who is to be sacrificed, or given, in his place. Christ sacrificed himself, he gave himself. Christians are called to imitate him. Pozzo, instead, wants to sacrifice someone else—Lucky. It is the perverse image of the “Holy Savior’s” example—gain at someone else’s expense, rather than at our own.

After Vladimir has placed Lucky’s hat on his head, the prerequisite to his thinking, he will begin his famous discourse which, of course, concerns God—the God of the Bible, a personal God; and the God of popular imagination, with a white beard; as well as the God of the philosophers, without time and without extension. The fact that he is characterized by apathia, athambia, and aphasia, suggests, however, that he is viewed as a dysfunctional personal God. He is also the incarnate deity since he is said to love us dearly, but with some inexplicable exceptions, and he suffers with those who suffer. The idea that God suffers with those who suffer introduces the concept of suffering in heaven and since so many are plunged in the torments of hell fire here and now, if it continues, “hell will be blast into heaven” (28+). The speech continues mocking the rationalist agenda as much as metaphysical discourses on God were mocked (“quaquaquaqua” seems to deride the philosopher’s discourse as nonsense, using the philosophical term *qua* to mimic the animal sound *quack*, and at the same time suggesting the alternate meaning of *quack*, that is, charlatan). Here, however, the mockery is intensified, for a scatological element is introduced beginning with mention of the “Acacacademy of Antropopometry” (*popò* in Italian is equivalent to *caca* in French, both are the colloquial for excrement). This perhaps marks entrance into the scientific domain of the “beyond all doubt” but also the domain of the unfinished, of man who “wastes and pines” for reasons unknown. Despite scientific progress and the strides in physical culture, man “fades away,” he shrinks, for reasons unknown. “Alas Alas abandoned unfinished the skull the skull” (29+). Golgotha was the place of the skull where Jesus was abandoned to his suffering and cried: “My God, my God, why have You forsaken me?” (Mark 15:34). It is where he proclaimed: “It is finished!” (John 19:30). But somehow it is not finished, for the suffering continues.

After Lucky and Pozzo’s departure, Vladimir reveals that it is not the first time that he and Estragon have met Pozzo and Lucky; in fact, Vladimir remarks on

how much they have changed. Estragon, on the other hand, has no recollection of meeting them before just as he could not recall very much concerning Godot. It is at this point that the boy who is Godot's messenger appears. Estragon reproaches him for arriving so late. He does not believe him when he says he is a native of the area; he accuses him of lying; and he shakes him by the arm. Then suddenly he is overcome with the awareness of his own unhappiness and he sits down in his place to remove his boots. The boy responds that he had been there a good while waiting for Pozzo and Lucky to leave. He was afraid of the whip, the roars, and the two big men. As with Pozzo and Lucky, Vladimir has the impression he has seen the boy before, although the boy claims that he is there for the first time. His message is that Mr. Godot will not come that evening, but surely the next day. Vladimir then asks him what he does for Godot. He learns that the boy minds the goats and that Godot is good to him. His brother, on the other hand, the one who minds the sheep, is beaten. The boy gets enough to eat but does not know if he is happy or not. We also discover that he sleeps in the loft with his brother. Finally, Vladimir asks the boy to tell Godot that he saw them.

This whole episode is of great importance. The Biblical subtext here is rich and resonant. Matthew 25:31-46 explains the significance of the sheep and the goats. We read:

When the Son of Man comes in His Glory . . . He will separate them from one another as a shepherd parts the sheep from the goats: and He will place the sheep at His right and the goats at his left. The King will then say to those on his right. 'Come, My Father's blessed ones, inherit the kingdom . . . for I was hungry and you gave me food; I was thirsty and you gave Me drink; I was a stranger and you entertained Me; naked, and you clothed Me; sick, and you looked after Me; in prison, and you visited Me.' Then the righteous will answer Him. 'Lord when did we see You hungry . . . thirsty . . . a stranger . . . or naked . . . ? And the King will answer, 'I assure you, insofar as you did it to one of the least of these brothers of Mine, you did it to Me.' Then he will say to those at His left, 'Begone from Me, accursed ones, to the everlasting fire . . . for I was hungry and you did not feed Me; thirsty and you gave Me no drink; I was a stranger and you did not entertain Me; naked and you failed to clothe Me; ill and in prison and you did not come to see Me. Then will they too answer, 'Lord when did we see You hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or ill or in prison and did not serve You?' Then he will answer them, 'I assure you, insofar as you failed to do it to one of the least of these, you failed to do it to Me.'

In keeping with these criteria it is then appropriate that the goat keeper was sent as messenger to Vladimir and Estragon. We recall that Vladimir associated himself with the thieves that were crucified with Jesus. He was hopeful that mercy would be extended to him as it was to the thief who was saved. Our pair are not among those who have given themselves to alleviate the sufferings of man. We will see, in fact, that they are reluctant to do so even when called upon.

It is also worth noting that the keeper of the goats is treated well, whereas the keeper of the sheep is beaten. This echoes Scriptures such as Hebrews 12:6-10: "The Lord disciplines the person he loves and punishes every son whom He receives . . . If you receive no correction, such as all sons share, then you are illegitimate children and not sons. . . He does it for our benefit, so that we may share in His holiness." On the other hand, it is said of the unrighteous that "God gave them up to the desires of their heart" (Romans 1:24).

It is significant, too, that the messenger is a boy. The scriptural referents are undoubtedly Matthew 18:3: "I assure you, unless you are converted and become as little children, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven;" and Mark 10:14: "Suffer the little children to come unto me, and forbid them not: for of such is the kingdom of God."

The richness and complexity of scriptural resonances in this encounter are remarkable and seem to suggest that Godot is indeed God; and not a God who is aphasic, for he communicates with man—he sends messengers. Vladimir and Estragon's waiting is not pointless; that Godot exists cannot be doubted—he sends messengers. What remains unclear is what their chances are of being well received by him. As we said, Vladimir had thought that they were fifty/fifty but finally settled for one in four.

The boy makes a running exit and then the light suddenly fails and the moon rises. Estragon has removed his boots and will leave them for someone else with smaller feet. When Vladimir protests that he cannot go barefoot, Estragon responds that Christ did and then reveals, to Vladimir's shock, that all his life he has compared himself to Christ. This confirms that he considers himself an innocent victim, as I suggested above; unlike Vladimir who, as we saw, compares himself to the thieves. We recall that Estragon is of the sort that blames his boots for the faults of his feet. After revealing this about himself, he promptly adds that where Christ lived they crucified quick and we understand that the comparison is indeed about victimization. Yet, it should be noted that Estragon is incorrect in thinking that Christ went barefooted. Quite the contrary, there are scriptural injunctions that our feet be shod and we note that John the Baptist said he was unworthy of untying Christ's sandal-strings (John 1:27), clearly indicating that Jesus did not travel barefooted. Furthermore, when Jesus sent out his disciples, he purposefully instructed them to wear sandals (Mark 6:9). We will come back to the importance of feet, shod or

unshod.

Estragon's discouragement contrasts with Vladimir's hope. Tomorrow everything will be better, Vladimir asserts; the child said that Godot was sure to come the next day. Estragon, on the other hand, once again has thoughts of suicide and recalls a previous attempt. Many years ago, he threw himself in the Rhone and we discover that Vladimir fished him out. Yet Estragon wonders if they would not have been better off alone; he thinks they were not made for the same road. And as we have seen, they are indeed very different.

Act 2

We are told that Act 2 takes place the next day. Same time. Same place. It is twilight again, on the road. We are at once assured that indeed only one day has passed by the presence on stage of Lucky's hat; yet this assurance is undermined by the outrageous burgeoning of life in the once barren tree. In the French version, "l'arbre est couvert de feuilles" (95) ("the tree is covered with leaves"); in our English version, the burgeoning is sparser, "The tree has four or five leaves" (37). In either case, however, we have a remarkable sign of hope—life present in what seemed dead; or, even more hopeful, life conquering death. The first, a more natural explanation; the second, one with more supernatural implications. In any event, the Biblical referents include Aaron's rod which blossomed as a sign to the rebellious that Aaron had been chosen by God and that divine favor rested on him (Num. 17:1-11); and Christ's cross, the instrument of death which also became the means of triumph over death, the path to life through the resurrection.

Of course, a tree normally looks dead in the winter. That it should come back to life in the spring is natural. The seasonal cycles of death and life are natural cycles. However, there remains the fact that our tree has come to life from one day to the next. There is something extraordinary about that which permits more transcendental interpretations of the sign. Both acts, then, begin with thoughts of life following death. In the first act Vladimir ponders the fate of the thieves at the crucifixion and is encouraged by the thought that one was saved. In this act there is a hopeful sign of life after death and the mere sight of it makes Vladimir halt and look long. He will also gaze into the distance at both ends of the stage. Is he looking for Estragon whose boots have been left behind; or is it Godot he is expecting? In any event, I believe it is the tree that inspires Vladimir to begin singing loudly. He sings, interestingly enough, of a dog that steals a crust of bread and is killed by the cook. Then all the dogs come running and dig him a tomb on which are written the words of his song. Several things can be said about this curious song. Its cyclical character is interesting because it mirrors the cycles of nature suggested by the tree and also the cyclical nature of time itself in this play. The song also immediately introduces the theme of death. Each time that Vladimir says the word "tomb" he stops and broods. Finally, we remember that Vladimir

associated himself with the thieves at the crucifixion and it is understandable that the fate of the dog, who is also a thief, gives him pause.

When Estragon enters, barefooted, head bowed, Vladimir would embrace him, but Estragon once again resists as he did in Act 1. He does not want to be touched, questioned, or spoken to; but he does want Vladimir to stay with him. It should be noted that there has been clear deterioration in Estragon. At the beginning of the first act, he was removing his boots. He succeeded in doing so at the end of the act. Now he has arrived barefooted; in other words, he spent the night that way—much more exposed. We also discover that he has again been beaten, but this time, during the day, suggesting encroaching darkness. What used to happen under the cloak of night is now taking place in broad daylight. Perhaps for that reason the embrace is exchanged sooner and we see that Estragon, when no longer supported by his friend, once again almost falls. Then we learn that he was devastated to hear Vladimir singing. It finished him, for he thought “He’s all alone, he thinks I’m gone for ever, and he sings.” (38) Vladimir admits that, although he missed his friend, he felt happy because he felt in great form; he did not get up in the night even once. So Estragon’s deterioration is contrasted with Vladimir’s improvement which had been announced at the end of Act 1 when he told Estragon that on the morrow everything would be better, but it must be said that this improvement seems to diminish now that they are once again together. Are they both better off alone? Perhaps, but Vladimir claims that Estragon always comes back because he does not know how to defend himself. He would not have let them beat Estragon. At this Estragon is incredulous because there were ten of them. Then Vladimir remarks, very much in character: “No, I mean before they beat you. I would have stopped you from doing whatever it was you were doing.” (38+). Vladimir, who, as we pointed out earlier, is among those who believe in personal responsibility, assumes that his friend provoked the attack either by what he did or the way he did it, even if he was unaware of it; for, he says, there are things that escape Estragon that do not escape him. Estragon, also true to character, proclaims his innocence. Then Vladimir, for a second time, will suggest a certain lack of awareness, or lucidity, or introspection on Estragon’s part when he claims that Estragon “must be happy too, deep down” (38+), if he only knew it; happy, that is, to be together again. In fact, he wants Estragon to say as much, even if it is not true.

The couple proclaims their happiness and then their attention turns once again to waiting for Godot. Vladimir points to the tree and remarks that things have changed since the day before. For Estragon, everything now “oozes” (39). The sign of life brings him no hope; quite the contrary, it seems to repulse him. Then we learn that he in fact remembers nothing of the day before, or almost nothing. He recalls being kicked and receiving a bone, but does not recollect when these things occurred. In a moment of frustration which follows, he blurts out that the best thing would be to kill him, “like the other” (40). And one is left to surmise,

although he does not specifically acknowledge it, that “the other” is Jesus with whom he has compared himself his whole life. This seems confirmed by Vladimir’s remark: “To every man his little cross” (40).

Vladimir and Estragon then admit that they are incapable of keeping quiet. According to Estragon it is so that they will not think or hear—hear all the dead voices of memory that make noises like wings, leaves, sand, feathers, ashes that whisper, rustle and murmur. The exchange is remarkable for its beauty and it is reminiscent of Pascal’s thoughts concerning diversion, or *divertissement*, in which he lays bare all that we do in order to avoid solitude and silence because we do not want to face the reality of the human condition, *la misère de l’homme*. Pascal is convinced that acknowledgment of this condition would lead us to seek God (Pascal 34-42). That it is indeed Pascal who has inspired this exchange seems confirmed when we witness Vladimir’s anguished response to the silence that establishes itself between them and also when we hear Vladimir say: “When you seek you hear . . . That prevents you from finding . . . That prevents you from thinking” (41). The Biblical promise is that “those diligently seeking me will find me” (Proverbs 8:17), and again: “seek and you will find” (Matthew 7:7); but we also know that Jesus said to the hypocrites: “Ye shall seek me, and shall not find me” (John. 7:34). Vladimir and Estragon are among those who have been prevented from finding; not because of their hypocrisy, but because of what they hear—the whisper, the rustle, the murmur of voices from the past which divert them and prevent them from thinking.

This last point is a bone of contention, however. Estragon claims that they think all the same and Vladimir says instead that they are in no danger of ever thinking any more. What is terrible is to *have* thought and to be tormented by the corpses or skeletons of those thoughts. Vladimir regrets becoming a charnel house of dead thoughts. These lugubrious reflections are punctuated by Estragon’s bitterly ironic suggestion that they give thanks for their mercies (in the French version this is replaced by: “Et si on s’estimait heureux?” [108]).¹² which recalls Vladimir’s insistence at the beginning of the act that they say they are happy and also Camus’ insistence that his absurd hero Sisyphus be thought of as being happy. Estragon also suggests that they turn resolutely towards Nature, which, in the light of his previous remarks about the oozing landscape, is also biting implausible. This entire exchange is further undermined by the frequent remarks that indicate that they are simply trying to avoid the terror of silence.

As the conversation continues, Vladimir points to the tree and expresses his amazement that it is now covered with leaves¹³ when just the day before it was bare. For Estragon, whose memory is failing, this further convinces him that they were not there the day before. We, however, are not confused by his doubts and confusion, for we know that it is indeed the next day. Not only does the second act begin with the note that it is the next day, but now Vladimir demonstrates it by

exposing Estragon wounded leg. And so, the burgeoning of the tree remains a remarkable sign, one which only Vladimir appreciates, however.

Initially, Vladimir believes that the boots on stage are another proof that only a day has passed, for they are where Estragon left them the day before. He had removed them because they were too tight on him. But on closer examination it becomes clear that the boots are not Estragon's. Vladimir suggests that Estragon try them on. He then helps him to do so and, remarkably, they fit. Estragon will not, however, acknowledge that anything exceptional has occurred even though one gets the impression that Vladimir has been struck by this instance of extraordinary provision just as he was struck by the burgeoning tree.

But it must be acknowledged that in the midst of these remarkable occurrences, there is yet another sign of deterioration. Their meager provisions have dwindled. Vladimir has no more carrots, only radishes and turnips, and the radishes are black, not the pink ones Estragon likes, so he will not eat.

A scene of unusual tenderness and generosity ensues. Estragon falls asleep in a fetal position while Vladimir lullabies him. When he is asleep Vladimir takes off his coat and lays it across his shoulders and then shivers himself in the cold. When Estragon awakens from his nightmare, Vladimir comforts him and tells him not to be afraid. Although again, as in Act 1, he will not allow Estragon to tell him his dream, we do discover that Estragon, who told Pozzo in Act 1 that his name was Adam (25), has dreamt he was falling. At the suggestion that they go, Vladimir reminds his friend that they cannot go because they are waiting for Godot

Then he notices Lucky's hat, and that, too, will be an encouraging sign for him. It will confirm to him that they are in the right place and he will conclude that now their troubles are over. And just as the boots fit Estragon, Lucky's hat will fit Vladimir and he will happily give up his old one which itched him.

And now we might ask if there is a possible Biblical subtext for the boots and hats which are so important in the play. A remark that Beckett made concerning Estragon gives us a clue. He said: "One of Estragon's feet is blessed, and the other damned. The boot won't go on the foot that is damned; and it will go on the foot that is not. It is like the two thieves on the cross" (States 18). I would surmise that in addition to the crucifixion, Beckett had in mind a passage from Ephesians 6 concerning the "armor of God" in which we are exhorted to "wear the helmet of salvation" (6:17) and to have our "feet shod with the preparation of the gospel of peace" (6:15). If this is so, then Estragon's problems with his boots point to more deep-seated issues, as Beckett's comments suggest, issues concerning resistance to a certain preparation which seemingly would protect him from what is to come. Not only does he resist, but he blames the boots for the problems of his feet, as we have seen. That he is exposed and unprotected is also clear. He is beaten on a daily basis. That these beatings might be avoidable has already been suggested by Vladimir. Is it not then remarkable that the boots that would furnish a measure of

protection have been provided and that his friend is there to help him put them on? There is more, however. Beckett also connected Godot with boots. Dierdre Bair reports that “when Roger Blin asked him who or what Godot stood for, Beckett replied that it suggested itself to him by the slang word for boot in French, ‘godillot, godasse,’ *because feet play such a prominent role in the play*” (Emphasis mine, Bair 382). If we link this remark with the one in which he said that only Estragon’s blessed foot could be shod, we see that there is an important and coherent thread linking this theme to the scriptural subtext in which we learn that feet should be shod with “the preparation of the gospel of peace.”

Then Vladimir proposes that they play at imitating Lucky and Pozzo. Estragon reluctantly goes along with this but soon tires and actually attempts to leave. When Vladimir notices his absence he panics, and then a curious scene unfolds. Estragon comes running back on stage crying “They’re coming” (47+). They both apparently think it is Godot and they have radically different reactions, both very much in keeping, however, with their outlooks on life. Vladimir, whom Beckett has said is of the light (see note 7), is delighted and exclaims: “We’re saved! Let’s go and meet him!” (47+). It is Vladimir who has some knowledge of Godot; it is he who is actively waiting for him; and it is he who is convinced that his coming means salvation, not only for him but also for his friend. Estragon, on the other hand, is terrified and cries: “I’m accursed! . . . I’m in hell!” (47+). He tries desperately to escape, but they seem to be surrounded. Then, at Vladimir’s suggestion, he will hide behind the tree just as Adam hid behind the trees in the Garden of Eden after the fall. (And we recall that Estragon called himself Adam in Act 1 and dreamt of a fall at the beginning of Act 2.) “Adam and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the Lord God amongst the trees of the garden. And the Lord God called unto Adam and said unto him, Where art thou? And he said, I heard thy voice in the garden, and I was afraid, because I was naked; and I hid myself” (Genesis 3:8-10). Estragon also feels naked, unshod, unprepared even though provision has been made for him—he has been given boots that fit. But hiding is of course useless. And when Estragon calms down he apologizes and asks Vladimir what he should do. They will both stand watch, but no one comes and Vladimir concludes that Estragon had a vision.

The episode is curious because it is the first indication of any kind of spiritual disquiet on Estragon’s part. Up until now he has seen himself as an innocent victim and he has resisted every attempt on Vladimir’s part to consider spiritual matters. That he should fear Godot’s coming is understandable, however, for he has given him no thought up until now. Within the Pascalian context into which we have been placed, those who have spent their lives with no thought of God (in contrast with those who seek Him) must fear falling into the hands “d’un Dieu irrité” (“of an angry God”) (Pascal 76).

Following the tension of this moment our pair will have a fight, again almost

staged like their earlier conversation, and then make up with a second embrace. During their exercises, they decide to do the tree. Vladimir goes first, followed by Estragon. As Estragon staggers with his eyes closed, he asks: "Do you think God sees me?" Interestingly enough he does not speak of Godot, but quite clearly of God and it is while he "does the tree" suggesting perhaps that he, too, has now come to identify himself with the thieves crucified with Christ. When he cries "God have pity on me!" (49+) we realize that this is his first acknowledgment of spiritual need, and it comes on the heels of the terror he experienced at the thought that Godot was really coming. That he should ask for pity, clearly reveals that his attitude has changed. Gone are the sarcastic responses to Vladimir's spiritual reflections of Act 1. There is a change in attitude, but not in character; for he asks that God have pity on him and does not consider his friend. In fact, he shouts: "On me! On me! Pity! On me!" (49+); whereas Vladimir had exclaimed "*We're saved!*" (emphasis mine). Let us not forget that it is also Vladimir who feeds his friend (this in both acts, although in Act 2 he has no carrots left); would protect him against his attackers; gives him his jacket, only to suffer cold himself; and helps him put on the boots.

Much has been said about the transformation in Lucky and Pozzo when they appear for the second time. Pozzo is blind and so now he, the master, is dependent on his slave who actually leads with a rope that is much shorter than before. This is an eloquent commentary on the corrosive nature of power relationships, the vulnerability of the oppressor, and the mutual dependence which can exist between master and slave. The abuse, of course, continues. Lucky is still burdened as before; but things have deteriorated to such a degree that their entrance is marked not by one fall, but by two. When Lucky falls he brings Pozzo down with him. They both lie helpless. This spectacle evokes many scriptural images and injunctions. That Pozzo, the master, should now depend on his slave, following him helplessly, makes us think of Christ's prediction that the first shall be last. We also think of a passage from Revelations: "For you say, 'I am rich; I have grown wealthy; I need nothing,' and you do not know that you are wretched, pitiable, poor, blind, and naked" (Revelation 3:17). It is as though Pozzo has now become what he was all along: wretched, pitiable, poor, and blind. He has also now reaped what he had sown. Most important, though, is the theme of the Fall. It is what Beckett called a "visual theme of the body" (Graver 36). He also called it the visual expression of the common situation; that is, the threat of everything in the play falling (Graver 67). (In this connection, Niklaus Gessner lists no fewer than forty-five stage directions indicating that one of the characters leaves the upright position, which symbolizes the dignity of man.)¹⁴ The doctrine of the Fall is, of course, the Pascalian theme par excellence. It is Pascal who said that "nothing shocks us more forcibly than this doctrine; and yet, without this mystery, the most incomprehensible of all, we are incomprehensible to ourselves (Pascal 69)."¹⁵

At Pozzo and Lucky's entrance, Estragon, who, as we pointed out earlier, doesn't know Godot, asks if it is he, as he did at their first appearance. Vladimir, on the other hand, sees only that reinforcements have come. They were indeed beginning to weaken, but now they are no longer alone. He rejoices that they no longer need to struggle unassisted in their wait for the night or their wait for Godot. The ludicrous nature of these remarks is underlined by Pozzo's cries for help. No savior has arrived for Vladimir or Estragon, but perhaps Pozzo has encountered one. He cries pity and pleads for help from Vladimir and Estragon. He writhes and groans and beats the ground with his fists. He wants to get up but cannot do it alone. Interestingly enough, at this, Estragon wants to go. It is once again Vladimir who objects that they cannot leave because they are waiting for Godot. He also appeals to Estragon's self-interest to get him to considering helping. "Perhaps he has another bone for you" (50). They have Pozzo at their mercy and Estragon proposes to help only under certain conditions. He wants the bone first. He half convinces his friend, but Vladimir thinks better of it at the thought of Lucky who might get going all of a sudden. All of this is reminiscent of the parable of the unjust steward who pleaded for mercy from his master and obtained it, but would not show mercy to his fellow slaves (Matthew 18:23-35). At the end of Act 1 we saw Estragon pleading for pity, now he is being entreated, and, unlike Vladimir, he is unwilling to respond unless he gets something out of it first. It should be noted, however, that this response, or lack thereof, has nothing to do with the abuse he received from Lucky in Act 1. He remembers nothing of it. Nor does he remember that Pozzo had given him some bones. Estragon is simply behaving as he normally does. He will even propose that they give Pozzo a good beating. When Vladimir asks if he meant that they should fall on him in his sleep, we are reminded that Estragon repeatedly suffers from attacks in his sleep, and now he would do the same to Pozzo. Vladimir proposes instead that they take advantage of Pozzo's calls for help to actually help him, in *anticipation* of some reward. This, interestingly enough, mirrors the model of investing oneself for some future return; it is a model that requires faith, or hope in an anticipated return.

But despite his admonition not to waste time in idle discourse, that is precisely what Vladimir will do. As Pozzo cries desperately for help, Vladimir will engage in a prolonged meditation. The cries of help are addressed to all mankind, he says; but right then, all mankind is they and he suggests that, for once, they should represent "the foul brood" worthily (51). The discourse continues with a reflection on why they are there and an observation that they are blessed to know the answer. "In this immense confusion one thing alone is clear. We are waiting for Godot to come— . . . Or for night to fall . . . We are not saints, but we have kept our appointment" (51+). When Vladimir asks how many people can boast as much, Estragon replies, "Billions," which seems to undermine the significance of what his friend has just said; and yet, of our four characters, who do indeed represent all

mankind, only one, Vladimir, is intentionally waiting for Godot.

As the discourse continues it becomes more and more Pascalian in inspiration. He speaks of reason, the deadening effect of habit or custom, the night without end of the abyssal depths, and, if that were not enough, he also mentions boredom, diversion, and solitude in the midst of nothingness—all Pascalian themes. And meanwhile the cries for help go unheeded. When money is offered, Estragon immediately takes note and asks for more, but Vladimir remains caught up in his meditations. When he is finally ready to act, it is not because of the money that has been offered, but rather because he has talked himself out.

Vladimir's effort to rescue Pozzo results in his own fall. Then his cries for help to his friend Estragon are met with indifference. Estragon wants to leave and says: "I'm going" (52+) twice. That is, until something is offered. Vladimir promises him that they will go away together and never come back. Thereupon, Estragon seems ready to help, but his determination falters when Pozzo fouls the air. At this, Vladimir tries to get up by himself, but fails. His failure prompts him to say: "In the fullness of time,"¹⁶ and this alerts us to what is indeed happening in this scene, which is one that has received a great deal of commentary. It is in the fullness of time that the savior came to redeem man from the effects of the fall, and it is in the fullness of time that the savior will come again in glory. What is being communicated in this scene is that no self help or mutual aid will do it. We cannot save ourselves or one another and when we try to do so we find ourselves in worse straights than we were before. Even Vladimir, the best of the lot, falls. In fact, his fall comes precisely because he has tried to play the savior. Both the good and the bad are fallen, both need salvation. This is a basic tenet of the Puritan faith in which Beckett was raised.

Estragon who thinks only of himself, like Pozzo, and who is unwilling to help anyone unless there is something in it for him, stays on his feet the longest. But when he finally stretches out his hand to help his friend, he too will fall. Now they are all groveling on the ground—a stark depiction of man's fallen state. Interestingly enough, Estragon seems content in this situation. He exclaims: "Sweet mother earth!" (53). ("*Ce qu'on est bien par terre*" [138].) and will not even try to get up; instead, he falls even further—into sleep. Vladimir, on the other hand, reacts badly. He has already told his friend to go to Hell (in French "*Fous le camp*" [138]), and now that they are all in the same boat he cannot bear Pozzo whining for help. He says Pozzo can think of nothing but himself. When Estragon suggests that he make Pozzo stop by kicking him in the crotch, Vladimir complies and it is the first time we see him behave in this manner. (In the French version he will also kick Lucky, having been told by Pozzo that it is the only way of getting him going [153].) Vladimir thought he would be attacked when he fell and now he has turned into the attacker himself. Pozzo's cries, which had inspired compassion when Vladimir was on his feet, now become unbearable because Vladimir, too, needs

help.

But Vladimir soon regrets his assault and in the French version sums up what has transpired in this way: "*Il a imploré notre aide. Nous sommes restés sourds. Il a insisté. Nous l'avons battu*" (140). (He begged for our help. We remained deaf. He insisted. We beat him.) Here Estragon also notes: "*C'est pour avoir voulu l'aider que nous sommes dans ce pétrin*" (140). (It is for having wanted to help him that we are in this mess.) Neither of these remarks is in the English version. Then Vladimir thinks of crawling to Pozzo because he fears he might be dying. At Estragon's objection—he does not want to be left alone—Vladimir calls him instead. Then Estragon joins in and when there is no response he suggests trying him with other names. First he tries Abel and then Cain, the names of the children Adam had after the fall—one good, the other bad. Pozzo responds to both names, which prompts Estragon to remark that he is all humanity. He, like all the rest of us, is part victim like Abel and part oppressor, or murderer, like Cain, and we saw as much in Act 1, although it must be said that the Cain nature seemed to be dominant in Pozzo. (This also reminds us of Beckett's remark that one of Estragon's feet is damned and the other blessed.)

Now that the fall has been enacted and its effects demonstrated, including violence on the part of the one character—Vladimir—who up until then had been well-nigh exemplary, the two friends are able to rise. Vladimir attributes it to will-power, suggesting that although we cannot save ourselves we certainly can improve ourselves. We can rise and we can help others to rise. Vladimir suggests that they help Pozzo and, surprisingly, Estragon goes along with the idea and they do indeed help Pozzo to his feet—only to see him fall again. Not only must they help him rise, they must also sustain him in that position—an interesting commentary on the kind of help that really works. Estragon remarks in the French version: "*Il faut qu'il se réhabitue à la station debout*" (143). ("He needs to get used to being on his feet again.") It is then that they discover that Pozzo is blind and that the blind, according to him, have no notion of time. Vladimir responds with incredulity: "I could have sworn it was just the opposite" (55+), thinking perhaps of Estragon who then must also be blind in some way, for he, too, has no notion of time; whereas, Vladimir is acutely aware of time.

At that point, attention turns to Lucky. Pozzo asks them to go and see if he is hurt. Since they both cannot leave Pozzo at once, Vladimir suggests that Estragon go. He protests citing the beating he received from Lucky the day before. (In the French version, Vladimir then remarks that Estragon finally remembers something; but Estragon quickly denies this, explaining that he only knows what Vladimir has told him [148].) Thereupon Vladimir asks him what he is waiting for, and Estragon says, for the first time, that he is waiting for Godot. When Estragon finally approaches Lucky, he does what he has been told—Pozzo said that he should give him a taste of the boot to get him going and Vladimir noted that it would be his

opportunity to avenge himself. But during the assault Estragon injures his foot. He has forgotten the injunction: "Do not avenge yourselves, dear friends, but leave room for divine retribution; for it is written, 'It is Mine to punish; I will pay them back, says the Lord'" (Romans 12:19). Interestingly enough, and again in character, Estragon blames Lucky for the injury to his foot, crying: "Oh the brute!" (56+). Following this, he disposes himself for sleep, for the second time, joining Lucky who also seems to have been sleeping and Pozzo who said that he wondered if he was not still asleep (55+). Only Vladimir is watchful; only he does not sleep. Pozzo has also lost his memory with his sense of time, as has Estragon. He says pointedly to Vladimir: ". . . don't count on me to enlighten you" (57). Only Vladimir remembers.

As Pozzo gets ready to leave, we discover two things: that the bag Lucky carries is filled with sand, undoubtedly representing futility—the futility of Lucky's work as well as the futility of material possessions; and that Lucky is dumb. In the French version Vladimir remarks how much Lucky has changed (152). The blind master is led by the dumb slave whose verbal excesses have turned to silence. The one who danced what Estragon called the Scapegoat's Agony and was to be taken to the Holy Savior's fair to be sold, the one who spoke of divine aphasia, is now mute, reminding us that it is said of Jesus Christ: "He was led as a sheep to the slaughter; and like a lamb dumb before his shearer, so opened he not his mouth. In his humiliation he was deprived of justice" (Isaiah 53:7-8). Jesus is also called the burden-bearer. We are exhorted to cast our burdens on the Lord (Psalm 55:22) and then we are told: "Surely he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows" (Isaiah 53:4).

The violence and abuse heaped on Lucky by his master is perhaps a key to the latter's blindness for the Biblical text teaches: "But he who hates his brother is in the dark and walks in the dark; he does not even know where he is going, because the darkness has blinded his eyes" (I John. 2:11). With this in mind, we are not surprised to hear Pozzo say: "They give birth astride of a grave, the light gleams an instant, then it's night once more" (57+).

After Pozzo and Lucky's departure, Vladimir, now feeling lonely, awakens Estragon who, this time has dreamed he was happy. Still Vladimir will not let him speak of his dream; he instead reflects on what has just transpired. Estragon once again asks if he is sure Pozzo was not Godot. This insistence on Estragon's part probably stems from the fact that Pozzo and Lucky are very much in the image of what he imagines the Christian God(ot) and his Son to be like. Between the two of them they are blind and deaf, blind to the sufferings of humanity and deaf to their cries. God the Father is a cruel and sadistic task master, who even misused his Son. It is no wonder that Estragon was terrified at the thought of their approach. We recall that Estragon views himself as a helpless victim and the result of that mentality seems to be fear, resentment, and guilt.

Vladimir, on the other hand, vehemently rejects this possibility, as he did in Act 1. But now he is less sure. He laments: "I don't know what to think any more" (58). He has clearly been shaken by this encounter with Pozzo and Lucky. It occasioned his own fall and the violent behavior which ensued. And now we see further consequences. He has lost faith. He is now assailed with doubts. Yet when he asks "Was I sleeping while the others suffered?" (58), we understand that this question springs from a profoundly ethical world view, despite the lapse that occurred when he delayed in responding to Pozzo's cries for help. Those who sleep bear some responsibility for their lack of vigilance; yet we know that, on the whole, Vladimir has been watchful and has been concerned with others. In fact, he is the only one of the four of whom that can be said. As Estragon dozes off again, Vladimir acknowledges the fact that tomorrow his friend will know nothing of today. Then he recalls Pozzo's words and adds to them his own somber reflections. Habit has indeed dulled him and he fears that at some level he, too, is asleep and unaware of it.

All of this has deep scriptural resonances. In fact, Pozzo's second coming occasions responses which recall not only the Fall, as indicated above, but also the second coming of Christ. Perhaps most evident is the evocation of the parable of the bridesmaids who went out to meet the bridegroom. "Five of them were foolish and five were prudent. The foolish ones took lamps but took no oil along with them, but the prudent ones took along oil in the flasks with their lamps. And as the bridegroom delayed his coming they all grew drowsy and fell asleep." When the bridegroom's coming was announced at midnight the prudent ones trimmed their lamps and went out to meet him. The foolish ones could not do so because they had no light. Then "those who were ready went in with him to the marriage feast. And the door was shut. Afterwards the rest of the bridesmaids came and said, 'Master, master, open up for us! But he replied. 'I tell you truly, I do not know you.'" The parable concludes with the following exhortation: "So keep watch; for you know neither the day nor the hour when the Son of Man will come" (Matthew 25:1-13). Of our four characters, we remember that Beckett said only Vladimir is "of the light" and we saw that only he has remained vigilant while all the others slept.

Finally, there is also another scripture concerning the second coming which seems pertinent: "When the Son of Man comes, will He find faith on the earth?" (Luke 18:8). At this, we think of how Vladimir has been undermined and of his flagging faith.

At his lowest point, however, when he has frightened himself by saying: "I can't go on" (58+), another messenger from Godot arrives. Once again, the message is the same. Mr. Godot will not come that evening, but he will come the next day without fail. And once again, the messenger fails to recognize Vladimir, although we cannot be sure that the same boy has come twice, it may be his brother. (In the

French version, however, we are told that it is indeed the same boy [157]). Hope is again deferred; yet it is still remarkable that a messenger has indeed come and so hope is sustained, and not unreasonably. It can also be said that the two are apparently in the right place, although Estragon is no longer able to participate in the exchange. He is asleep. In the conversation Vladimir has with the boy we learn that Mr. Godot does nothing (except perhaps send messengers), that the boy's brother is sick, and that Godot has a white beard. This discovery prompts Vladimir to exclaim: "Christ have mercy on us!" (59). The boy repeats the same question that was asked in Act 1: "What am I to tell Mr. Godot, Sir?" But the answer has subtly changed. In Act 1 he said: "Tell him you saw us" (34). Now he says: "Tell him you saw me" (59). Vladimir now stands alone. His frustration, however, with the boy's failure to remember that he saw him the day before, prompts him to violently insist that he not repeat the same scenario the next day. Then he springs forward in an attempt to catch the boy, but the boy avoids him and exits running.

When the sun sets and the moon rises, Estragon wakes and takes off his boots. In the exchange that ensues it is clear that despite his discouragement, Vladimir is determined to come back tomorrow to wait for Godot. His hope has not failed him. The messenger did come. When Estragon suggests that they give up and drop Godot, Vladimir expresses a fear of punishment, and we note that in all the scriptural accounts, which have been alluded to throughout the play, there have indeed always been consequences for lack of faith, blindness, or the failure to be watchful. Not much is required; just believing enough to be there and to remain vigilant. Vladimir does not fear Godot's coming because he has done these things, but he knows that if even these were lacking, there would be consequences. Then he directs our attention to the tree: "Everything's dead but the tree," he says (59+). At this Estragon once again suggests that they hang themselves as he did in Act 1. Apparently the temptation to end it all is one that frequently assails them. But they have no rope; there is only the cord holding up Estragon's trousers. When he removes it to see if it will do, he is left with his pants around his ankles—the ultimate indignity. In typical fashion, however, he does not realize what has happened. When he repeats that he cannot go on, Vladimir assures him that it is not so. There is the morrow which will bring either death at their own hands or salvation, if Godot comes.

As the play ends, Vladimir tells his friend to pull up his trousers then he suggests that they go. Estragon agrees, but they do not move. Are they then truly *homo viator* as I claimed at the beginning of this study? Yes, I believe so; but their journey has repeatedly brought them back to the same place, the place of waiting for Godot. Scripture tells us that hope is the "anchor of the soul" (Hebrews 6:19).

At this point, the question that remains is one of intentionality. Can it reasonably be argued, as Mays has (162), that Beckett's use of Scriptures was not substantive or continuous? I believe that I have demonstrated that these claims are

untenable. Yet it can perhaps be maintained that the characters who enact, enunciate, or embody these Biblical echoes do not comprehend their significance. The characters are not masters of all they do or say. This is appropriate, however; for their creator, Beckett, has likewise admitted that he is not fully in control of all he says and writes:

The kind of work I do is one in which I'm not master of my material. The more Joyce knew the more he could. He's tending toward omniscience and omnipotence as an artist. I'm working with impotence, ignorance. I don't think impotence has been exploited in the past. There seems to be a kind of aesthetic axiom that expression is an achievement—must be an achievement. My little exploration is that whole zone of being that has always been set aside by artists as something unuseable—as something by definition incompatible with art. I think anyone nowadays who pays the slightest attention to his own experience finds it the experience of a non-knower, a non-can-er (somebody who cannot). The other type of artist—the Apollonian—is absolutely foreign to me.¹⁸

Beckett has no illusions concerning his creaturely status, and no desire to play God. There is no hubris in him; just as there are no certainties, one way or the other. Yet it is beyond any doubt that metaphysical questions are probed in this work. It is also clear that within the western tradition serious consideration of transcendental questions is well-nigh impossible without recourse to Scripture.

In my view, what is so compelling about *Waiting for Godot* is that it is cosmic or ontological. It is a play in which something essential is at stake. It entertains the danger of falling into despair and it does not side-step the reality of suffering and evil, yet light and hope and the possibility of salvation are also present in a very real way. Its unfathomable depths are doubtless due to this opposition and to the uncertainty it contains, but it cannot be denied that they are also due to the scriptural echoes that reverberate in it.

Notes

1. In its proper context, however, the remark substantiates a Christian interpretation of the play. Beckett was asked by Colin Duckworth if a Christian interpretation of the play is justified. Beckett responded: "Yes, Christianity is a mythology with which I am perfectly familiar. So naturally, I use it." (Colin Duckworth, *Angels of Darkness* [New York: Barnes & Noble Books, 1972] 18.) James Mays is among those who dismiss the importance of this material. (James Mays, "Allusion and Echo in

Godot” in *Samuel Beckett, Waiting for Godot: A Casebook*, Ruby Cohn, ed. [London: Macmillan, 1987] 162.) I trust that my study effectively counters this stance.

2. Josephine Jacobsen and William R. Mueller claim that Beckett “is squarely . . . in the tradition of the Old Testament prophets, and that of Paul, Augustine, and Calvin.” In *The Testament of Samuel Beckett* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1964) 104.

3. Samuel Beckett, *Waiting for Godot* (New York: Grove Weidenfeld, 1956) 6+. All quotes in English are from this edition. “+” indicates an unnumbered page following a numbered page.

4. John 14:6. The Thompson Chain-Reference Bible, 4th Improved Edition (Indianapolis: B. B. Kirkbride Bible Co., Inc., 1964).

5. In Bert O States, *The Shape of Paradox* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1978) 92. Beckett’s remarks concerning form and chaos are also illuminating in this regard. “What I am saying does not mean that there will henceforth be no form in art. It only means that there will be new form, and that this form will be of such a type that it admits the chaos and does not try to say that the chaos is really something else. The form and the chaos remain separate. The latter is not reduced to the former.” In Deirdre Bair, *A Biography: Samuel Beckett* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1978) 523. And so it is also with light and darkness, hope and hopelessness. Darkness and hopelessness are evident in our play but it must be acknowledged that they coexist with light and hope.

6. Kristin Morrison, “Biblical Allusions in *Waiting for Godot*” in *Approaches to Teaching Beckett’s Waiting for Godot*, June Schlueter and Enoch Brater, eds. (New York: The Modern Language Association of America, 1991) 58.

7. “‘Vladimir is light,’ Beckett once observed, ‘he is oriented towards the sky. He belongs to the tree.’” In Lawrence Graver, *Samuel Beckett: Waiting for Godot* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1989) 33.

8. Gabriel Marcel, *Pour une sagesse tragique et son au-delà* (Paris: Plon, 1968) 306.

9. James Mays notes: “. . . the entire action is situated in the limbo period between Good Friday and Christ’s resurrection” (Mays 165). In other words, between death and life, between darkness and light, between hopelessness and hope.

10. Samuel Beckett, *En attendant Godot* (Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit, 1952) 51. The translations are mine.

11. Blaise Pascal, *Selections from The Thoughts*, Arthur H. Beattie, trans. and ed. (Wheeling, Illinois: Harlan Davidson, Inc., 1965) 86-90.

12. This and other differences between the French and English versions seem to corroborate Kristin Morrison’s contention that some of the Biblical allusions in the play are the result of the fact that “the words and myths of the Bible are so significant a part of his cultural and intellectual world that they need no elaboration” (Morrison 61). The implication is that, in English, Beckett can hardly avoid a Biblical resonance in his language because of his religious upbringing. I will get back to this point in my conclusion.

13. This remark appears in both versions despite the fact that in the English version the tree is not really covered with leaves.

14. Martin Esslin, *The Theatre of the Absurd* (Garden City: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1961) 15.

15. In *The Shape of Paradox*, Bert O. States quotes Coleridge's thoughts on the Fall unaware that he undoubtedly borrowed them from Pascal (States 2).

16. It should be noted that the French version has "Tôt ou tard" instead of "In the fullness of time," suggesting once again that scriptural resonances are more abundant in English than in French.

17. Dierdre Bair informs us that "he also called himself a Puritan and, in the most important part of his self-analysis, said Puritanism comprised the simple, straightforward and dominant part of his personality . . ." (Bair 198).

18. In Norman Mailer, "A Public Notice: Norman Mailer" in *Casebook for Waiting on Godot*, Ruby Cohn, ed. (New York: Grove Press, 1967) 70-71.