

BECKETT  
*Waiting for Godot*

\*

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## CHAPTER 1

### BECKETT BEFORE *WAITING* *FOR GODOT*

Samuel Barclay Beckett was born on 13 April 1906 (Good Friday). The anguish that pervades his plays has no discernible root in his childhood experiences. On the contrary, he appears to have enjoyed a happy childhood, despite being somewhat introverted and reclusive. He had a gift for games and enjoyed excelling in all kinds of sporting contests: he was light heavyweight boxing champion and opening batsman for his school as well as being a passionate chess and bridge player.<sup>1</sup> At Trinity College, Dublin, he achieved first-class honours in French and Italian before going on to spend a couple of years as *lecteur* at the prestigious Ecole Normale Supérieure in Paris. Here he met James Joyce and his friends, and published his first essay ('Dante . . . Bruno. Vico . . . Joyce') as well as his first short story. When in 1930 he returned to Trinity College, to a lectureship in French, all seemed set for a glittering career.

But after only four terms at Trinity, at Christmas 1931, he resigned his post, leaving Ireland for Germany, and then Paris, where he spent several months writing his first novel, *Dream of Fair to Middling Women* (not published until 1993). From then on, with brief visits home, he was to live in exile throughout his life, gradually fixing on Paris as his permanent place of abode. He spent time with his uncle's family in Kassel in Germany, where he became emotionally attached to his cousin Peggy Sinclair and extended his interest in fine art, since his uncle was at this time a picture dealer. On visits home, he maintained a good relationship with his father, but found his mother harder to relate to, both desiring her affection and approval but shrinking

from her Protestant middle-class values. In early Summer 1933, he lost the two people he cared for most in quick succession: in May, Peggy Sinclair died of tuberculosis, and the following month his father suffered a fatal heart attack. Beckett went into a period of prolonged depression. He was in London during 1934 and 1935, where he underwent psychiatry for a short time. He also published a collection of stories entitled *More Pricks than Kicks* with Chatto and Windus, and wrote his second novel, *Murphy*. In 1936–7 he spent six months travelling around Germany, visiting acquaintances and art galleries. It was during this period that he saw Caspar David Friedrich's painting *Two Men Observing the Moon* in Dresden (a painting to which he referred in the production notebook for *Godot*), and also met the Munich dialect comedian Karl Valentin.

He returned home to Ireland for another six months before taking up residence again in Paris. An embarrassing return to Dublin to stand as witness in a family libel case at the end of 1937 resulted in his being publicly branded a 'bawd and blasphemer from Paris' and strengthened his dislike of Irish parochialism. In Paris, he renewed and extended his earlier acquaintance with Joyce's circle and with a number of avant-garde artists, began to write poems in French and, in 1938, had the satisfaction of seeing his novel *Murphy* published in London by Routledge. He had a brief affair with the American heiress and art collector Peggy Guggenheim, was stabbed in a street brawl and, while he was recovering in hospital, began a close friendship with Suzanne Deschevaux-Dumesnil, who was to become his lifelong partner. When war broke out he was visiting his mother in Ireland, but immediately returned to stay in France with Suzanne. In 1941 he joined a resistance group, recruited by his close friend Alfred Péron. A year later, when the network was betrayed to the Gestapo and Péron was arrested, Beckett and Suzanne took refuge in Provence, in a village of the Vaucluse called Roussillon d'Apt. *Waiting for Godot* contains several references to this part of France, including the name of the farmer for whom Beckett worked, Bonnelly, and the peculiar

red colour of the earth.<sup>2</sup> During this time, he wrote *Watt* as a kind of escape from the dreadful times he was living through.

The war years had a decisive influence on Beckett. A new note of urgency begins to replace the self-consciously clever verbal pyrotechnics of some of his early writing, and his vision no longer seems so exclusively private in its inspiration. His biographer James Knowlson wrote that 'it is difficult to imagine him writing the stories, novels and plays that he produced in the creative maelstrom of the immediate postwar period without the experience of those five years. It was one thing to appreciate fear, danger, anxiety and deprivation intellectually. It was quite another to live them himself.'<sup>3</sup> Stanley Gontarski went further, noting that 'war is latent in much of Beckett's work', and that 'despite very little direct reference to the war itself, *Waiting for Godot* grew out of Beckett's war experiences'.<sup>4</sup> These experiences included the channelling of secret information (for which he was awarded the Croix de Guerre in 1945), all the anguish of waiting for contacts in dangerous circumstances, of seeing friends betrayed, hearing of their torture and death, of hiding in fields and ditches, and of being permanently hungry. Even after the Liberation of France, Beckett accepted hard physical labour and a share in the sufferings of others, when he volunteered to work for five months in a hospital being run by the Irish Red Cross at Saint-Lô in Normandy.

When he finally settled back into his Paris flat in 1946, he experienced an extraordinarily fertile period. He described it as 'a frenzy of writing' and, in the course of the next four years, he found time for little else. Between 1946 and 1950, Beckett wrote his first novel in French, *Mercier et Camier*, four short *nouvelles*, and the three novels of the trilogy *Molloy*; *Malone meurt*; *L'Innommable*, as well as two complete plays, *Eleutheria* and *En attendant Godot*. The change of language (from English to French) together with the enthusiasm of Jérôme Lindon, then a young publisher who had recently founded Editions de Minuit, led to his becoming as much a French author as an Irish one. His novels and plays were taken up in France before they



became famous in the English-speaking world, and he continued to live in Paris, until his death in 1989.

Much has been written about Beckett's friendship with the Joyce family and his links with significant figures in the literary avant-garde at this time. There is comparatively little evidence about his theatrical tastes. He was always something of a recluse, and the extrovert exuberance commonly associated with theatre circles was not for him. He was drawn to both painting and music, spending many hours in art galleries, and, especially after he met Suzanne (a pianist), attending concerts. But his visits to the theatre were rarer. As a young man in Dublin he had been a regular attender at the Abbey Theatre, where he was impressed by the plays of O'Casey, W. B. Yeats and, especially, J. M. Synge. When asked by Knowlson which playwrights had influenced him, he mentioned only Synge.<sup>5</sup> Katharine Worth comments on 'the affinities between the blind couple who make the world for themselves from words in [Synge's] *The Well of the Saints* and Beckett's lonely tale-spinners',<sup>6</sup> and also recalls Beckett telling her that *At the Hawk's Well* was his favourite among Yeats' plays. His theatre-going in Dublin was not limited to literary theatre, however: he had also attended the music hall, circus and cinema, and developed a special admiration for Buster Keaton and Charlie Chaplin. He was always drawn to melancholy clowns, and was deeply moved by his meeting with Karl Valentin in Munich in 1937; after seeing him perform he wrote that he was a 'real quality comedian, exuding depression, perhaps past his best'.<sup>7</sup> Although his circle of acquaintances included few actors, many of his friends were artists who had been active in the performance events of the Dada and early Surrealist movements, such as Marcel Duchamp, Francis Picabia and the founding father of Dada, Tristan Tzara. Their importance is discussed below, in the section on avant-garde performance.

During the war years, Beckett had little opportunity for attending artistic functions of any kind, especially after 1942, when he and Suzanne were hiding from the Gestapo in the Vaucluse. In the second half of 1945 his work at Saint-Lô kept him fully occupied, and after his

return to Paris in 1946 conditions were very difficult: he and Suzanne lived from hand to mouth on her earnings as a piano teacher, and he seldom attended public functions of any kind. For *Eleutheria* and *En attendant Godot*, he appears to have drawn not on the theatre life of contemporary Paris but on his friendship with men such as Tristan Tzara and his own earliest experiment in dramatic performance. This had been when he was still lecturing at Trinity in 1931, when he had collaborated on a burlesque parody of Corneille's masterpiece *Le Cid*, retitled *Le Kid*, which is discussed in the next section.

Why Beckett turned to drama at this point in his writing life is an intriguing question which may be answered in a number of different ways. To Colin Duckworth (editor of the first scholarly edition of *En attendant Godot*) he said, 'I began to write *Godot* as a relaxation, to get away from the awful prose I was writing at that time.'<sup>8</sup> This may be true, but says nothing about why he had already begun and completed *Eleutheria* early in 1947. *En attendant Godot* was written over a comparatively short period: the first page of the manuscript is dated '9 October 1948' and the last '29 January 1949'. The 'awful prose' to which he referred was the trilogy of novels on which he was working at this time, novels grounded in despair at the failure of language to give meaning to human existence. Michael Robinson sums it up: 'By the end of the trilogy, the dichotomy of which Beckett speaks in the *Three Dialogues*, the obligation to write and the nothing to write, becomes irreconcilable. The hero is forced into repeatedly denying a valid meaning to his words: Beckett is left with a voice in the void that can never know itself, must find itself, has only words with which to achieve this and yet lies in every word it speaks.'<sup>9</sup>

Robinson considers that 'Beckett's decision to turn to the theatre arose from this situation'. If language was fundamentally untrustworthy, then perhaps he could expect more of an art form in which language is not the only means of communication, but which can orchestrate all the different elements invoked by Edward Gordon Craig and can use each to comment upon the other. 'The theatre allows Beckett a double freedom; the opportunity to explore the blank

spaces between the words and the ability to provide visual evidence of the untrustworthiness of language.<sup>10</sup> Above all, theatre introduces the element of time in a concrete, experiential form not possible in prose fiction. Ross Chambers points to a sentence from Molloy:

My life, my life, now I speak of it as something over, now as of a joke which still goes on, and it is neither, for at the same time it is over and it goes on, and is there any tense for that?<sup>11</sup>

Chambers suggests that it was 'this failure of language to express a certain experience of time that turned Beckett's attention to the theatre, where he was able to create that experience with a fragment of actual time instead of trying to capture it in a linguistic structure that, in fact, denied its existence'.<sup>12</sup>

These accounts of Beckett turning to theatre as the solution to a creative and artistic impasse are persuasive, but in turn raise a further question: what theatre would he turn to? For Beckett's prose (and poetry) had showed him to be at the forefront of the avant-garde of his day, and he was not likely to slip comfortably into traditional models of dramatic construction. This was especially true if, as Robinson and Chambers suggest, his interest was drawn less to the dramatic text than to all the other dimensions of performance and production. His first full-length drama, *Eleutheria*, shows him very clearly experimenting with the avant-garde theatrical forms of the 1920s and 1930s as a sort of 'clearing of the decks' before arriving at his own theatrical style with *En attendant Godot*. In particular, he drew inspiration from the experiments of the Dada and Surrealist movements, just as he had done in his poetry.

#### DADA, SURREALISM AND THE AVANT-GARDE PERFORMANCE TRADITION IN FRANCE

The Dada movement, which flourished in Zurich from 1916 until 1920 and then continued in Paris, transforming itself into Surrealism, was based on a group of what would now be termed performance artists. The prime mover, Tristan Tzara, was the first

twentieth-century artist to make protest and provocation a fundamental principle of all that he did, and the first to enlist sculpture, painting, poetry and music as well as theatre performance in this venture. Annabelle Melzer, the historian of Dada and Surrealist performance, has written that ‘there is hardly a theatrical “innovation” perpetrated on our contemporary audiences by the environmental and psycho-physical theatres, the happening and the event, which had not been explored before 1924 by Tzara, his cohorts and disciples.’<sup>13</sup>

The performances given by members of the Dada group in Zurich and, later, in Paris, were carefully designed to outrage and provoke their audiences in every possible way, but especially by attacking their belief in the value of art itself. ‘Art is useless and impossible to justify’, declared Francis Picabia.<sup>14</sup> The very name Dada was chosen for its lack of meaning or definition (though many attempts have been made to give it one – almost as many meanings as have been suggested for *Godot*) and Tzara’s manifestos demonstrate Dada’s careful attempt to avoid definition.<sup>15</sup> Beckett has described *Godot* as a play striving all the time to avoid definition but this concern to avoid definition is most flagrantly evident in the central character of *Eleutheria*, whose refusal to define himself provokes all the other characters to fury: ‘Prenez un peu de contour, pour l’amour de Dieu’ (‘Take on some sort of shape, for the love of God’), says one of them.<sup>16</sup>

Dada’s originality lay in its systematic reversal of every quality assumed to contribute to a work of art. As well as hurling verbal insults at their audience, the performers at the Cabaret Voltaire in Zurich insulted their expectations of what a performance should consist of, exploiting the captive nature of any live audience, and using this to provoke them in every way possible. One of these was to devalue language; Hugo Ball’s declamation of nonsense poems became a regular feature of Dada evenings, when he would stand up dressed in a cardboard hat and costume and declaim, for example:

gadji beri bimba  
glandridi lauri lonni cadori  
gadjama bim beri glassala . . .<sup>17</sup>

Melzer writes that ‘for Ball, words were conceived of as being meaningful by being reminiscent of other words, or rather sounds “touching lightly on a hundred ideas without naming them”’. In August 1916 Ball wrote: ‘Language is not the only means of expression. It is not capable of communicating the most profound experiences.’<sup>18</sup> Dada’s search for ways of overcoming this perceived failure of language through live performance has obvious links with the preoccupations of Beckett in 1947 and 1948.

Since Dada’s aim was to disrupt every established canon and to avoid definition, it was bound to burn out after a short time. Indeed, the provocative effect of performances which abuse their audiences is quickly lost when the audiences come expecting to be abused. Tristan Tzara moved to Paris in 1920 and various *manifestations* and *soirées* took place whose chief purpose was again provocation. Members of the group involved went on to found the Surrealist movement. In the first four years of the 1920s, a number of plays and sketches of combined Surrealist and Dada inspiration were performed, including Cocteau’s *Les Mariés de la Tour Eiffel* (1921), Ribemont-Dessaignes’ *Le Serin muet*, *Le Zizi de Dada* and *Le Partage des os* (1921), Tzara’s *Le Coeur à gaz* (1922), Vitrac’s *Entrée libre* (1922) and *Les Mystères de l’amour* (1923) and Artaud’s *Le Jet de sang* (1924). These performances, though very different from one another, all shared an underlying ambition, which was to shock or destabilise their audiences. The only one who proved sufficiently commercial to have his work regularly performed was Jean Cocteau, whose work Beckett certainly knew.

Among Cocteau’s plays, *Orphée* (1926) stands out for its mixture of classical theme with Surrealist dramatic technique and music-hall jokes. A key character introduced by Cocteau is Heurtebise, a glazier. He appears in Scene 2 in response to Orphée’s deliberate smashing of a window-pane and retains a central role throughout the play. In *Eleutheria*, Beckett must surely intend an echo of Cocteau’s work when Victor deliberately breaks a window (at the start of Act II) only to find that a glazier appears, as if by magic. As in Cocteau’s play, the

glazier then remains, playing a central role throughout the remaining two acts. Both glaziers might be traced back to a common origin in Strindberg's *Dream Play*, were it not for the fact that Beckett denied having read Strindberg's work before writing *Eleutheria* and *Godot*.<sup>19</sup>

#### LE KID AND ELEUTHERIA

These experiments of the avant-garde theatre in Paris filtered through to members of the Trinity College French department with the usual time-lapse of a few years that it takes for academic institutions to wake up to new artistic developments. They clearly inspired a student production given in 1931. This was devised by Beckett, in collaboration with Georges Pelorson (the department's French language assistant), and parodied Corneille's *Le Cid*, under the punning title *Le Kid* (Charlie Chaplin's film *The Kid* had come out ten years earlier). Since the text of this parody is lost, information about it can only be gleaned from contemporary accounts and the memories of those involved. According to Georges Pelorson, who was responsible for the production, it was he and not Beckett who did the work of cutting up Corneille's text, while Beckett's only original contribution was the title.<sup>20</sup>

Whatever the truth, it is certain that Beckett took part, playing the role of Don Diègue and delivering his famous speech at the end of the first act, 'O rage! ô désespoir! ô vieillesse ennemie!', to a strict time limit set by an alarm clock. The alarm began to ring before he had finished, and so his delivery of the last part of the speech became faster and faster 'until he built up a wild, crazy momentum, producing a torrent of sound that has been aptly compared with the effect of Lucky's extravagant monologue in *Waiting for Godot*'.<sup>21</sup> Other contemporary accounts quoted by Knowlson make it clear that the performance relied on a series of comic gags which recalled the provocative performances of the Dada movement, in which everything to do with military glory was mocked. As Don Diègue, Beckett carried an umbrella in place of a sword. Don Gomès was played by Pelorson in

the uniform of a German general borrowed from the previous year's production, which had been Giraudoux's *Siegfried*. Balloons were released on stage and, as in Apollinaire's *Les Mamelles de Tirésias*, the general leapt off the stage and ran all over the auditorium, trying to burst them with his sabre. Corneille's heroes all wore modern dress and Corneille's heroic glorification of both love and war were treated in grotesque, deflating style. Above all the burlesque reduction of a grand hero to a Chaplinesque child is entirely in the Dada spirit.

Taking their cue from the historic seventeenth-century quarrel about whether Corneille's play observed the classical unities of time, place and action, many of the jokes drew on conventions of time. Beckett was dressed up to look like Old Father Time, with a long white beard. A silent figure seated on a ladder was supposed to turn the hands of a large clock face through twenty-four hours in the course of the action. He kept falling asleep and having to be prodded awake by the actors. The play concluded with a barman uttering the traditional cry used to indicate the imminent closing of a pub: 'Time, Gentlemen, please!'. Much of this was clearly inspired, as Knowlson points out, by the irreverence and iconoclasm of early Dada performance. Irreverence and iconoclasm were permanent features of Beckett's writing, especially his writing of the 1930s. Mostly, these tendencies found expression in scatological word play and in aggressive challenges to traditional expectations of poetic or narrative structure. The exploitation of performance as a means of undermining or destroying traditional assumptions seems not to have occurred to Beckett again until after the war.

Human existence within time is demonstrably the theme Beckett felt could most appropriately find expression on stage, from Don Diègue's alarm clock in *Le Kid*, to the endless wait of Vladimir and Estragon and beyond. What *Eleutheria* demonstrates is that, just as he had done in *Le Kid*, Beckett at first turned to the techniques of Dada and Surrealist performance before he was able to discover his own. Knowlson detects in *Eleutheria* echoes of Pirandello, Sheridan, Strindberg, Sophocles, Molière, Ibsen, Yeats, Hauptmann

and Shakespeare, but fails to allude to the more obvious recent antecedents.<sup>22</sup> These can be found in the work of those who had mounted the most radical challenge to performance conventions – just as in the novel he was drawn to Joyce, who was challenging its very structure.

Although the Surrealist movement produced relatively little performance work to match the force and explosive energy of Dada, several of the Surrealists wrote sketches or plays, and Antonin Artaud, the most radical reformer of all, was a member of the Surrealist group from 1924 to 1926. The fact that Beckett seldom attended theatre performances was no bar to his knowing the work of Artaud and other Surrealists, since they were so seldom performed on the Paris stage. But they were much discussed, especially in the circles frequented by Beckett, and he certainly knew their work: he translated poems by Breton, Eluard, Crevel and Tzara for various literary journals, and, as John Fletcher has pointed out, ‘his verse throughout his career shows the influence of Surrealist technique’.<sup>23</sup> *Eleutheria* presents many similarities with the Surrealist sketches of Breton and Soupault, of Ribemont-Dessaignes, of Tzara and of Vitrac. In the first place, it follows the Surrealist fashion in setting the action in a dream space. The dream is suggested by the fact that the anti-hero, Victor, is present throughout, even when the action does not concern him, and is shown asleep at the start of the first and third acts. Beckett anticipates a device which Adamov was to use some years later in *Le Professeur Taranne*: part of the stage space is left empty, with the action confined to the other part. The empty space becomes that of the dreamer.

Many of the Surrealist plays employed passages of dialogue derived from the technique known as automatic writing – Vitrac’s *Les Mystères de l’amour* is a prime example. In writing *Eleutheria*, Beckett does not appear to have made use of automatic writing, but much of the play is reminiscent of it, using dialogue that borders on the absurd, bearing strong similarities to Ionesco’s early plays. This is partly because, as in *La Cantatrice chauve* or *Jacques*, its nonsense dialogue is used to send up respectable middle-class society – also a feature of many Surrealist



plays of the pre-war period. Another device often used in Surrealist plays, which Beckett borrows in *Eleutheria*, is that of an audience member who jumps on stage to protest about the incomprehensibility or irrelevance of the action. In *Eleutheria*, the interloper from the audience remains on stage for the greater part of the third act.

Most striking of all, however, is the debt that *Eleutheria* owes to the play generally considered the most successful dramatic manifestation of Surrealism, Vitrac's *Victor, ou les Enfants au pouvoir*. Like Vitrac's play, Beckett's is constructed in the shape of a self-conscious and rather heavy-handed parody of the bourgeois *drame*. Like Vitrac's hero, Beckett's is named Victor, and there is much to suggest that Beckett intended his Victor as a counterpart to the Victor of Vitrac. Both are figures of the rebellious son who upsets the expectations of his respectable bourgeois family and reveals their double standards. But whereas Vitrac's child is more advanced and more active and more intelligent than the adults, Beckett's character is just the reverse: he is completely passive, refuses to move from his bed, and rejects all attempts to cajole him into joining 'normal' life or into explaining what he stands for. Vitrac's Victor represents the libido freed from the normal constraints imposed on it; Beckett's Victor desires only to be left alone.

Vitrac was Artaud's partner in establishing a theatre named after Alfred Jarry in 1927. Here, they presented two of Vitrac's plays: *Les Mystères de l'amour* and *Victor, ou les Enfants au pouvoir*, as well as others including Strindberg's *Dream Play*. Although Artaud had very little active involvement with theatre after his production of *Les Cenci* in 1935, he continued to be an influential presence through his writings (*Le Théâtre et son double* first appeared in 1938) and through his friends, on whom he made great demands. These included Roger Blin and Arthur Adamov, who edited a literary review, *L'Heure Nouvelle* (two issues only, in 1945 and 1946), which expressed an attitude to language not unlike that of Beckett at this period.

Adamov, like Beckett, had spent the 1930s on the fringes of literary and artistic circles in Paris, occasionally earning money from

translations. Like Beckett, too, he did not begin to write plays until the late 1940s. When he did turn to theatre, his plays bore the stamp of both the Surrealist experiments and the theories of Artaud. In a preface first published in 1950, he argued that ‘theatre as I understand it is linked utterly and absolutely to performance’.<sup>24</sup> Like Artaud, he believed that the only theatre worthy of the name was one ‘in which everything, from conception to achievement, only has value or existence to the extent that it takes concrete shape on the stage’.<sup>25</sup>

Adamov went on to designate this desired quality as ‘literality’: ‘What I should like to see in the theatre, and what I have attempted to put into practice in my plays, is for the manifestation of content to coincide literally, concretely, physically, with the content itself.’<sup>26</sup> This recalls Beckett’s approving comment on Joyce: ‘here form *is* content, content *is* form’.<sup>27</sup> Beckett’s plays all demonstrate a similar striving for mastery of theatrical form in which the play only achieves full expression when it takes place in real time and space on the stage. No doubt Blin’s close involvement with both Artaud and Adamov enabled him to understand from the very beginning this quality in Beckett’s work when, in 1949, he was given his first two plays to read. For Blin, the principles of Artaud continued to be vital to his understanding of Beckett. To Beckett’s first biographer, Deirdre Bair, Blin said that Beckett was ‘one of the two most important people in my life. He and Artaud divide my sentiments between them.’<sup>28</sup> When Blin’s production of *En attendant Godot* opened at the Théâtre de Babylone in 1953, it took its place, quite deliberately and self-consciously, in this tradition of French avant-garde theatre. This will be examined in more detail in chapter 3.