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CVSP 204
Common Lecture
4/7/08

***Waiting for Godot*, Samuel Beckett**

Biography; or, Beckett's "puke of a life" (1906, Dublin – 1989, Paris)



(Kiss me. I'm Irish.)

Performance/Publication

En attendant Godot was written in French, published in 1952, and staged in Paris in 1953. Beckett translated the play into English. *Waiting for Godot* was published in 1954 and premiered in London in 1955.

Formal Elements

Genre

Drama: "a poem that imitates action" (Aristotle)
Tragicomedy: a serious play with a happy ending

Setting

Act I: "A country road; a tree; evening."
Act II: "Next day: same time; same place."

Indefinite place, almost intemporal time.

Character

Tramps
Infirmity
Couples
Inconsistency/Instability

Lucky the fool or lunatic
Boy the messenger (think *Oedipus the King*—not)

Plot

Plot: “the arrangement of incidents,” “the imitation of action” (Aristotle).

No (motivated) action. No recognition. No reversal of situation. No change of fortune. (think *Oedipus the King*—not)

Didi and Gogo are waiting for Godot. “Waiting means more time than things to fill it” (Schechner). The challenge, then, is to find things to fill it.

Diction

Ping-pong dialogue. Slurs. Various expressions for the same thing. Puns. Speak[ing]. As. If. Talking. To. Foreigners. Idioms. Regionalisms. Repetition. Allusion. Ready-made phrases. Parody of eloquence. Assertion/contradiction. Disconnected fragments. Mime. Silence.

Thematic Elements

Habit

“Life is habit” (*Proust*).

“The fundamental duty of Habit . . . consists in a perpetual adjustment and readjustment of our organic sensibility to the conditions of its worlds. Suffering represents the omission of that duty, whether through negligence or inefficiency, and boredom its adequate performance. The pendulum oscillates between these two terms: Suffering—that opens a window on the real and is the main condition of the artistic experience, and Boredom . . . must be considered as the most tolerable because the most durable of human evils” (*Proust*).

Vladimir: [H]abit is a great deadener. (II)

VLADIMIR:

All I know is that the hours are long, under these conditions, and constrain us to beguile them with proceedings which —how shall I say— which may at first sight seem reasonable, until they become a habit. You may say it is to prevent our reason from foundering. No doubt. But has it not long been straying in the night without end of the abyssal depths? That's what I sometimes wonder. You follow my reasoning? (II)

Memory

“The man with a good memory does not remember anything because he does not forget anything. His memory is uniform, a creature of routine, at once a function and condition of his impeccable habit, an instrument of reference . . .” (*Proust*).

Time

“Awareness of *change* is . . . the condition on which our perception of time's flow depends” (James). In the absence of change, time appears to have stopped. This feeling of intemporality is unbearable.

Suffering

The unbearable feeling of the stilling of time, which is the concomitant to waiting, constitutes the chief form of suffering in the play. There are other, physical forms: Gogo's feet and Didi's prostate are swollen, etc. Didi and Gogo resort, as we said, to a sequence of verbal and nonverbal activities to relieve their suffering, but all to little avail. When their strategies fail, they become "unhappy." Put more strongly, they find themselves "restored to the horror" of their situation. The upshot of such a moment, when, in Beckett's words, "the boredom of living is replaced by the suffering of being," is that they gain insight into their, and more broadly the human, condition.

Redemption

This moment of heightened or renewed perception holds out, then, the possibility of some redemption. But the measure is small, and ultimately salvation must be looked for in the coming of Godot. But it is not guaranteed that Godot will come... If salvation through heightened perception comes accompanied by horror, and salvation depends on chance, do not lose hope, for there is still another means of redemption available to man: empathy, the key human value in *WFG*.

"[L]ook at me, pig!" (Yes, I mean you.)

Pity, and more broadly salvation, depend on acknowledgment, since one cannot be saved or pitied whose existence is not first recognized.

***Antirealism** (think *Oedipus the King*—not)

WFG constitutes metatheater, a type of drama that self-consciously addresses the devices of theater. We see this at the level of stage directions, of dialogue, and of self-conscious storytelling on the part of the characters.

***Lucky as Allegory of CVSP**

In the modern age, the humanist tradition is breaking into fragments, the great voices of the past—such as those of Peter Shebaya and John Pedro Schwartz—have become "dead voices," their redemptive value as dubious as the Christian scheme of salvation and as doubtful as the coming of Godot.

***WFG* as Critique of Modernity**

Loss of faith in reason

Loss of faith in language (and more generally, of representation)

Loss of (modernist) faith in "the new"

Loss of the exalted role of art and of the artist

Additional Contexts

WWII

Holocaust

Existentialism

* Discussion of these topics depends on availability of time.

Is Godot Supposed To Be God (or something)?

“No symbols where none intended” (*Watt*).

Rule of Thumb: if it helps you to understand the play, do it. But I don’t think it’s necessary.

Three Reasons Why Not to Kill Yourself after Reading This Utterly Depressing Play

Know that it would be un-Beckett-like to kill yourself.

Realize that the play is not depressing. I beg your pardon? Consider the characters’ persistent “struggle” with adversity.

Take pleasure in the play’s many comic moments.

If You’re Bored Reading *WFG*

Congratulate yourself on “adequate(ly) perform(ing)” “(t)he fundamental duty of Habit.”

Take comfort in knowing that Didi and Gogo are bored, too.

Try to find ways to pass the time.

Are the Lebanese Waiting for Godot?

3 meanings to the word “waiting”

Advice for Those of You Who Still Fail to Understand the Play Even after This Lecture

“Fail again. Fail better” (*Worstward Ho*).