ICON READERS' GUIDES

Samuel Beckett

Waiting for Godot

Endgame

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ICON BOOKS

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Contents

INTRODUCTION 5

Places the plays in the context of Beckett's writing life, and introduces the critical approaches to be considered in the Guide.

CHAPTER ONE 9

First Responses to *Waiting for Godot* and *Endgame*

This chapter covers a range of initial responses to *Waiting for Godot* and *Endgame*, and is split into two sections.

1. Nothing Happens Twice: Reviews and Early Journalism
This section looks at a range of reactions to the first performances of the plays, and considers the scope and the nature of their initial impact. It includes extracts from reviews by critics such as Kenneth Tynan, Harold Hobson, Patrick Kavanagh, Jacques Lemarchand and Vivian Mercier.

2. Presence, Negativity and the Human Condition: First Essays
Moving on from early journalism and reviews, this section looks in more detail at two of the first full-length essayistic responses to the plays. The section reads Martin Esslin's humanist reading of the plays as examples of the 'Theatre of the Absurd', against Adorno's Marxist reading of *Endgame* as a critique of post-war European culture.

CHAPTER TWO 51

Humanising the Void

This chapter traces the development of a liberal humanist reading of the plays, from the sixties to the present day, and is split into two sections.

1. New Criticism and Esslin's Three Categories
This section looks at Martin Esslin's influential introduction to his 1965 collection of essays. It discusses and lays out the three modes of critical enquiry that Esslin suggests are valid responses to Beckett's writing.

2. Kenner, Cohn and the Liberal Humanist Beckett
This section traces the development of humanist readings of the plays as they have developed from Esslin's work onwards, focusing particularly on the work of Ruby Cohn (with extracts from *Samuel Beckett: The Comic Gamut*) and Hugh Kenner (with extracts from *A Reader's Guide to Samuel Beckett* and *Samuel Beckett: A Critical Study*).

CHAPTER THREE 94

Beckett and the Emergence of Theory

This chapter traces the development of other theoretical approaches, as they have grown up alongside the more dominant liberal humanist paradigm discussed in chapter two, and is split into three sections.

1. Beckett, Derrida and the Resistance to Theory
This section considers the relative paucity of theoretical approaches to Beckett, focusing on Derrida's discussion of his own reluctance to embark on a reading of Beckett's work.

2. Beckett, Iser and Reader Response
This section looks back to the seventies, and discusses the emergence of a 'reader response' approach to *Waiting for Godot*. It includes extracts from Wolfgang Iser's *The Implied Reader*, and from his essay entitled 'Countersensical Comedy and Audience Response in Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*'.

3. Beckett, Post-structuralism and Feminism
This section looks at the emergence in the late eighties of post-structuralist and deconstructive-feminist readings of *Waiting for Godot* and *Endgame*. It includes extracts from Steven Connor's essay entitled 'The Doubling of Presence in *Waiting for Godot* and *Endgame*', and from Mary Bryden's essay entitled 'Gender in Transition'.

CHAPTER FOUR 137

Political Criticism

This chapter discusses the growth of an overtly political criticism, as it has developed from Adorno's Marxist reading of *Endgame*. It includes extracts from Ernst Fischer's seventies Marxist work, *Art Against Ideology*, from Werner Huber's consideration of the relation between Beckett and Bertolt Brecht, and from Declan Kiberd's reading of *Godot* and *Endgame* as post-colonial texts in *Inventing Ireland*.

NOTES 168

SELECT BIBLIOGRAPHY 178

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS 185

INDEX 186

INTRODUCTION

SAMUEL BECKETT wrote the two plays for which he is best known, *Waiting for Godot* and *Endgame*, in the middle phase of his writing career. *Waiting for Godot* was written in French, as *En attendant Godot*, between October 1948 and January 1949, in the midst of a frantic burst of activity that produced two plays, three novels and several short stories.[1] The first draft of *Endgame* was also written in French, as *Fin de partie*, in 1955, after his frenzy of prose writing had come to a close with *The Unnamable* (which was published in French in 1953). The impact that these plays had, both on Beckett's career, and on post-war European culture, was enormous. The success of the first productions of *Godot* in 1953 took Beckett from obscurity to notoriety and, in its total disregard for existing conventions, threw the dramatic world into an excited, confused consternation. With the first productions of *Fin de partie* in London in 1958, Beckett emerged as a playwright of extraordinary radicalism and extreme dramatic precision, whose vision of life in the twentieth century became, for many, definitive. His starkly vivid stage images articulated a post-war experience that had previously been inarticulable, and in doing so gave birth to a new drama.

The critical response to *Godot* and *Endgame* has reflected both the cultural importance of the plays and their originality. Whilst the general recognition of the drama's importance has been testified to by the vast quantity of critical work it has produced in a relatively short period of time, the originality of the plays is reflected in the uncertainty and confusion with which they were first received by the critical community. The boldness with which *Godot* undermined dramatic conventions caused a huge sensation, and the play commanded a great deal of attention, but the very newness that so distinguished it made it very hard to interpret, or even to describe. It seemed to their first audiences that both *Godot* and *Endgame* achieved their effects by the stubborn refusal to meet all expectations; the apparatuses of drama, such as plot, setting, catastrophe, were all abandoned, and with them went the conventions that allowed the critic to pass educated and sound judgement. None of the criteria by which good drama was measured appeared to be met in these plays, and yet here they were, looking good. In the very early reviews,

critics responded to this undermining of established theatrical codes in two ways – they either dismissed the plays as trivial nonsense, or they saw them as a profoundly challenging dramatic development that required critics and dramatists alike to rethink the conventions that had sustained theatre thus far. For those critics in the latter category, however, it was not immediately clear how to proceed with the interpretation of an art whose power was perceived to lie in its uninterpretability, its radical denial of the processes by which theatre becomes meaningful. What seemed to be required was a critical or elucidatory language that could somehow interpret the plays' uninterpretability, that could cast light on the plays' meaninglessness in ways that made it appear meaningful, without reconstructing the very critical and dramatic conventions whose denial constituted their meaning. The struggle to create such a language – to preserve the impact of the plays' meaninglessness whilst exploring what such meaninglessness might mean – has characterised the development of Beckett studies over the last five decades. As literary theory has grown and mutated throughout this period, *Godot* and *Endgame* have been subject to a wide range of analytical approaches, which have sought a means of giving critical expression to Beckett's dramatic negativity. The agonistic and difficult dialogue between Beckett and literary criticism that has ensued has helped us to understand Beckett's plays; it has also helped us to understand criticism.

This Guide traces the relationship between the plays and their critical reception as it has evolved over these decades. In doing so, it does not follow a strictly chronological order. Rather, it takes its organising principle from the theoretical and political battles that have surrounded the plays from the fifties to the nineties. The first chapter addresses the political gulf that opened in Beckett's critical reception in the fifties, after the first productions of *Waiting for Godot* and *Endgame*. Reading a range of contemporary reviews, and focusing on two of the earliest major essays on Beckett's drama by Martin Esslin and Theodor Adorno, this chapter explores the initial rift between a liberal humanist and a Marxist reading of the plays. For Martin Esslin, the plays are an essentially affirmative and redemptive vision of a struggling but persisting humanity, naked and noble, seen in its truest light. For Adorno, on the contrary, they offer no such comforting representation of a fundamental humanity; on the contrary, they demonstrate the collapse of a culture that allowed such ideological structures as humanism to persist. *Endgame* dramatises the deterioration of culture, after the atrocities of the twentieth century, to a bomb-site in which none of the myths that have sustained Western civilisation are left standing. All that emerges from the play's ruins is a mute critique of the social processes that have led to such destruction, which is mute because there is no longer a cultural language left intact with which to articulate resistance or protest. Beckett's drama was beyond the

interpretive powers of theory or philosophy, because what it dramatised was the failure of such discourses to be able to express the depravity of contemporary conditions, which is expressible only in the desolate spaces of Beckett's stage.

This early opposition between a critical approach that read Beckett's representation of meaninglessness, or 'absurdity', as being ultimately recuperable in the figure of a transcendent humanity and one that saw his negativity as a powerful and unparaphrasable critique of the collapse of post-war European culture, has proved extremely durable in Beckett studies. Indeed, this opposition provides the framework for the remaining chapters of the book. The second, third and fourth chapters trace different critical strands as they develop from the initial divergence in critical opinion. The second chapter focuses on the development of a liberal humanist paradigm as it progresses from Esslin's early appropriation of Beckett's drama as an example of the 'Theatre of the Absurd'. This paradigm, which has remained extremely influential from the sixties to the present day, regards the plays as apolitical representations of the 'human condition'. Drawing on a formalist critical method that has affinities with New Criticism and early structuralism, the critics represented in this chapter pay particular attention to the formal qualities of Beckett's drama. It is in the beauty and symmetry of the shapes that Beckett makes on stage that the redeeming quality of his vision can be found. He may give expression to a humanity that has become detached from metaphysical and theological roots, but the sheer, ineffable beauty and grace of the dramatic structures with which he expresses humanity in crisis provides the drama with its own meaning and its own epiphany. The third chapter traces a number of theoretical approaches, as they have grown up alongside the more dominant liberal humanist paradigm, from the reader response approach to Beckett's drama adopted by Wolfgang Iser in the seventies to the deconstructive and feminist approaches by Steven Connor and Mary Bryden developed in the eighties and nineties. Where the liberal humanists had recast Beckett's representation of absurdity as positive and life-affirming by focusing on the stage as the physical space in which an essential humanity asserts itself, these theorists suggested that his drama undermined the certainty of 'presence' on the stage. Moving away from the suggestion that Beckett dramatises a 'human' predicament, critics such as Connor and Bryden regard Beckett's stage as a site on which meaning, identity and subjecthood, were put radically into question. For these critics Beckett's negativity is not contained within his humanism, but allows him to explore the ongoing dynamics of language and representation, to dramatise the limits at which representation topples into nothingness. In doing so, Beckett's stage becomes a space in which subjects live out the eternal process of the invention and projection of selfhood. The fourth chapter

traces the evolution of a more engaged political criticism, as it has developed from Adorno's influential early essay. It explores readings of the political possibilities of Beckett's drama, from Ernst Fischer's 1966 essay on *Endgame* to nineties readings of the drama as a post-colonial aesthetic by critics such as Declan Kiberd. Where the previous two strands of critical development cast Beckett's drama as being largely apolitical, the critics represented here read his drama as being deeply engaged with a culturally specific set of political concerns.

In tracing the uneasy relationship between *Godot* and *Endgame* and the critical approaches that have sought to account for them, this Guide has a twofold purpose. Its first aim is to offer a range of readings of the plays that is as wide, inclusive and revealing as possible. Its second aim is to show how Beckett's drama reflects critically upon critical establishments themselves, as they have developed their own theoretical and ideological agendas. One of the values of Beckett's plays is that, in their characteristically impoverished surplus, they exceed the moment of their own reception, and move beyond the grasp of the culture to which they speak. It is this capacity for Beckett's writing to resist critical inclusion, to draw attention instead to the fabric of the critical garment it disdains, that is perhaps one of its more precious characteristics. The critics in this Guide have preserved this capacity – they have had no choice.

CHAPTER ONE

First Responses to *Waiting for Godot* and *Endgame*

1. Nothing Happens Twice: Reviews and Early Journalism

THAT THE critic has a hard time with Beckett's texts has become one of the sustaining myths of the Beckettian critical industry. When trying to approach the drama critically, one is likely to meet with a kind of pitying mockery, both from a knowing Beckett audience who have ruled effective criticism out of court and from the plays themselves, which contain sometimes elaborate structures of resistance to elucidation and explication. A critic of Beckett's drama risks being lampooned in the same way that Winnie lampoons her would-be critic in the play *Happy Days*. Winnie, who is inexplicably buried in a mound throughout the performance, narrates an incident in which an ignorant, 'coarse' observer lumbers his way on to the stage to ask 'What's she doing? . . . What's the idea? . . . stuck up to her diddies in the bleeding ground . . . What does it mean? . . . What's it meant to mean?'.[1] Critics have taken the hint, and the notion that it is somehow inappropriate to demand significance from a Beckett play has hardened into an orthodoxy. Mindful of the famous exchange of insults in *Godot*, which culminates in Estragon's withering parting shot 'Crritic!' (*CDW* 70), critics have sheltered themselves from such opprobrium by seeking to develop a mode of analysis that falls short of critique. 'We cannot, of course, say what this play means' quickly became a refrain in interpretations of Beckett's plays.

It is clear, however, that critics have sought, and continue to seek, for meaning in Beckett's writing – that, after all, is one of the functions of criticism. This contradiction, between a critical method that seeks to avoid saying what the plays mean, and the need for critics to explain and interpret the works that they approach, can be found running through Beckett criticism from the fifties to the nineties. The earliest reviews and essays on *Waiting for Godot* and *Endgame* deal explicitly and sometimes

tortuously with this problem. *Godot* appeared to initial audiences to depict the absurdity and meaninglessness of life: it seemed to be a play that dramatised the collapse of meaning, language and belief. How can one approach this total collapse, this extreme statement of the inadequacy of the stories and myths that we construct to protect ourselves from the brute absurdity of physical existence, with a coherent critical language? Surely, such a devastating revelation of the falsity of our value systems and codes of belief, if it has any real power, would undermine any critical language that sought to evaluate it or codify it. This problem is faced time and time again by the first reviewers of *Godot*. The language of explanation and judgement tends to give way to an inarticulate expression of the power of the performance, coupled with an emphasis on the incapacity of criticism to articulate the means by which the performance achieved such power. Jacques Lemarchand, reviewing the first ever performance of *En attendant Godot* in the tiny Théâtre de Babylone in Paris, exemplifies this prostration of criticism before an art it can admire, but cannot paraphrase:

■ I do not quite know how to begin describing this play by Samuel Beckett, *Waiting for Godot* (directed by Roger Blin, now playing at the Théâtre de Babylone). I have seen this play and seen it again, I have read and reread it; it still has the power to move me. I should like to communicate this feeling, to make it contagious. At the same time I am faced with the difficulty of fulfilling the primary duty of the critic, which, as everyone knows, is to explain and narrate a play to people who have neither seen it nor read it. I have experienced this difficulty many times before; the sensation is infinitely agreeable. One feels it each time one is called upon to describe a work that is beautiful, but of an unusual beauty; new, but genuinely new; traditional, but of an eminent tradition; clever, but with a cleverness the most clever professors are unable to teach; and finally, intelligent, but with that clear intelligence that is non-negotiable in the schools.[2] □

The power of the play, Lemarchand insists, is such that it exceeds description, and cannot be transcribed or translated by the critic. In fact, Lemarchand stresses in the same review that the resistance of the play to his critique of it is such that he would 'be extremely sorry if anyone should say to himself after reading [the review], "I see what it's about . . ."'.[3]

This reticence, amongst the first reviewers of *Godot*, to impinge on what appeared to be the almost sacred territory of the play, is not merely critical sheepishness, or reluctance to fall into the trap that Beckett sets for the unwary critic. It is a symptom of the kind of challenge that the play represented to the dramatic community. This challenge asserted itself in two related ways. Firstly, *Godot* slipped through the nets of critical

explication because of its originality. In this it has much in common with most 'legitimately' new plays. For dramatic works to come fully into being, some critics argue, they have to operate within an accepted theatrical convention. Once we have agreed that the play in front of us is Jacobean, Elizabethan, naturalist, realist or expressionist, then we can settle into the performance, knowing that the stage will come to mean in certain pre-established ways. We understand, often unconsciously, how an aside works, how a soliloquy works, how plot and characters develop together over the duration of the performance, within what we have tacitly accepted as the dominant convention. Conventions, however, are historical constructs that change over time, and which adapt to historical contingencies. As changing social conditions demand or produce new forms of expression, plays periodically arrive that do not conform to the dominant convention, but which challenge or undermine it in important ways. These plays, precisely because they exceed the accepted boundaries of drama, and use the stage in unpredictable ways, cannot easily be incorporated into their contemporary critical discourses. As they break through the frontiers of dramatic knowledge and understanding, they prove unsettling and baffling to their commentators, but in time a new convention is established to accommodate the new play, and drama as a whole has changed, even progressed, as a result.[4] That *Godot* exceeded the known dramatic conventions of its time in this way, and that this excess was partly responsible for the critical reluctance or inability to say what it meant, is noted by many of its early reviewers. Lemarchand comments, in the review quoted above, that '*Waiting for Godot* is a profoundly original work: because of this it will necessarily be a disconcerting one'.[5] Similarly, in a review of the first (1955) English performance of *Godot*, in the London Arts Theatre Club, Kenneth Tynan writes: '*Waiting for Godot* frankly jettisons everything by which we recognise theatre . . . It forced me to re-examine the rules which have hitherto governed the drama; and, having done so, to pronounce them not elastic enough.'[6] Adjectives such as 'startling', 'extraordinary' and 'baffling' abound in reviews (both complimentary and damning) that cannot incorporate the event of *Waiting for Godot* into the system of expectations and requirements that contained twentieth-century Western theatre.

But *Godot* also presented a second sort of challenge to its critics, which is not reducible to its rejection of established theatrical conventions. This challenge is related to the play's negativity. What makes critics most uneasy is not simply that Beckett seeks to develop a new convention, or to use the stage in surprising and innovative ways, but that he threatens to abandon convention and theatricality altogether. Beckett's theatre seemed unique, and uniquely threatening, to most of his fifties' critics, because what he appeared to represent on the stage was 'nothing'. Harold Hobson speaks for many bemused contemporary critics when he

comments, in his review of the 1955 performance in London, that 'in the course of the play, nothing happens'. There is no 'dramatic progress', no 'theatrical tension'.[7] The action, such as it is, is continually threatening to yield to the long, awkward silences that the audience can feel gathering behind the dialogue just as Pozzo's nightfall collects behind the tranquil twilight sky. What Beckett presented to the audience in Godot was theatre that was only just theatre, on the very brink of becoming the opposite of theatre. The stage was only fitfully controlled by the script. There was little effort to draw anyone into the collective conviction that the stage represented 'A country road' at 'Evening' (*CDW* 11) – it most often appeared to represent nothing other than itself. It frequently felt as if the audience had wandered into the theatre during a break in the rehearsal. As Jean Anouilh commented in a review of the 1953 performance, quoting the play itself, 'Nothing happens, nobody comes, nobody goes, it's awful.'[8] It is this representation of dramatic negativity that distinguished Beckett's theatre most clearly from other playwrights who experimented with similar ideas. It was not new for a dramatist to present the audience with the notion that the stories which make life meaningful have no essential truth value – the 'absurdity' of life had been dramatised before by Sartre and other proponents of Parisian existentialism. Where Beckett's work was shockingly original was in its adoption of a new dramatic form that directly articulated this sense of a loss of meaning. Rather than expressing the terror of existential angst from within a stable and recognisable theatrical convention, Beckett caused the stage to become the *site* of meaning's desertion. As Vladimir and Estragon wait passively on the stage for Godot to arrive and confer meaning on their waiting, Beckett abandoned every theatrical principle and undermined every expectation. Even Vladimir and Estragon's stability as characters is given no guarantee. Vladimir may be heavier than Estragon, he may be lighter (*CDW* 13). Vladimir may actually be called Mister Albert, Estragon's name may be Catullus (*CDW* 47). Beckett presents us with a situation in which 'nothing is certain' (*CDW* 16), and in doing so he takes dramatic form beyond its own limits, kicks out every prop that holds the dramatic space in shape, and presents us with a stage that is perpetually falling into the void left by its relentless negation of its own meaning. He does not adopt a strange convention, he negates the very idea of convention itself.

In order to respond to the challenge that this form of aesthetic negativity represented, critics were faced with the problem of generating an interpretative language or methodology that could incorporate it and examine it without destroying it. It appeared to many that this new play questioned some of the most basic assumptions that underlay not only drama, but also life in the world, and that it was extremely important to understand how it did so, and what kinds of answer there may be to *Godot*'s questions. To interrogate a dramatic practice whose primary quality

was a lack of all quality, however, is rather like grasping water. For Theodor Adorno, one of Beckett's earliest critics, the 'criterion of a philosophy whose hour is struck' was that it 'proved equal to the challenge' of interpreting Beckett's drama.[9] The first and, in the English-speaking critical community, the most enduringly influential means of bringing Beckett's drama into interpretability was to convert negativity into positivity. An early stirring of this drive towards positivity is hinted at in Vivian Mercier's much-quoted article on *Godot* in 1956. In 'The Uneventful Event', Mercier comments that:

> ■ [Beckett] has achieved a theoretical impossibility – a play in which nothing happens, that yet keeps audiences glued to their seats. What's more, since the second act is a subtly different reprise of the first, he has written a play in which nothing happens, twice.[10] □

This witticism, playful as it is, suggests a mode of approaching Beckettian negativity that quickly became virtually orthodox. It grasps the positivity that inhabits the linguistic denotation of nothingness, and employs it as a means of concretising the non-events of the play. 'Nothing happens' is not a purely negative statement, but can be read as suggesting that something happened – the thing that happened was 'nothing'. The substantiality of nothing as a Beckettian event is given more weight by the fact that it happens twice. Finally, we see what happens in this enigmatic play – nothing happens – and now all we have to do is approach this event as if it was any other dramatic occurrence.

This thought figure re-emerges time and time again, and in various guises. The meaning of the play, for example, could be said to be its meaninglessness. If you take lack of meaning as a positive quality, then it is possible to progress beyond the aporia, or unsolvable intellectual problem, presented to the critic by an act of signification that refuses to signify. By performing such a conversion, it was even possible for critics to read the representation of meaninglessness as something reassuring and life-affirming. What Beckett achieves in *Godot*, some argued, is the removal of all the distracting baggage of everyday life, to reveal to the audience an essential truth about humanity. He depicts the naked human deprived of all comforting myths, awaiting validation from a higher source. The nothingness that is discovered beneath the sound and fury of life in the world is an emptiness that is intensely spiritual, and that helps us to understand, in a 'deep' sense, what it is to be human. In this respect, *Godot* appeared to be a profoundly Christian play. For G. S. Fraser, rather than conveying a sense of 'blank despair', the 'message of *Waiting for Godot* is perhaps something nearer a message of religious consolation':

■ Audiences do not leave the theatre, after seeing his play, feeling that life has been deprived of meaning. They feel rather that a new light has been cast on life's meaning, at several deep levels.

What sort of light, however? That is what so far has eluded critics of the play as performed. Mr. Beckett is rumoured to have instructed his English producer not, by any manner of means, to tell the actors what the theme of the play was. Yet unless Mr. Beckett whispered his central secret in the producer's ear, the warning was probably unnecessary. The elusiveness of the core has, indeed, led some critics to contend that there is no core; that the whole startling effect of the play on the stage depended on the excellent production and acting and on Mr. Beckett's own mastery of the mechanics of stage craft. The play, on this theory, would resemble the machine recently invented by an ingenious Californian, which works perfectly, with the minimum of friction, but does no 'work,' performs no function. Or, to put this with more dignity, the theory might be that Mr. Beckett in *Waiting for Godot* dramatises the notion of emptiness. This, or something like this, was the reaction of Jean Anouilh to the first performance of *En attendant Godot* in Paris. 'Nothing happens. Nobody comes, nobody goes, it's awful! But,' Anouilh added, 'I think the evening at the Babylone is as important as the première of Pirandello, put on in Paris by Piteoff in 1923.' And from what we know of Mr. Beckett's other work, we might assume that to dramatise emptiness, to have his much ado literally about nothing, may have been his conscious intention. Yet, with a play even more than a poem, we have to consider not the author's conscious intention – what the author, in a conversation, may say about 'life' – but the whole complex significance, the valid levels of meaning, of a coherent structure. What *Waiting for Godot* essentially is is a prolonged and sustained metaphor about the nature of human life. It is a metaphor which makes a particular appeal to the mood of liberal uncertainty which is the prevailing mood of modern Western Europe; and which makes (to judge by the play's failure in Miami) much less appeal to the strenuous and pragmatic temper of the contemporary American mind. It is also a play by an Irishman, by a friend and disciple of James Joyce; a play, therefore, by a man whose imagination (in the sense in which Mr. Eliot used this phrase of Joyce himself) is orthodox. In other words, we should consider where Mr. Beckett springs from and what he is reacting against in his roots. Even at his most nihilistic he will come under Mr. Eliot's category of the Christian blasphemer.

The fundamental imagery of *Waiting for Godot* is Christian; for at the depth of experience into which Beckett is probing, there is no other source of imagery for him to draw on. His heroes are two tramps, who have come from nowhere in particular and have nowhere in particular

to go. Their life is a state of apparently fruitless expectation. They receive messages, through a little boy, from the local landowner, Godot, who is always going to come in person to-morrow, but never does come. Their attitude towards Godot is one partly of hope, partly of fear. The orthodoxy of this symbolism, from a Christian point of view, is obvious. The tramps, with their rags and their misery, represent the fallen state of man. The squalor of their surroundings, their lack of a 'stake in the world,' represents the idea that here in this world we can build no abiding city. The ambiguity of their attitude towards Godot, their mingled hope and fear, the doubtful tone of the boy's messages, represents the state of tension and uncertainty in which the average Christian must live in this world, avoiding presumption, and also avoiding despair. Yet the two tramps, Didi and Gogo, as they call each other, represent something far higher than the other two characters in the play, the masterful and ridiculous Pozzo and his terrifying slave, Lucky. Didi and Gogo stand for the contemplative life, Pozzo and Lucky stand for the life of practical action taken, mistakenly, as an end in itself. Pozzo's blindness and Lucky's dumbness in the second act rub this point in. The so-called practical man, the man of action, has to be set on his feet and put on his way by the contemplative man. He depends – as becomes clear, in the first act, from Pozzo's genuine though absurd gratitude for the chance of a little conversation – on the contemplative man for such moments of insight, of spiritual communication, as occur in his life. The mere and pure man of action, the comic caricature of the Nietzschean superman, Pozzo, is like an actor who does not properly exist without his audience; but his audience are also, in a sense, his judges. Pozzo and Lucky, in fact, have the same sort of function in *Waiting for Godot* as Vanity Fair in *The Pilgrim's Progress*. But they are, as it were, a perambulating Vanity Fair; Didi and Gogo are static pilgrims. It is worth noting, also, that Didi and Gogo are bound to each other by something that it is not absurd to call charity. They treat each other with consideration and compunction (their odd relationship, always tugging away from each other, but always drawn together again, is among other things an emblem of marriage). Pozzo and Lucky are drawn together by hate and fear. Their lot is increasing misery; but if Didi and Gogo are not obviously any better off at the end of the play than they were at the beginning, neither are they any worse off. Their state remains one of expectation.

Waiting for Godot – one might sum up these remarks – is thus a modern morality play, on permanent Christian themes.[11] □

Thus, Fraser takes what appeared to contemporary audiences to be the defining thematic characteristics of the play – amorality, impermanence,

despair, meaninglessness – and conjures them into their opposites – moral pedagogy, permanent Christian values, hope, and the promise of redemption from the 'squalor' and 'misery' of our 'fallen world'. Gogo and Didi wait for salvation from the doubt-ridden condition of living, in a barren limbo in which the meaning of our lives is hidden from us, but even during this uncertain wait the play maintains a moral structure that, precisely because it persists in such a sparse universe, becomes all the more enduring. It is Estragon and Vladimir's 'charity', their fundamental humanity, that sets them aside from Pozzo and Lucky, and forms the moral fabric of the play.

Whilst Christian interpretations of *Godot* maintained some currency over the following two decades,[12] the majority of critics resisted such an unconditional reading of *Godot* as a 'modern morality play'. The structure that Fraser's reading relies on, however, in which an essential and potentially redemptive humanity is seen to lie beneath a patina of trivial social meaning structures, is duplicated by many critics who reject an overt Christian thematic. The 'human condition' came to be widely viewed as the substance of this insubstantial play. Gogo and Didi may appear to be on the verge of fading out, as the play fails to provide the dramatic conditions for their continued existence, but this flickering of the reality effect does not threaten to reveal the void. Rather, it opens on to the wide expanses of humanity itself. Gogo and Didi are not on the brink of becoming nobody at all, because they promise to become 'everyman'. By the steady removal of all individual qualities, the play arrives at a picture of an all-encompassing generality. This representation of a denuded but stubbornly persistent species, no qualities and all essence, was enthusiastically welcomed, not least because it offered a model of 'universal' theatre that crossed national and political divides. For many critics, Beckett's drama was regarded as diametrically opposed to the politically committed Irish theatre that preceded it. Here was an Irish dramatist who rose above the parochial nationalist squabbles that dominated his country's productions for the stage, to forge a drama that spoke of issues that were more fundamental and permanent than cultural and political controversies. Patrick Kavanagh speaks for many critics, when, in 1956, he makes a clear distinction between Beckett's universal theatre, and those less powerful dramatists who become engaged in local concerns.

■ To those of us who cannot abide the theatre with its flatulent pieties, its contrivances and its lies, *Waiting for Godot* is a wonderful play, a great comedy. I do not set out to interpret *Godot*, merely to say why I like it, which is probably the only valid criticism.

Take a play like *The Bishop's Bonfire*, which was well received in Dublin. There you have the old unhappy Shibboleths paraded, the theme of 'Ireland' as a moral reality, and the last refuge of the weak,

the theme that our failure to ramble out into the flowery lanes of liberty which O'Casey is always talking about, is due to forces outside ourselves. In O'Casey's case the restrictions of religion are the villain of the melodrama.[13]

All of us who are sincere know that if we are unhappy, trying to forget our futility in pubs it is due to no exterior cause, but to what is now popularly called the human condition. Society everywhere today and its beliefs are pastiche; there is no overall purpose, no large umbrella of serenity.

This world-wide emotion has seeped through national boudoirs. It flowed into Ireland many years ago, but the 'Ireland' writers continued as if nothing had happened. Now and again one noticed their discomfiture; why, they seemed to be asking themselves, was no one giving them any heed?

These 'Ireland' writers, who are still writing, of course, could not see that the writers of Ireland were no longer Corkery and O'Connor and the others, but Auden and George Barker – anyone anywhere who at least appreciated, if he could not cure, their misfortune. Saying this is liable to make one the worst in the world, for a national literature, being based on a convention, not born of the unpredictable individual and his problem, is a vulnerable racket and is protected by fierce wild men. A national literature is the only thing some men have got, and men will not relinquish their hold on the only thing that gives them a reason for living.

It is because of this awareness of the peculiar sickness of society and a possible remedy suggested that I like Beckett's play. The remedy is that Beckett has put despair and futility on the stage for us to laugh at them. And we do laugh.

I am not going to say that *Godot* is a great illuminating, hope-creating masterpiece like *King Lear*, but then, that is the present condition of humanity. Beckett is an honest writer. Academic writers and painters are always ready to offer the large illuminating symbol; they give us gods and heroes, and they write and paint as if society were a solid, unified Victorian lie.

I know that I am not being very direct in my statements about *Waiting for Godot*, but that is part of this play's importance; it both holds a mirror up to life and keeps reminding you, if you are interested in sincerity, that the reason that you couldn't endure the theatre hitherto was that it was tenth-rate escapism, not your dish at all.[14] □

Kavanagh here contrasts Beckett's modernist and internationalist vision of futility and despair, which is located at the level of an individual struggle against a 'world-wide' existential crisis, with a myopic nationalist literature, which is stupidly preoccupied with local beliefs and commitments

that have already been shown to be trivial and illusory. Influentially pitting Beckett against the nationalist myth-makers of the Celtic revival, Kavanagh suggests that Beckett is unafraid of the harsh realties of the twentieth-century human condition, and is able to tell it how it is, without cowering in the shelter of national identity or political struggle. Collective problems and identifications give way in Beckett to an almost joyful recognition of chronic isolation. But for Kavanagh, crucially, Beckett's representation of isolation, futility and despair, is a humanist, affirmative vision, rather than a negative one. In putting futility on the stage, he recognises a human quality and is able to confront it: by making it funny, he is able to make us face it, and even almost like it. Beckett's emptiness becomes a positive comment on humanity in crisis. His comedy is its remedy.

This positivisation of Beckett's vision, coupled with an emphasis on the redemptive quality of his humour, proved more problematic for critics, however, with the appearance of Beckett's second published play, *Endgame*. This was partly due to differences between the texts themselves, and partly to the history of their performance. The textual differences between the two plays were immediately clear to contemporary reviewers. Where *Godot* takes place on an open road, waiting for the arrival of a saviour, *Endgame* unfolds in a cramped, internal stage space, in which history and nature have ended, and the saviour has already failed to appear. If, in *Godot*, 'Hope deferred maketh the something sick' (*CDW* 12), it seemed to be the temporary sickness of anxiety and unknowingness, and the deferral of hope held out the promise of cure in eventual arrival. In *Endgame*, there is no such uncertainty about the outcome of history, and sickness is a permanent condition. The evens chance of redemption in *Godot* has failed to pay off and the protagonists, Hamm and Clov, have lost their stake money. Many critics thought of *Godot* and *Endgame* as two parts of the same play. *Endgame* is where Gogo and Didi finally end up, after a lifetime of baffled hope, or Hamm is actually Godot himself, cruelly indifferent to the sufferings of those who depend upon his mercy and his help. However you look at it, critics claimed, *Endgame* is *Godot* wound down, defeated and unremittingly bleak. The dialogue no longer canters, but doggedly trudges, grinding out its inevitable, toneless 'tale of woe'. This shared sense that *Endgame* strenuously resisted the critical conversion of negativity into something honestly life-affirming was further emphasised by the style of the first French-language production in London and the English-language productions in London and New York. Where the 1955 performance of *Godot*, directed by Peter Hall at the Arts Theatre Club, had been played for laughs, both Roger Blin's London performance of *Fin de partie* and the New York and London performances of *Endgame* (directed by Alan Schneider and George Devine respectively) were played with a weight

and gravitas that stifled the comedy of the latter play.[15] The effect of this downplaying of the comic elements in the play was exacerbated by reports that Beckett was involved with Blin's, Schneider's and Devine's productions, and wanted them to be played as flat and straight as possible. It also emerged that Beckett was unhappy with Peter Hall's upbeat performance of *Waiting for Godot*, and preferred even this 'lighter' play to be performed in a deadpan monotone. Even for many of Beckett's most vocal supporters, this rejection of any basis for hope or affirmation cast doubt on Beckett's stature as a dramatist, and put *Endgame* beyond the acceptable boundaries of theatre. Kenneth Tynan, whose enthusiastic review of *Godot* in the *Observer* was very influential,[16] exemplified such a response in his 1957 review of *Fin de partie*:

■ As produced in London, *Waiting for Godot* made Beckett's world valid and persuasive. Though deserted by God, the tramps survived, and did so with gaiety, dignity and a moving interdependence; a human affirmation was made. I had heard, and discounted, rumours that Beckett disliked the London production. Those rumours I now believed. The new play, directed by Roger Blin under the author's supervision, makes it clear that his purpose is neither to move nor to help us. For him, man is a pigmy who connives at his own inevitable degradation. There, says Beckett, stamping on the face of mankind: there, that is how life is. And when protest is absent, the step from 'how life is' to 'how life should be' is horrifyingly short.

Before going any further, I ought to explain what I think the play is about. I take it to be an analysis of the power-complex. The hero, a sightless old despot robed in scarlet, has more than a passing affinity with Francis Bacon's paintings of shrieking cardinals. He lives in a womb-shaped cell, attended by Clov, his shambling slave, on whose eyes he is totally dependent. His throne is flanked by two dust-bins, wombs within the womb, inhabited by his parents, Nagg and Nell. Eventually Nell dies, whereupon the tyrant asks Clov to see what Nagg is up to. 'Il pleure,' says Clov. 'Donc,' says the Boss, 'il vit.'[17] The curtain falls on a symbolic stalemate: King (Nagg) versus King and Knight (Boss and Clov). The boss is imprisoned for ever in the womb. He can never escape from his father.

Schopenhauer once said: 'The will is the strong blind man who carries on his shoulders the lame man who can see.' Beckett reverses the positions. It is the lame man, Clov – representing perception and imagination – who is bowed down by the blind bully of naked will. The play is an allegory about authority, an attempt to dramatise the neurosis that makes men love power. So far, so good. I part company with Beckett only when he insists that the problem is insoluble, that this is a deterministic world. 'Quelque chose suit son cours':[18] and

there is nothing we can do about it. My interpretation may be incomplete, but it illuminates at least one of the play's facets. The blind irascible hero, Hamm, is working on an interminable novel: does this not bring to mind the 'cantankerous Irishman' by whom Beckett was once employed? Hamm stands for many things: for the Church, the State, and even Godot himself; for all the forms of capricious authority. One of them may perhaps be Joyce.

When I read the play, I enjoyed long stretches of it – laconic exchanges that seemed to satirise despair, vaudeville non-sequiturs that savagely parodied logic. Within the dark framework I even discerned glimmers of hope. I now see that I was wrong. Last week's production, portentously stylised, piled on the agony until I thought my skull would split. Little variation, either of pace or emphasis, was permitted: a cosmic comedy was delivered as if its author had been Racine. . . . I suddenly realised that Beckett wanted his private fantasy to be accepted as objective truth. And that nothing less would satisfy him. For a short time I am prepared to listen in any theatre to any message, however antipathetic. But when it is not only disagreeable but forced down my throat, I demur. . . .

This kind of facile pessimism is dismaying in an author of Beckett's stature. It is not only the projection of a personal sickness, but a conclusion reached on inadequate evidence. I am ready to believe that the world is a stifling, constricting place – but not if my informant is an Egyptian mummy.[19] □

Tynan's frustration with *Endgame* – his reluctance to accept an art form that refused either to 'move' or to 'help' us – was typical of the response that the play received from English-speaking journalists. There were some more enthusiastic reviews, which tended to come from critics who managed to find hope and affirmation in *Endgame* as they had done in *Godot*. For Harold Hobson in the *Sunday Times*, for example, the play filled those audience members who were neither 'philistines' nor 'half-wits' with a 'profound and sombre and paradoxical joy'. Where Tynan complains that *Endgame* couldn't help us, Hobson claims that 'its representation is among the greatest of the services that the English Stage Company has rendered to the British public'.[20] But most critics failed to distil tidings of comfort and joy from the play, and for many this failure cast doubt on the artistic legitimacy of both *Godot* and *Endgame*. In Tynan's review there is a sense that he feels that he has been duped[21] – *Endgame* reveals a recalcitrant, pathological negativity in Beckett's drama that remains beyond the pale of theatre and of criticism, and that suggests that even the critic of *Godot* was foolish to attempt to bring Beckett back into the fold. In recognising this excess, Tynan drew attention to a gap between the dominant critical discourse and Beckett's aesthetic

practice, which had yet to be closed by critics who attempted to read his negativity as positive and affirming. The criteria that liberal humanist critics applied to their objects did not seem to be appropriate to Beckett's drama. Art should move us; art should console us; art should tell us something essential and permanent about the human condition; art has a moral responsibility to help us cope with the world as it is; if it cannot change the world, it must at least make it beautiful. These prerequisites had seemed to be met, albeit in peculiar fashion, in *Godot*, but *Endgame*'s apparent representation of absolute despair without 'protest' undermined all of the qualities by which art was recognisable.

By proving more resistant than *Godot* to critical domestication, *Endgame* brought relations between Beckett and his critics to a point of crisis, and to an ultimatum. Either Beckett's work had to be rejected as inartistic, or the rules that governed the appreciation and understanding of art had to evolve to incorporate a form of expression that, for philistines, half-wits, and connoisseurs alike, may fail to tell us that the world and those who live on it are redeemable. The challenge that Beckett posed to the critical community was still, at the end of the fifties, alive, well and unanswered.

2. Presence, Negativity and the Human Condition: First Essays

The first fuller-length critical responses to *Waiting for Godot* and *Endgame*, in the late fifties and early sixties, were focused on developing a means of interpreting Beckett's theatre that could move beyond the boundary marked out by Tynan's rejection of *Endgame*. This work took two directions, whose divergent paths can be traced through the following forty years, and the remaining chapters of this book. The first of these, pioneered most influentially by Martin Esslin, sought to expand an existing liberal humanist critical discourse to incorporate Beckett's work, by sketching the contours of a new dramatic convention that would render its senselessness into sense. For Esslin, the difficulty posed by the drama arose because such a convention had not yet been clarified, rather than because it undermined any of the fundamental tenets of the brand of Anglo-American New Criticism that was hegemonic in fifties English culture. He suggested that Beckett was part of a larger body of dramatists, such as Adamov, Ionesco, Genet and Pinter, who were responding to twentieth-century European history by developing a recognisably distinct dramatic form, which he dubbed the 'Theatre of the Absurd'. In order to make this new form of theatre available to the mainstream, Esslin set out to 'provide a framework of reference that will show the works of the Theatre of the Absurd within their own convention'.[22] In doing so, the 'frustration and indignation'[23] that humanist critics such as

Tynan felt could be overcome, and the plays' 'relevance and force can emerge'.[24] The second direction taken by critics in the late fifties was charted originally by Theodor Adorno. Adorno suggested, *contra* Esslin, that an entirely new discourse was required for the interpretation of Beckett's drama, which was able to articulate its radical senselessness without absorbing it into the very bourgeois humanist ideology that it strenuously resisted. The negativity of Beckett's work, and its indifference to the demands made upon it by his critics, was not something that criticism had to overcome, but was itself the very meaning that had to be interpreted. For Adorno, 'Understanding it can mean only understanding its unintelligibility, concretely reconstructing the meaning of the fact that it has no meaning.'[25] Meaninglessness cannot be converted into meaning by the critic, but has to be examined in the condition and the moment of its meaninglessness. Its resistance to meaning, to ideology, and to interpretation has to be preserved within the act of interpretation itself. Where Esslin introduced a critical practice of elucidation, positivisation and humanisation that sought to understand and accommodate Beckett, Adorno laid the foundations of a hermeneutic method that saw in Beckett's negative resistance to all forms of containment his political and aesthetic promise.

Esslin's theorisation of a convention that could accommodate the new absurdist theatre turned around what he saw as a radical new departure in the use of the stage itself. What makes absurdist theatre strange and difficult is the fact that, in such plays, the stage seems to emerge from the control of the script – the reality effect, and all the other dramatic apparatuses that are conventionally used to draw the stage into a plot or dramatic situation are abandoned, allowing the stage to appear as a bare physical space that fails to become meaningful in any discernible theatrical or artistic way. For Esslin, this privileging of the space of the stage as a physical reality is the meaning and the promise of absurdist theatre, rather than a block to its interpretation, and when this is realised and properly accounted for, the plays are allowed to come into clear critical focus. This naked, but undeniably present space expresses the only fundamental truth available to our understanding – that we are here, in the world. All else, in Beckett's drama as in twentieth-century life, is revealed to be fake. For Esslin, as for Robbe-Grillet, another of Beckett's influential early critics, Beckett's theatre is best understood as a theatre of existential human presence, in which the superficial metaphysical, social and ideological meaning structures are seen to collapse around the brute physical existence of the characters on stage, who are stripped of all the illusions and myths that adorn their beings, and protect them from the void. In Beckett's drama, the particular and contingent features of life in the world dissolve to present us with a concrete image of the universal reality of human existence, common to all cultures, reducible to none.

■ The human condition, Heidegger says, is to be there. Probably it is the theatre, more than any other mode of representing reality, which reproduces this situation most naturally. The dramatic character is on stage, that is his primary quality: he is there.

Samuel Beckett's encounter with this requirement afforded a priori, an exceptional interest: at last we would see Beckett's man, we would see Man.[26] □

It is the intention to expose this existentialist reality lying at the heart of being-in-the-world that motivates Beckett's seemingly baffling experiments with logic and reason. It is true that language, dialogue and plot fail, but these do not collapse around an unapproachable and uninterpretable negativity. Rather they disintegrate to reveal the concrete architecture of the stage, which is itself interpretable as an analogue for the condition of humanity.

■ If Beckett's plays are concerned with expressing the difficulty of finding meaning in a world subject to incessant change, his use of language probes the limitations of language both as a means of communication and as a vehicle for the expression of valid statements, an instrument of thought. When Gessner asked him about the contradiction between his writing and his obvious conviction that language could not convey meaning, Beckett replied, *'Que voulez-vous, Monsieur? C'est les mots; on n'a rien d'autre.'* But in fact his use of the dramatic medium shows that he has tried to find means of expression beyond language. On the stage – witness his two mime-plays[27] – one can dispense with word altogether, or at least one can reveal the reality behind the words, as when the actions of the characters contradict their verbal expression. 'Let's go,' say the two tramps at the end of each act of *Waiting for Godot*, but the stage directions inform us that 'they don't move'. On the stage, language can be put into a contrapuntal relationship with action, the facts behind the language can be revealed. Hence the importance of mime, knockabout comedy, and silence in Beckett's plays – Krapp's eating of bananas, the pratfalls of Vladimir and Estragon, the variety turn with Lucky's hat, Clov's immobility at the close of *Endgame*, which puts his verbally expressed desire to leave in question. Beckett's use of the stage is an attempt to reduce the gap between the limitations of language and the intuition of being, the sense of the human situation he seeks to express in spite of his strong feeling that words are inadequate to formulate it. The concreteness and the three dimensional nature of the stage can be used to add new resources to language as an instrument of thought and exploration of being.[28] □

By exploiting the physical presence of the stage to its maximum potential, Beckett is able to dramatise the collapse of metaphysical meaning structures around the naked truth of 'being there'. The myths of national and personal identity, the construction of a stable system of beliefs that help to make sense of our being in the world, all such narratives prove themselves to be woefully inadequate in the face of the horrifying actuality of existence.

Thus for Esslin, it is the physical action of waiting in *Waiting for Godot*, rather than the question of who or what Godot represents, that should be thought of as the focal point of the play. In the following extract, Esslin draws on Beckett's own critical exposition of Proust's novel *A La Recherche du Temps Perdu*, to emphasise the illusoriness of 'identity', and other narrative structures that graft meaning onto our existence in the world. As Vladimir and Estragon wait for Godot to arrive to liberate them from brute existence into the paradise of significance, the concrete space in which they are waiting reveals the true nature of being in time:

■ Whether Godot is meant to suggest the intervention of a supernatural agency, or whether he stands for a mythical human being whose arrival is expected to change the station, or both of these possibilities combined, his exact nature is of secondary importance. The subject of the play is not Godot but waiting, the act of waiting as an essential and characteristic aspect of the human condition. Throughout our lives we always wait for something, and Godot simply represents the objective of our waiting – an event, a thing, a person, death. Moreover, it is in the act of waiting that we experience the flow of time in its purest, most evident form. If we are active, we tend to forget the passage of time, we pass the time, but if we are merely passively waiting, we are confronted with the action of time itself. As Beckett points out in his analysis of Proust, 'There is no escape from the hours and the days. Neither from tomorrow, nor from yesterday because yesterday has deformed us or been deformed by us. . . . Yesterday is not a milestone that has been passed, but a daystone on the beaten track of the years, and irremediably part of us, within us, heavy and dangerous. We are not merely more weary because of yesterday, we are other, no longer what we were before the calamity of yesterday'.[29] The flow of time confronts us with the basic problem of being – the problem of the nature of the self, which, being subject to constant change in time, is in constant flux and therefore ever outside our grasp – 'personality, whose permanent reality can only be apprehended as a retrospective hypothesis. The individual is the seat of a constant process of decantation, sluggish, pale and monochrome, to the vessel containing the fluid of past time, agitated and multi-coloured by the phenomena of its hours.'[30]

Being subject to this process of time flowing through us and changing us in doing so, we are, at no single moment in our lives, identical with ourselves. Hence, 'we are disappointed at the nullity of what we please to call attainment. But what is attainment? The identification of the subject with the object of his desire. The subject has died – and perhaps many times on the way.'[31] If Godot is the object of Vladimir's and Estragon's desire, he seems naturally ever beyond their reach. It is significant that the boy who acts as go-between fails to recognise the pair from day to day. The French version explicitly states that the boy who appears in the second act is the same boy as the one in the first act, yet the boy denies that he has ever seen the two tramps before and insists that this is the first time he has acted as Godot's messenger. As the boy leaves, Vladimir tries to impress it upon him: 'You're sure you saw me, eh, you won't come and tell me tomorrow that you never saw me before?' The boy does not reply, and we know that he will again fail to recognise them. Can we ever be sure that the human beings we meet are the same today as they were yesterday? When Pozzo and Lucky first appear, neither Vladimir nor Estragon seems to recognise them; Estragon even takes Pozzo for Godot. But after they have gone, Vladimir comments that they have changed since their last appearance. Estragon insists that he didn't know them.

> VLADIMIR: Yes you do know them.
>
> ESTRAGON: No, I don't know them.
>
> VLADIMIR: We know them, I tell you. You forget everything. [*Pause. To himself.*] Unless they're not the same . . .
>
> ESTRAGON: Why didn't they recognize us, then?
>
> VLADIMIR: That means nothing. I too pretended not to recognize them. And then nobody ever recognizes us. (*CDW* 47)

In the second act, when Pozzo and Lucky reappear, cruelly deformed by the action of time, Vladimir and Estragon again have their doubts whether they are the same people they met on the previous day. Nor does Pozzo remember them: 'I don't remember having met anyone yesterday. But tomorrow I won't remember having met anyone today' (*CDW* 82).

Waiting is to experience the action of time, which is constant change. And yet, as nothing real ever happens, that change is itself an illusion. The ceaseless activity of time is self-defeating, purposeless, and therefore null and void. The more things change the more they are the same. That is the terrible stability of the world. 'The tears of the world are a constant quantity. For each one who begins to weep,

somewhere else another stops' (*CDW* 33). One day is like another, and when we die we might never have existed. As Pozzo exclaims in his great final outburst:

> Have you not done tormenting me with your accursed time! . . . One day, is that not enough for you, one day like any other day, one day he went dumb, one day I went blind, one day we'll go deaf, one day we were born, one day we shall die, the same day, the same second, . . . They give birth astride a grave, the light gleams an instant, then it's night once more. (*CDW* 83)

And Vladimir, shortly afterwards, agrees: 'Astride of a grave and a difficult birth. Down in the hole, lingeringly, the gravedigger puts on the forceps' (*CDW* 84).

Still Vladimir and Estragon live in hope: they wait for Godot, whose coming will bring the flow of time to a stop. 'Tonight perhaps we shall sleep in his place, in the warmth, dry, our bellies full, on the straw. It is worth waiting for that, is it not?'[32] This passage, omitted in the English version, clearly suggests the peace, the rest from waiting, the sense of having arrived in a haven, that Godot represents to the two tramps. They are hoping to be saved from the evanescence and instability of the illusion of time, and to find peace and permanence outside of it. They will no longer be tramps, homeless wanderers, but will have arrived home.[33] □

To hope for a metaphysical solution to the continual agony of being in time, however, is, for Esslin, a form of Sartrean 'bad faith'. Rejecting Christian and other theological interpretations of the play, he suggests that the only form of salvation available to Estragon and Vladimir is the recognition that no Godot will ever come to transmute existence into meaning. The promise of the play is found in the moments when Vladimir and Estragon come closest to comprehending the naked actuality of existence, shorn of all illusions and all comforting myths. It is when this truth is understood that the play opens out onto the vast vistas of existential freedom.

■ That *Waiting for Godot* is concerned with the hope of salvation through the workings of grace seems clearly established both from Beckett's own evidence and from the text itself. Does this, however, mean that it is a Christian, or even that it is a religious play? There have been a number of very ingenious interpretations in this sense. Vladimir's and Estragon's waiting is explained as signifying their steadfast faith and hope, while Vladimir's kindness to his friend, and the two tramps' mutual interdependence are seen as symbols of

Christian charity. But these religious interpretations seem to overlook a number of essential features of the play – its constant stress on the uncertainty of the appointment with Godot, Godot's unreliability and irrationality, and the repeated demonstration of the futility of the hopes pinned upon him. The act of *Waiting for Godot* is shown as essentially *absurd*. Admittedly it might be a case of *'Credere quia absurdum est'*, yet it might even more forcibly be taken as a demonstration of the proposition *'Absurdum est credere.'*

There is one feature of the play that leads one to assume there is a better solution to the tramps' predicament, which they themselves both prefer to *Waiting for Godot* – that is, suicide. 'We should have thought of it a million years ago, in the nineties. . . . Hand in hand from the top of the Eiffel Tower, among the first. We were respectable in those days. Now it's too late. They wouldn't even let us up' (*CDW* 12). Suicide remains their favourite solution, unattainable owing to their own incompetence and their lack of the practical tools to achieve it. It is precisely their disappointment at their failure to succeed in their attempts at suicide that Vladimir and Estragon rationalise by waiting, or pretending to wait, for Godot. 'I'm curious to hear what he has to offer. Then we'll take it or leave it' (*CDW* 18). Estragon, far less convinced of Godot's promises than Vladimir, is anxious to reassure himself that they are not tied to Godot.

> ESTRAGON: I'm asking you if we are tied.
>
> VLADIMIR: Tied?
>
> ESTRAGON: Ti-ed.
>
> VLADIMIR: How do you mean tied?
>
> ESTRAGON: Down.
>
> VLADIMIR: But to whom? By whom?
>
> ESTRAGON: To your man.
>
> VLADIMIR: To Godot? Tied to Godot? What an idea! No question of it. [*Pause.*] For the moment. (*CDW* 20–21)

When, later, Vladimir falls into some sort of complacency about their waiting – 'We have kept our appointment . . . We are not saints, but we have kept our appointment. How many people can boast as much?' – Estragon immediately punctures it by retorting, 'Billions.' And Vladimir is quite ready to admit that they are waiting only from irrational habit. 'All I know is that the hours are long . . . and constrain us to beguile them with proceedings . . . which may at first

sight seem to be 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 abyssal depths?' (*CDW* 75).

In support of the Christian interpretation, it might be argued that Vladimir and Estragon, who are *Waiting for Godot*, are shown as clearly superior to Pozzo and Lucky, who have no appointment, no objective, and are wholly egocentric, wholly wrapped up in their sadomasochistic relationship. Is it not their faith that puts the two tramps on a higher plane?[34]

It is evident that, in fact, Pozzo is naïvely over-confident and self-centred. 'Do I look like a man that can be made to suffer?' (*CDW* 34) he boasts. Even when he gives a soulful and melancholy description of the sunset and the sudden falling of the night, we know that he doesn't believe the night will ever fall on him – he is merely giving a performance; he is not concerned with the meaning of what he recites, but only with its effect on the audience. Hence he is taken completely unawares when night does fall on him and he goes blind. Likewise Lucky, in accepting Pozzo as his master and in teaching him his ideas, seems to have been naïvely convinced of the power of reason, beauty and truth. Estragon and Vladimir are clearly superior to both Pozzo and Lucky – not because they pin their faith on Godot, but because they are less naïve. They do not believe in action, wealth or reason. They are aware that all we do in this life is as nothing when seen against the senseless action of time, which is itself an illusion. They are aware that suicide would be the best solution. They are thus superior to Pozzo and Lucky because they are less self-centred and have fewer illusions. In fact, as a Jungian psychologist, Eva Metman, has pointed out in a remarkable study of Beckett's plays, 'Godot's function seems to be to keep his dependants unconscious.'[35] In this view, the hope, the habit of hoping, that Godot might come after all is the last illusion that keeps Vladimir and Estragon from facing the human condition and themselves in the harsh light of fully conscious awareness. As Dr Metman observes, it is at the very moment, toward the end of the play, when Vladimir is about to realise that he has been dreaming, and must wake up and face the world as it is, that Godot's messenger arrives, rekindles his hopes, and plunges him back into the passivity of illusion.

For a brief moment, Vladimir is aware of the full horror of the human condition: 'The air is full of our cries. . . . But habit is a great deadener.' He looks at Estragon, who is asleep, and reflects, 'At me too someone is looking, of me too someone is saying, he is sleeping, he knows nothing, let him sleep on. . . . I can't go on!' (*CDW* 84–85) The routine of *Waiting for Godot* stands for habit, which prevents us from reaching the painful but fruitful awareness of the full reality of being.

Again we find Beckett's own commentary on this aspect of *Waiting for Godot* in his essay on Proust: 'Habit is the ballast that chains the dog to his vomit. Breathing is habit. Life is habit. Or rather life is a succession of habits, since the individual is a succession of individuals. . . . Habit then is the generic term for the countless treaties concluded between the countless subjects that constitute the individual and their countless correlative objects. The periods of transition that separate consecutive adaptations . . . represent the perilous zones on the life of the individual, dangerous, precarious, painful, mysterious, and fertile, when for a moment the *boredom of living* is replaced by the *suffering of being*.'[36] 'The suffering of being: that is the free play of every faculty. Because the pernicious devotion of habit paralyses our attention, drugs those handmaidens of perception whose co-operation is not absolutely essential.'[37]

Vladimir's and Estragon's pastimes are, as they repeatedly indicate, designed to stop them from thinking. 'We're in no danger of thinking any more. . . . Thinking is not the worst . . . What is terrible is to *have* thought' (*CDW* 60).

Vladimir and Estragon talk incessantly. Why? They hint at it in what is probably the most lyrical, the most perfectly phrased passage of the play:

VLADIMIR: You are right, we're inexhaustible.

ESTRAGON: It's so we won't think.

VLADIMIR: We have that excuse.

ESTRAGON: It's so we won't hear.

VLADIMIR: We have our reasons.

ESTRAGON: All the dead voices.

VLADIMIR: They make a noise like wings.

ESTRAGON: Like leaves.

VLADIMIR: Like sand.

ESTRAGON: Like leaves.

[*Silence.*]

VLADIMIR: They all speak together.

ESTRAGON: Each one to itself.

[*Silence.*]

VLADIMIR: Rather they whisper.

ESTRAGON: They rustle.

VLADIMIR: They murmur.

ESTRAGON: They rustle.

[*Silence.*]

VLADIMIR: What do they say?

ESTRAGON: They talk about their lives.

VLADIMIR: To have lived is not enough for them.

ETSRAGON: They have to talk about it.

VLADIMIR: To be dead is not enough for them.

ESTRAGON: It is not sufficient.

[*Silence.*]

VLADIMIR: They make a noise like feathers.

ESTRAGON: Like leaves.

VLADIMIR: Like ashes.

ESTRAGON: Like leaves.

[*Long silence.*] (*CDW* 58)

This passage, in which the cross-talk of Irish music-hall comedians is miraculously transmuted into poetry, contains the key to much of Beckett's work. Surely these rustling, murmuring voices of the past are the voices we hear in the three novels of his trilogy; they are the voices that explore the mystery of being and the self to the limits of anguish and suffering. Vladimir and Estragon are trying to escape hearing them. The long silence that follows their evocation is broken by Vladimir, *'in anguish'*, with the cry 'Say anything at all!' after which the two relapse into their wait for Godot.

The hope of salvation may be merely an evasion of the suffering and anguish that spring from facing the reality of the human condition. There is here a truly astonishing parallel between the Existentialist philosophy of Jean-Paul Sartre and the creative intuition of Beckett, who has never consciously expressed Existentialist views. If, for Beckett as for Sartre, man has the duty of facing the human condition as a recognition that at the root of our being there is nothingness, liberty, and the need of constantly creating ourselves in a succession of choices, then Godot might well become an image of what Sartre calls 'bad faith' – 'The first act of bad faith consists in evading what one cannot evade, in evading what one is.'[38] □

Esslin's method in his interpretation of Godot is extended to incorporate *Endgame* also. The sense, felt by critics such as Tynan and Robbe-Grillet, that *Endgame* pushes further than Godot, and thus cannot be analysed with the same critical tool, is not shared by Esslin. *Endgame*, like Godot, is a play in which immediate presence is pitched against illusory narrative structures, and a deep sense of the meaning of being is salvaged from the collapse of all the trivial meanings that make up social being. In the following extract, Esslin suggests some means of approaching the play – it is a monodrama set in the inside of one character's mind, it is a partly autobiographical account of Beckett's relationship with Joyce – before stressing, in a familiar reluctance to say specifically what the play means, that no single interpretation can be applied to it. The play is a dramatisation of a 'situation that has deepened into a universal significance', and this significance has been achieved by a process of 'contraction', which has freed it from 'all elements of a naturalistic social setting and plot'.

■ The suggestion that *Endgame* may . . . be a monodrama has much to be said for it. The enclosed space with the two tiny windows through which Clov observes the outside world; the dustbins that hold the suppressed and despised parents, and whose lids Clov is ordered to press down when they become obnoxious; Hamm, blind and emotional; Clov, performing the function of the sense for him – all these might well represent different aspects of a single personality, repressed memories in the subconscious mind, the emotional and the intellectual selves. Is Clov then the intellect, bound to serve the emotions, instincts, and appetites, and trying to free himself from such disorderly and tyrannical masters, yet doomed to die when its connection with the animal side is severed? Is the death of the outside world the gradual receding of the links to reality that takes place in the process of ageing and dying? Is *Endgame* a monodrama depicting the dissolution of a personality in the hour of death?

It would be wrong to assume that these questions can be definitely answered. *Endgame* certainly was not planned as a sustained allegory of this type. But there are indications that there is an element of monodrama in the play. Hamm describes a memory that is strangely reminiscent of the situation in *Endgame*: 'I once knew a madman who thought the end of the world had come. He was a painter – an[d] engraver . . . I used to go and see him, in the asylum. I'd take him by the hand and drag him to the window. Look! There! All that rising corn! And there! Look! The sails of the herring fleet! All that loveliness! . . . He'd snatch away his hand and go back into his corner. Appalled. All he had seen was ashes . . . He alone had been spared. Forgotten . . . It appears the case is . . . was not so . . . so unusual' (*CDW* 113). Hamm's own world represents the delusions of the mad painter.

Moreover, what is the significance of the picture mentioned in the stage directions? 'Hanging near the door, its face to the wall, a picture' (*CDW* 92). Is that picture a memory? Is the story a lucid moment in the consciousness of that very painter whose dying hours we witness from behind the scenes of his mind?

Beckett's plays can be interpreted on many levels. *Endgame* may well be a monodrama on one level and a morality play about the death of a rich man on another. But the peculiar psychological reality of Beckett's characters has often been noticed. Pozzo and Lucky have been interpreted as body and mind; Vladimir and Estragon have been seen as so complementary that they might be the two halves of a single personality, the conscious and the subconscious mind. Each of these three pairs – Pozzo–Lucky; Vladimir–Estragon; Hamm–Clov – is linked by a relationship of mutual interdependence, wanting to leave each other, at war with each other, and yet dependent on each other. '*Nec tecum, nec sine te.*' This is a frequent situation among people – married couples, for example – but it is also an image of the interrelatedness of the elements within a single personality, particularly if the personality is in conflict with itself.

In Beckett's first play, *Eleutheria*, the basic situation was, superficially, analogous to the relationship between Clov and Hamm. The young hero of that play wanted to leave his family; in the end he succeeded in getting away. In *Endgame*, however, that situation has been deepened into a truly universal significance; it has been concentrated and immeasurably enriched precisely by having been freed from all elements of a naturalistic social setting and external plot. The process of contraction, which Beckett described as the essence of the artistic tendency in his essay on Proust, has here been carried out triumphantly. Instead of merely exploring a surface, a play like *Endgame* has become a shaft driven deep down into the core of being; that is why it exists on a multitude of levels, revealing new ones as it is more closely studied. What at first sight may have appeared as obscurity or lack of definition is later recognised as the very hallmark of the density of texture, the tremendous concentration of a work that springs from a truly creative imagination, as distinct from a merely imitative one.

The force of these considerations is brought out with particular clarity when we are confronted by an attempt to interpret a play like *Endgame* as a mere exercise in conscious or subconscious autobiography. In an extremely ingenious essay[39] Lionel Abel has worked out the theory that in the characters of Hamm and Pozzo Beckett may have portrayed his literary master, James Joyce, while Lucky and Clov stand for Beckett himself. *Endgame* then becomes an allegory of the relationship between the domineering, nearly blind Joyce and his adoring disciple, who felt himself crushed by his master's overpowering

literary influence. Superficially the parallels are striking: Hamm is presented as being at work on an interminable story, Lucky is being made to perform a set piece of thinking, which, Mr Abel argues, is in fact a parody of Joyce's style. Yet on closer study this theory surely becomes untenable; not because there may not be a certain amount of truth in it (every writer is bound to use elements of his own experience of life in his work) but because, far from illuminating the full content of a play like *Endgame*, such an interpretation reduces it to a trivial level. If *Endgame* really were nothing but a thinly disguised account of the literary, or even the human, relationship between the two particular individuals, it could not possibly produce the impact it has had on audiences utterly ignorant of these particular, very private circumstances. Yet *Endgame* undoubtedly has a very deep and direct impact, which can spring only from its touching a chord in the minds of a very large number of human beings. The problems of the relationship between a literary master and his pupil would be very unlikely to elicit such a response; very few people in the audience would feel directly involved. Admittedly, a play that presented the conflict between Joyce and Beckett openly, or thinly disguised, might arouse the curiosity of audiences who are always eager for autobiographical revelations. But this is just what *Endgame* does not do. If it nevertheless arouses profound emotion in its audience, this can be due only to the fact that it is felt to deal with a conflict of a far more universal nature. Once that is seen, it becomes clear that, while it is fascinating to argue about the aptness of such autobiographical elements, such a discussion leaves the central problem of understanding the play and exploring its many-layered meanings still to be tackled.

[. . .]

The experience expressed in Beckett plays is of a far more profound and fundamental nature than mere autobiography. They reveal his experience of temporality and evanescence; his sense of the tragic difficulty of becoming aware of one's own self in the merciless process of renovation and destruction that occurs with change in time; of the difficulty of communication between human beings; of the unending quest for reality in a world in which everything is uncertain and the borderline between dream and waking is ever shifting; of the tragic nature of all love relationships and the self-deception of friendship (of which Beckett speaks in the essay on Proust), and so on. In *Endgame* we are also certainly confronted with a very powerful sense of deadness, of leaden heaviness and hopelessness that is experienced in states of deep depression: the world outside goes dead for the victim of such states, but inside his mind there is ceaseless argument between parts of his personality that have become autonomous entities.

This is not to say that Beckett gives a clinical description of pathological states. His creative intuition explores the elements of experience and shows to what extent all human beings carry the seeds of such depression and disintegration within the deeper layers of their personality. If the prisoners of San Quentin responded to *Waiting for Godot*, it was because they were confronted with their own experience of time, waiting, hope, and despair; because they recognised the truth about their own human relationships in the sadomasochistic interdependence of Pozzo and Lucky and in the bickering hate–love between Vladimir and Estragon.[40] This is also the key to the wide success of Beckett's plays: to be confronted with concrete projections of the deepest fears and anxieties, which have been only vaguely experienced at a half-conscious level, constitutes a process of catharsis and liberation analogous to the therapeutic effect in psychoanalysis of confronting the subconscious contents of the mind. This is the moment of release from deadening habit, through facing up to the suffering of existence, that Vladimir almost attains in *Waiting for Godot*. This also, probably, is the release that could occur if Clov had the courage to break his bondage to Hamm and venture out into the world, which may not, after all, be so dead as it appeared from within the claustrophobic confines of Hamm's realm. This, in fact, seems to be hinted at by the strange episode of the little boy whom Clov observes in the last stage of *Endgame*. Is this boy a symbol of life outside the closed circuit of withdrawal from reality?

[. . .]

It may well be that the sighting of this little boy – undoubtedly a climactic event in the play – stands for redemption from the illusion and evanescence of time through the recognition, and acceptance, of a higher reality: the little boy contemplates his own navel;[41] that is, he fixes his attention on the great emptiness of nirvana, nothingness, of which Democritus the Aberdite has said, in one of Beckett's favourite quotations, 'Nothing is more real than nothing'.[42]

There is a moment of illumination, shortly before he himself dies, in which Murphy, having played a *game of chess*, experiences a strange sensation: '. . . and Murphy began to see nothing, that colourlessness which is such a rare post-natal treat, being the absence . . . not of *percipere* but of *percipi*. His other senses also found themselves at peace, an unexpected pleasure. Not the numb peace of their own suspension, but the positive peace that comes when the somethings give way, or perhaps simply add up, to the Nothing, than which in the guffaw of the Abderite naught is more real. Time did not cease, that would be asking too much, but the wheel of rounds and pauses did, as Murphy with his head among the armies [i.e. of the chessmen] continued to

suck in, through all the posterns of his withered soul, the accidentless One-and-Only, conveniently called Nothing.'[43]

Does Hamm, who has shut himself off from the world and killed the rest of mankind by holding on to his material possessions – Hamm, blind, sensual, egocentric – then die when Clov, the rational part of the self, perceives the true reality of the illusoriness of the material world, the redemption and resurrection, the liberation from the wheels of time that lies in union with the 'accidentless One-and-Only, conveniently called Nothing'? Or is the discovery of the little boy merely a symbol of the coming of death – union with nothingness in a different, more concrete sense? Or does the reappearance of life in the outside world indicate that the period of loss of contact with the world has come to an end, that the crisis has passed and that a disintegrating personality is about to find a way back to integration, 'the solemn change towards merciless reality in Hamm and ruthless acceptance of freedom in Clov', as the Jungian analyst Dr Metman puts it?[44]

There is no need to try to pursue these alternatives any further; to decide in favour of one would only impair the stimulating coexistence of these and other possible implications.

[. . .]

Waiting for Godot and *Endgame*, the plays Beckett wrote in French, are dramatic statements of the human situation itself. They lack both characters and plot in the conventional sense because they tackle their subject matter at a level where neither characters nor plot exist. Characters presuppose that human nature, the diversity of personality and individuality, is real and matters: plot can only exist on the assumption that events in time are significant. These are precisely the assumptions that the two plays put in question. Hamm and Clov, Pozzo and Lucky, Vladimir and Estragon, Nagg and Nell are not characters but the embodiments of basic human attitudes, rather like the personified virtues and vices in medieval mystery plays or Spanish *autos sacramentales*. And what passes in these plays are not *events* with a definite beginning and a definite end, but types of *situation* that will forever repeat themselves. That is why the pattern of Act I of *Waiting for Godot* is repeated with variations in Act II; that is why we do not see Clov actually leave Hamm at the close of *Endgame* but leave the two frozen in a position of stalemate. Both plays repeat the pattern of the old German students' song Vladimir sings at the beginning of act II of *Waiting for Godot*, about the dog that came into a kitchen and stole some bread and was killed by the cook and buried by its fellow-dogs, who put a tombstone on its grave which told the story of the dog that came into the kitchen and stole some bread – and so on *ad infinitum*. In *Endgame* and *Waiting for Godot*, Beckett is concerned with probing down

to a depth in which individuality and definite events no longer appear, and only basic patterns emerge.[45] □

Esslin's reading of *Waiting for Godot* and *Endgame*, and his formulation of the Theatre of the Absurd, provided an interpretative convention that has remained extremely influential up to the present day. Fairly quickly after Esslin's categorisation of Beckett's plays in terms of a brand of populist existentialism and a formulaic dramatic nihilism, both audiences and critics became much more comfortable with the drama: the period of the plays' challenge to comprehension and interpretation seemed, as Esslin predicted, to come fairly quickly to a close. Pierre Marcabu commented wryly, in 1961, that within a short space of time *Godot* had become 'a game whose rules are completely unmysterious'. The initial threat that the play presented was quickly defused by those critics who protect their hermeneutic ideologies by 'drawing some of the teeth out of dangerous plays'.[46] For the majority of critics, less scathing than Marcabu, the plays remained extremely powerful, but it was generally agreed that their power had been more or less successfully contained within the dramatic and interpretative boundaries sketched out by Esslin. The critical formula that Esslin introduced in *The Theatre of the Absurd*, however, rests on fundamental contradictions that are not explicitly addressed, and he leaves many questions unanswered as a consequence. Perhaps the clearest contradiction that emerges from Esslin's account is that between value and valuelessness. Beckett's stage is a space in which all the processes that impute value to our presence in the world are exposed as being spurious and groundless, yet this process of exposure is itself highly valuable. Vladimir and Estragon are deemed by Esslin to be engaged in a recognition of the essential truth that the world is without meaning, but he describes this recognition, in the above extract, as the 'painful but fruitful awareness of the full reality of being'. The means by which such an awareness could bear fruit in Beckett's universe is not closely examined, beyond a reference to a crude existentialist category of absolute freedom. The moment at which it is discovered that we are not held in the world by an overarching system of signification is 'fruitful', because it is a moment of catharsis and liberation, in which we realise that we are free. Within the terms of Esslin's argument, however, it is difficult to see how such freedom could redeem the value and the fruitfulness that he imputes to it. For Esslin, Vladimir and Estragon are not free from anything, nor are they free to do anything. Even the political value that Sartre attaches to existential freedom is absent in Esslin's model, as the freedom that Beckett's characters win is the freedom to recognise that all action is futile and senseless.[47] The abstract concept of freedom that Esslin privileges as the 'illuminating' and 'inspiring' content of the plays belongs to the very system of 'metaphysical meaning structures' that

Beckett is in the business of debunking – outside such a system, it loses the value that Esslin seeks to claim for it. Many of the contradictions that run throughout Esslin's argument grow from this underlying problem. For example, the emphasis upon the instability of personal identity, and the illusoriness of the myths that tell us who we are, is made to coexist with an equal emphasis upon the sacred freedom of the individual. The category of individualism is regarded both as the myth that Beckett is rejecting in his drama, and as the privileged bearer of truth that emerges intact from it. Beckettian freedom both liberates you from who you are, and allows you to become who you are.

These contradictions are caused by Esslin's untheorised deployment of his sustaining distinction between social being and extra-social being, referred to earlier in this chapter. Without explicitly recognising the fact, Esslin's argument rests on the liberal humanist assumption that there are some universal values that attain their significance not from any of the social value systems that he is so keen to disparage, but from the force of their own self-evident rectitude. These values are not social, political or ideological, but are rather transcendent truths that do not need to refer to any epistemological authority for their validation. Thus, Esslin's argument abruptly brings a radical nihilism, which questions the validity of all truth and meaning, up against a stout defence of the validity of a stock of values that he deems to be unquestionable. He does not consider that the integrity of his nihilism is compromised and undermined by his privileging of such values, because he deems them to be natural rather than cultural. But for many critics, to place a selection of values beyond the range of the deconstructive power of art is itself an ideological move – the values that Esslin privileges in the name of an apolitical universalism are those that underpin the Western bourgeois ideology that he is implicitly protecting. As Eagleton has commented, one of the functions of ideology is to disguise its own ideological quality by presenting itself as natural,[48] and it is this naturalisation of the values of Western liberal humanism that accounts for Esslin's silent distinction between ideological and extra-ideological being. The universal reality that Esslin discovers in Beckett's drama, in which an individual confronts a confusing and irredeemable world with honesty, bravery and poetry, is a cornerstone of the Western bourgeois ideology in which his critique is steeped: the world may be bleak and difficult, but there is nothing we can do about it, so we must keep on going with humour and humility, stoically accepting the *status quo* as the given and immutable condition of humanity. For some critics, Esslin's interpretation of Beckett's drama thus succeeded in transforming a powerful critique of Western humanism into a defence of its most basic tenets. Beckett appeared as an apologist for Western decadence, and an advocate of a passive, stoical stance in the face of cultural unfreedom. He seemed to substitute a delight in the faithful representation of an

unchanging, essential human condition, for any form of commitment to particular cultural realities, a substitution that was only conceivable for those who did not have to fight for their most basic rights. P.J. Murphy comments, in *Reconstructing Beckett*, that the result of Esslin's influential analysis 'is a bourgeoisification of Beckett which renders innocuous some of his potentially most radical comments about art and its relationship to life'.[49] The long history of criticism that casts Beckett's drama as a defender of decadent Western complacency has its beginning, for critics such as Murphy, in *The Theatre of the Absurd*. The challenge that *Waiting for Godot* and *Endgame* presented to the critical community was not so much responded to by Esslin, as annulled.

Adorno's influential essay, 'Trying to Understand *Endgame*', written in 1958, approaches the challenge of interpreting Beckett's drama in a very different way. Many of the assumptions that underpin and sustain Esslin's critique are explicitly rejected in this essay, which suggests that a mode of critique is required that can gain access to Beckett's negativity, without compromising the work's outright rejection of existing interpretative agendas. Adorno seeks to negotiate here between two critical approaches, which he deems equally unsatisfactory: the approach, adopted by 'the cultural spokespersons of authentic expression'[50] such as Esslin, which enthusiastically welcomes Beckett into a dominant critical ideology; and the approach, adopted in different ways by defenders of socialist realism such as Georg Lukács[51] and by liberal critics such as Kenneth Tynan, which rejects Beckett's work because, in its decadent abstraction, it does not conform to prescribed notions of how responsible, committed art should be. It is necessary, Adorno suggests, to understand the unique standpoint of Beckett's aesthetic, which refuses to cooperate either with the demand that a work of art should be directly politically committed, or with the avowedly apolitical[52] criteria by which Western humanist critics judge the authentic work of art. The reason that the challenge of interpreting Beckett's drama is so difficult and so urgent, is that it gives both bourgeois and formulaic socialist critical institutions the slip, and gestures beyond them towards an entirely different aesthetic that has yet to be critically articulated.

The means of grasping Beckett's negativity, and making it available for interpretation, that has been practised by most of the critics represented in this chapter so far, is rejected by Adorno as inadequate. It is neither sufficient nor even possible to take Beckett's representation of meaninglessness as the meaning of his work, and then to progress as if it was a positive quality. Adorno is emphatic that:

■ Drama cannot simply take negative meaning, or the absence of meaning, as its content without everything that is peculiar to it being affected to the point of turning into its opposite. The essence of drama was constituted by that meaning. Were drama to try and survive meaning aesthetically, it would become inadequate to its substance and be degraded to a clattering machinery for the demonstration of worldviews.[53] □

Here, Adorno's reading can be seen to be in direct opposition to Esslin's. Where Esslin suggests that something positive emerges intact from Beckett's dramatisation of meaningless, Adorno insists that there has to be something suspicious and inartistic about a form of dramatic expression that claims to represent a collapse of value systems without itself collapsing around the meaninglessness that it seeks to represent. Esslin's quiet distinction between trivial, social meaning and deep, universal meaning is rejected by Adorno. In fact, for Adorno, what distinguishes Beckett's drama is its move away from such a distinction, which he claims is commonly found in existentialist thought. Beckett's drama does not try to survive the collapse of meaning that is its content – for Adorno there is precisely not a stock of universal, unideological values that is salvaged from the wreckage of Beckett's drama, and elevated to the status of fundamental truth. Neither does the death of illusory meaning give way to a 'new kind of consciousness, which faces the mystery and terror of the human condition in the exhilaration of a new-found freedom',[54] as it does for Esslin. The difficulty of Beckett's drama, and its originality, stems from its rejection of a universally meaningful category that acts as a crutch to support the drama, and as a cement to plug the gap that opens between meaning and meaninglessness.

The creed of universal meaning that has emerged from absurdist and existentialist drama before Beckett, Adorno suggests, is that of the 'irreducibility of individual existence'.[55] The meaning that supports both Esslin's and Robbe-Grillet's critiques, the Heidegerrian certainty of 'being there' on the physical stage when time, narrative and language fail, is the backbone of an existentialist philosophy that Adorno claims is exploded in Beckett's drama, rather than given its definitive shape. Presence on the stage does not act as the guarantor of being for Adorno, as it does for so many of Beckett's critics. On the contrary, the categories of subjectivity and objectivity, concretion and abstraction, being and nothingness, are seen in their irreconciled disparity, and in a state of irredeemable alienation, rather than represented as being reconciled within the figure of a 'new kind of consciousness'. Being who you are, in the liberating reality of the moment, is simply not an option, for Adorno, in Beckett's dramatic universe. What the existentialist emphasis on individual existence failed to account for is the fact that individuality is produced by the very processes it is pitted against. It is difficult to see how you can use existence as a sealed refuge against ideology, when ideology at least partly produces existence. *Endgame* destroyed the illusion, touted by the existentialists, that existence could be used as a fail-safe defence against

history, because in the play 'the individual himself is revealed to be a historical category'. Where Esslin leans heavily on the figure of transcendent 'being' as the content and the truth of Beckett's drama, Adorno is insistent that such a comforting quality is not to be found in the plays, because being is revealed to be an outcome of capitalist development, rather than something that can posit itself in a space outside social processes. Transcendent 'Being', in Beckett's drama, does not have the authority to articulate itself without reference to social being.

■ If individual experience in its narrowness and contingency has interpreted itself as a figure of Being, it has received the authority to do so only by asserting itself to be the fundamental characteristic of Being. But this is precisely what is false. The immediacy of individuation was deceptive; the carrier of individual experience is mediated, conditioned. *Endgame* assumes that the individual's claim to autonomy and being has lost its credibility.[56] □

Whilst Adorno rejects outright the notion that any kind of universal, positive 'message' emerges from Beckett's drama, however, this does not mean that his work is politically redundant, nor that the search for forms of artistic resistance to ideological control is necessarily futile. The individual for Adorno is 'both the outcome of the capitalist process of alienation and a defiant protest against it',[57] and the articulation of this protest is what the drama strives for above all else. It is not that there is no impulse towards protest against forms of unfreedom, but rather that Beckett's drama does not offer an existing discourse in which to couch such protest. The predicament in twentieth-century Europe is such that there are no modes of direct expression available in which to articulate dissent from a society that exercises 'virtually unmediated control' – to grant the individual the power to do so (as critics such as Esslin tend to do) is just another form of false consciousness. *Endgame* is a response to the decline of culture in a period of rampantly triumphant capitalism. The situation depicted on the stage is one in which dialogue, language and philosophy have degenerated into clichés and tautologies that offer no way out of the claustrophobic confines of the ruined shelter. One reason that *Endgame* is so powerful is because it is able to depict the reification of culture so ruthlessly, and in doing so the possibility of leaving a space for culture to speak with any authenticity or any truth is precisely what is squeezed out. But at the same time as it confronts us with a culture that has 'gone kaputt', *Endgame* presents us with a voiceless reflection on such a catastrophe – a dramatic urge towards a condemnation of what has become of culture, which cannot find a voice and whose only mode of expression is silence. This silent verdict on twentieth-century culture cannot be mediated or paraphrased by philosophy or by

theory, because it is the inability of these discourses to deal with the depravity of post-Second World War culture that is the focal point of the play. For Adorno, the intriguing double movement of *Endgame* is that it both dismisses culture as being terminally closed in upon itself, unable to find a way out of its own corruption in order to reflect upon itself as bankrupt, and *at the same time* 'surges beyond' the confines of such bankruptcy towards an enigmatic, silent negativity that is all that is left of the subject in revolt.

It is the challenge of interpreting and understanding this double movement that Adorno suggests is the test for a philosophy 'whose hour has struck'. The following extract, which forms the introduction to 'Trying to Understand *Endgame*', formulates the distinction between existentialist philosophy and Beckett's drama, and gestures towards a means of interpreting the play that can understand the limits and the nature of its revolt.

■ Beckett's oeuvre has many things in common with Parisian existentialism. It is shot through with reminiscences of the categories of absurdity, situation, and decision or the failure to decide, the way medieval ruins permeate Kafka's monstrous house in the suburbs. Now and then the windows fly open and one sees the black, starless sky of something like philosophical anthropology. But whereas in Sartre the form – that of the *pièce à thèse* – is somewhat traditional, by no means daring, and aimed at effect, in Beckett the form overtakes what is expressed and changes it. The impulses are raised to the level of the most advanced artistic techniques, those of Joyce and Kafka. For Beckett absurdity is no longer an 'existential situation' diluted to an idea and then illustrated. In him literary method surrenders to absurdity without preconceived intentions. Absurdity is relieved of the doctrinal universality which in existentialism, the creed of the irreducibility of individual existence, linked it to the Western pathos of the universal and lasting. Beckett thereby dismisses existential conformity, the notion that one ought to be what one is, and with it easy comprehensibility of presentation. What philosophy Beckett provides, he himself reduces to cultural trash, like the innumerable allusions and cultural tidbits he employs, following the tradition of the Anglo-Saxon avant-garde and especially of Joyce and Eliot. For Beckett, culture swarms and crawls, the way the intestinal convolutions of *Jugendstil* ornamentation swarmed and crawled for the avant-garde before him: modernism as what is obsolete in modernity. Language, regressing, demolishes that obsolete material. In Beckett, this kind of objectivity annihilates the meaning that culture once was, along with its rudiments. And so culture begins to fluoresce. In this Beckett is carrying to its conclusion a tendency present in the modern novel. Reflection, which the cultural criterion of aesthetic immanence

proscribed as abstract, is juxtaposed with pure presentation; the Flaubertian principle of a completely self-contained subject matter is undermined. The less events can be presumed to be inherently meaningful, the more the idea of aesthetic substance as the unity of what appears and what was intended becomes an illusion. Beckett rids himself of this illusion by coupling the two moments in their disparity. Thought becomes both a means to produce meaning in the work, a meaning which cannot be rendered in tangible form, and a means to express the absence of meaning. Applied to the drama, the word 'meaning' is ambiguous. It covers the metaphysical content that is represented objectively in the complexion of the artefact; the intention of the whole as a complex of meaning that is the inherent meaning of the drama; and finally the meaning of the words and sentences spoken by the characters and their meaning in sequence, the dialogic meaning. But these equivocations point to something shared. In Beckett's *Endgame* that common ground becomes a continuum. Historically, this continuum is supported by a change in the a priori of the drama: the fact that there is no longer any substantive, affirmative metaphysical meaning that could provide dramatic form with its law and its epiphany. That, however, disrupts the dramatic form down to its linguistic infrastructure. Drama cannot simply take negative meaning, or the absence of meaning, as its content without everything peculiar to it being affected to the point of turning into its opposite. The essence of drama was constituted by that meaning. Were drama to try to survive meaning aesthetically, it would become inadequate to its substance and be degraded to a clattering machinery for the demonstration of worldviews, as is often the case with existentialist plays. The explosion of the metaphysical meaning, which was the only thing guaranteeing the unity of the aesthetic structure, causes the latter to crumble with a necessity and stringency in no way unequal to that of the traditional canon of dramatic form. Unequivocal aesthetic meaning and its subjectivisation in concrete, tangible intention was a surrogate for the transcendent meaningfulness whose very denial constitutes aesthetic content. Through its own organised meaninglessness, dramatic action must model itself on what has transpired with the truth content of drama in general. Nor does this kind of construction of the meaningless stop at the linguistic molecules; if they, and the connections between them, were rationally meaningful, they would necessarily be synthesised into the overall coherence of meaning that the drama as a whole negates. Hence interpretation of *Endgame* cannot pursue the chimerical aim of expressing the play's meaning in a form mediated by philosophy. Understanding it can only mean understanding its unintelligibility, concretely reconstructing the meaning of the fact that it has no meaning. Split off, thought no longer presumes, as the Idea

once did, to be the meaning of the work, a transcendence produced and vouched for by the work's immanence. Instead, thought transforms itself into a kind of second-order material, the way the philosophical ideas in Thomas Mann's *Magic Mountain* and *Doctor Faustus* have their fate as material does, a fate that takes the place of the sensuous immediacy that dwindles in the self-reflexive work of art. Until now this transformation of thought into material has largely been involuntary, the plight of works that compulsively mistook themselves for the Idea they could not attain; Beckett accepts the challenge and uses thoughts *sans phrase* as clichés, fragmentary materials in the *monologue intérieur* that spirit has become, the reified residues of culture. Pre-Beckettian existentialism exploited philosophy as a literary subject as though it were Schiller in the flesh. Now Beckett, more cultured than any of them, hands it the bill: philosophy, spirit itself, declares itself to be dead inventory, the dream-like leavings of the world of experience, and the poetic process declares itself to be a process of wastage. *Dégoût*, a productive artistic force since Baudelaire, becomes insatiable in Beckett's historically mediated impulses. Anything that no longer works becomes canonical, thus rescuing from the shadowlands of methodology a motif from the pre-history of existentialism, Husserl's universal world-annihilation. Adherents of totalitarianism like Lukács, who wax indignant about the decadence of this truly *terrible simplificateur*, are not ill-advised by the interest of their bosses. What they hate in Beckett is what they betrayed. Only the nausea of satiety, the *taedium* of the spirit, wants something completely different; ordained health has to be satisfied with the nourishment offered, homely fare. Beckett's *dégoût* refuses to be coerced. Exhorted to play along, he responds with parody, parody both of philosophy, which spits out his dialogues, and of forms. Existentialism itself is parodied; nothing remains of its invariant categories but bare existence. The play's opposition to ontology, which outlines something somehow First and Eternal, is unmistakable in the following piece of dialogue, which involuntarily caricatures Goethe's dictum about *das alte Wahre* what is old and true, a notion that deteriorates to bourgeois sentiment:

> HAMM: Do you remember your father?
>
> CLOV [*Wearily*]: Same answer. [*Pause.*] You've asked me these questions millions of times.
>
> HAMM: I love the old questions. [*With fervour.*] Ah the old questions, the old answers, there's nothing like them! (*CDW* 110)

Thoughts are dragged along and distorted, like the residues of waking life in dreams, *homo homini sapienti sat*. This is why interpreting Beckett,

something he declines to concern himself with, is so awkward. Beckett shrugs his shoulders at the possibility of philosophy today, at the very possibility of theory. The irrationality of bourgeois society in its late phase rebels at letting itself be understood; those were the good old days, when a critique of the political economy of this society could be written that judged it in terms of its own *ratio*. For since then the society has thrown its *ratio* on the scrap heap and replaced it with virtually unmediated control. Hence interpretation inevitably lags behind Beckett. His dramatic work, precisely by virtue of its restriction to an exploded facticity, surges out beyond facticity and in its enigmatic character calls for interpretation. One could almost say that the criterion of a philosophy whose hour is struck is that it proves equal to this challenge.

French existentialism had tackled the problem of history. In Beckett, history swallows up existentialism. In *Endgame*, a historical moment unfolds, namely the experience captured in the title of one of the culture industry's cheap novels, *Kaputt*. After the Second World War, everything, including a resurrected culture, has been destroyed without realising it; humankind continues to vegetate, creeping along after events that even the survivors cannot really survive, on a rubbish heap that has made reflection on one's own damaged state useless. The word *kaputt*, the pragmatic presupposition of the play, is snatched back from the marketplace:

> CLOV: [*He gets up on ladder, turns the telescope on the without.*] Let's see. [*He looks, moving the telescope.*] Zero . . . [*he looks*] . . . zero . . . [*he looks*] . . . and zero.
>
> HAMM: Nothing stirs. All is –
>
> CLOV: Zer –
>
> HAMM: [*Violently.*] Wait till you're spoken to. [*Normal voice.*] All is . . . all is . . . all is what? [*Violently.*] All is what?
>
> CLOV: What all is? In a word? Is that what you want to know? Just a moment. [*He turns the telescope on the without, looks, lowers the telescope, turns towards* HAMM.] Corpsed. [In the German translation quoted by Adorno, 'Kaputt!'.] (*CDW* 106)

The fact that all human beings are dead is smuggled in on the sly. An earlier passage gives the reason why the catastrophe may not be mentioned. Hamm himself is vaguely responsible for it:

> HAMM: That old doctor, he's dead naturally?

> CLOV: He wasn't old.
>
> HAMM: But he's dead?
>
> CLOV: Naturally. [*Pause.*] *You* ask *me* that? (*CDW* 104)

The situation in the play, however, is none other than that in which 'There's no more nature' (*CDW* 97). The phase of complete reification of the world, where there is nothing left that has not been made by human beings, is indistinguishable from an additional catastrophic event caused by human beings, in which nature has been wiped out and after which nothing grows any more:

> HAMM: Did your seeds come up?
>
> CLOV: No.
>
> HAMM: Did you scratch round them to see if they had sprouted?
>
> CLOV: They haven't sprouted.
>
> HAMM: Perhaps it's still too early.
>
> CLOV: If they were going to sprout they would have sprouted. [*Violently.*] They'll never sprout. (*CDW* 98)

The *dramatis personae* resemble those who dream their own death, in a 'shelter' in which 'it's time it ended' (*CDW* 93). The end of the world is discounted, as though it could be taken for granted. Any alleged drama of the atomic age would be a mockery of itself, solely because its plot would comfortingly falsify the historical horror of anonymity by displacing it onto human characters and actions and by gaping at the 'important people' who are in charge of whether or not the button gets pushed. The violence of the unspeakable is mirrored in the fear of mentioning it. Beckett keeps it nebulous. About what is incommensurable with experience as such one can speak only in euphemisms, the way one speaks in Germany of the murder of the Jews. It has become a total a priori, so that bombed out consciousness no longer has a place from which to reflect on it. With gruesome irony, the desperate state of things provides a stylistic technique that protects the pragmatic presupposition from contamination by childish science fiction. If Clov had really exaggerated, as his companion, nagging him with common sense, accuses him of doing, that would not change much. The partial end of the world which the catastrophe would then amount to would be a bad joke. Nature, from which the prisoners are cut off, would be as good as no longer there at all; what is left of it would merely prolong the agony.

But at the same time, this historical nota bene, a parody of Kierkegaard's point of contact between time and eternity, places a taboo on history. What existentialist jargon considers the *condition humaine* is the image of the last human being, which devours that of the earlier ones, humanity. Existentialist ontology asserts that there is something universally valid in this process of abstraction that is not aware of itself. It follows the old phenomenological thesis of the *Wesensschau*, eidetic intuition, and acts as though it were aware of its compelling specifications in the particular – and as though it thereby combined apriority and concreteness in a single, magical stroke. But it distils out the element it considers supratemporal by negating precisely the particularity, individuation in time and space, that makes existence existence and not the mere concept of existence. It courts those who are sick of philosophical formalism and yet cling to something accessible only in formal terms. To this kind of unacknowledged process of abstraction, Beckett poses the decisive antithesis: an avowed process of subtraction. Instead of omitting what is temporal in existence – which can be existence only in time – he subtracts from existence what time, the historical tendency, is in reality preparing to get rid of. He extends the line taken by the liquidation of the subject to the point where it contracts into a 'here and now', a 'whatchamacallit', whose abstractness, the loss of all qualities, literally reduces ontological abstractness *ad absurdum*, the absurdity into which mere existence is transformed when it is absorbed into naked self-identity. Childish silliness emerges as the content of philosophy, which degenerates into tautology, into conceptual duplication of the existence it had set out to comprehend. Modern ontology lives off the unfulfilled promise of the concreteness of its abstractions, whereas in Beckett the concreteness of an existence that is shut up inside itself like a mollusk, no longer capable of universality, an existence that exhausts itself in pure self-positing, is revealed to be identical to the abstractness that is no longer capable of experience. Ontology comes into its own as the pathogenesis of the false life. It is presented as a state of negative eternity. Dostoevski's messianic Prince Mishkin once forgot his watch because no earthly time was valid for him; for Beckett's characters, Mishkin's antithesis, time can be lost because time would contain hope. Bored, the characters affirm that the weather is 'as usual' (*CDW* 105); this affirmation opens the jaws of Hell:

> HAMM: But that's always the way at the end of the day, isn't it, Clov?
>
> CLOV: Always.
>
> HAMM: It's the end of the day like any other day, isn't it, Clov?
>
> CLOV: Looks like it. (*CDW* 98)

Like time, the temporal has been incapacitated; even to say that it didn't exist any more would be too comforting. It is and it isn't, the way the world is for the solipsist, who doubts the world's existence but has to concede it with every sentence. A passage of dialogue equivocates in this way:

> HAMM: And the horizon? Nothing on the horizon?
>
> CLOV: [*Lowering the telescope, turning towards* HAMM, *exasperated.*] What in God's name could there be on the horizon? [*Pause.*]
>
> HAMM: The waves, how are the waves?
>
> CLOV: The waves? [*He turns the telescope on the waves.*] Lead.
>
> HAMM: And the sun?
>
> CLOV: [*Looking.*] Zero.
>
> HAMM: But it should be sinking. Look again.
>
> CLOV: [*Looking.*] Damn the sun.
>
> HAMM: Is it night already then?
>
> CLOV: [*Looking.*] No.
>
> HAMM: Then what is it?
>
> CLOV: [*Looking.*] Grey. [*Lowering the telescope, turning towards* HAMM, *louder.*] Grey! [*Pause. Still louder.*] GRREY! (*CDW* 107)

History is kept outside because it has dried up consciousness' power to conceive it, the power to remember. Drama becomes mute gesture, freezes in the middle of dialogue. The only part of history that is still apparent is its outcome – decline. What in the existentialists was inflated into the be-all and end-all of existence here contracts to the tip of the historical and breaks off. True to official optimism, Lukács complains that in Beckett human beings are reduced to their animal qualities.[58] His complaint tries to ignore the fact that the philosophies of the remainder, that is, those which subtract the temporal and the contingent element of life in order to retain only what is true and eternal, have turned into the remains of life, the sum total of the damages. Just as it is ridiculous to impute an abstract subjectivist ontology to Beckett and then put that ontology on some index of degenerate art, as Lukács does, on the basis of its worldlessness and its infantilism, so it would be ridiculous to put Beckett on the stand as a star political witness. A work which sees the potential for nuclear catastrophe even in the oldest struggle of all will scarcely arouse us to do battle against nuclear catastrophe. Unlike Brecht, this simplifier of horror resists

simplification. Beckett, however, is not so dissimilar to Brecht. His differentiatedness becomes an allergy to subjective differences that have degenerated into the conspicuous consumption of those who can afford individuation. There is a social truth in that. Differentiatedness cannot absolutely and without reflection be entered onto the positive side of the ledger. The simplification of the social process which is underway relegates it to the *faux frais*, the 'extras', in much the same way that the social formalities by means of which the capacity for differentiation was developed are disappearing. Differentiatedness, once the precondition of humanness [*Humanität*], is gradually becoming ideology. But an unsentimental awareness of this is not regressive. In the act of omission, what is left out survives as something that is avoided, the way consonance survives in atonal harmony. An unprotesting depiction of ubiquitous regression is a protest against the state of a world that so accommodates the law of regression that it no longer has anything to hold up against it. There is constant monitoring to see that things are one way and not another; an alarm system with a sensitive bell indicates what fits in with the play's topography and what does not. Out of delicacy, Beckett keeps quiet about the delicate things as well as the brutal. The vanity of the individual who accuses society while his 'rights' add to the accumulation of injustices is manifested in embarrassing declamations like Karl Wolfskehl's *Deutschlandsgedicht* [*Poem on Germany*]. There is nothing like this in Beckett. Even the notion that he depicts the negativity of the age in negative form would fit in with the idea the people in the Eastern satellite states, where the revolution was carried out in the form of an administrative act, must now devote themselves cheerfully to reflecting a cheerful era. Playing with elements of reality, taking no stand and finding pleasure in this freedom from prescribed activity, exposes more than would taking a stand with the intent to expose. The name of the catastrophe is to be spoken only in silence. The catastrophe that has befallen the whole is illuminated in the horrors of the last catastrophe; but only in those horrors, not when one looks at its origins. For Beckett, the human being – the name of the species would not fit well in Beckett's linguistic landscape – is only what he has become. As in utopia, it is its last day that decides on the species. But mourning over this must reflect – in the spirit – the fact that mourning itself is no longer possible. No weeping melts the armour; the only face left is the one whose tears have dried up. This lies at the basis of an artistic method that is denounced as inhuman by those whose humanness has already become an advertisement for the inhuman, even if they are not aware of it. Of the motives for Beckett's reductions of his characters to bestialised human beings, that is probably the most essential. Part of what is absurd in his writing is that it hides its face.

The catastrophes that inspire *Endgame* have shattered the individual whose substantiality and absoluteness was the common thread in Kierkegaard, Jaspers, and Sartre's version of existentialism. Sartre even affirmed the freedom of the victims of the concentration camps to inwardly accept or reject the tortures inflicted upon them. *Endgame* destroys such illusions. The individual himself is revealed to be a historical category, both the outcome of the capitalist process of alienation and a defiant protest against it, something transient himself. The individualistic position constitutes the opposite pole to the ontological approach of every kind of existentialism, including that of *Being and Time*, and as such belongs with it. Beckett's drama abandons that position like an outmoded bunker. If individual experience in its narrowness and contingency has interpreted itself as a figure of Being, it has received the authority to do so only by asserting itself to be the fundamental characteristic of Being. But this is precisely what is false. The immediacy of individuation was deceptive; the carrier of individual experience is mediated, conditioned. *Endgame* assumes that the individual's claim to autonomy and being has lost its credibility. But although the prison of individuation is seen to be both prison and illusion – the stage set is the imago of this kind of insight – art cannot break the spell of a detached subjectivity; it can only give concrete form to solipsism. Here Beckett runs up against the antinomy of contemporary art. Once the position of the absolute subject has been exposed as the manifestation of an overarching whole that produces it, it cannot hold up; expressionism becomes obsolete. Art is denied the transition to a binding universality of material reality which would call a halt to the illusion of individuation. For unlike discursive knowledge of reality, something from which art is not distinguished by degrees but categorically distinct, in art only what has been rendered subjective, what is commensurable with subjectivity, is valid. Art can conceive reconciliation, which is its idea, only as the reconciliation of what has been estranged. Were it to simulate the state of reconciliation by joining the world of mere objects, it would negate itself. What is presented as socialist realism is not, as is claimed, something beyond subjectivism, but rather something that lags behind it, and at the same time the pre-artistic complement of subjectivism. The expressionist invocation 'O Mensch' ['Oh Man'] is the perfect complement to a social reportage seasoned with ideology. An unreconciled reality tolerates no reconciliation with the object in art. Realism, which does not grasp subjective experience, to say nothing of going beyond it, only mimics reconciliation. Today the dignity of art is measured not according to whether or not it evades this antinomy through luck or skill, but in terms of how it bears it. In this, *Endgame* is exemplary. It yields both to the impossibility of continuing to represent

things in works of art, continuing to work with materials in the manner of the nineteenth century, and to the insight that the subjective modes of response that have replaced representation as mediators of form are not original and absolute but rather a resultant, something objective. The whole content of subjectivity, which is inevitably self-hypostasising, is a trace and a shadow of the world from which subjectivity withdraws in order to avoid serving the illusion and the adaptation that the world demands. Beckett responds to this not with a stock of eternal truths, but with what the antagonistic tendencies will still – precariously, and subject to revocation – permit.[59] □

The challenge of understanding what forms of protest do survive in Beckett's universe, and how they are articulated, is one of the dominant imperatives in Beckett criticism. As can be seen from this chapter, this critical approach to Beckett, which seeks to understand how his radicalism subverts and deconstructs dominant ideological institutions, runs alongside an opposite mode of criticism, which aims to interpret his formal dramatic gestures as closely as possible, whilst assuming that his art is apolitical and benign. From these early days of Beckett criticism, two contrasting Becketts emerge: a Beckett who represents universal truths about human reality in concrete dramatic form, who rejects cultural and political concerns as trivial and illusory, and whose artistic merit stems from an unflinching, penetrating depiction of the world as it is, seasoned with ineffable poetry and grace; and another Beckett, whose drama is a dangerous challenge to the very notion of a universal humanity, whose negativity is a residual and mournful form of protest, and whose poetry is generated by a restless, formless antagonism. The history of Beckett studies is the story of these two traditions, as they have interwoven and contrasted through the decades of development of criticism and theory. One of the values of *Godot* and *Endgame* is that, in their difficult and sometimes abrasive relationship with the critical discourses that have sought to account for them, they have exposed some of the mechanics of the ongoing struggle for power, knowledge and authority that has driven literary criticism in the second half of the twentieth century.

The following chapters will trace these two approaches to Beckett's drama as they unfold, and as their fates are determined by the epistemological and theoretical battles fought in Anglo-American and European critical institutions.