

## A Future Hope

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On a road, by a tree, two men wait for Godot. They chat, and argue, and rant, and sleep – and they wait. And keep waiting. At the end of the day, Godot has not come, and they leave. But by the next morning, they're back at the lonely tree again – waiting.

Some say that “nothing happens” in Samuel Beckett’s tragicomedy, *Waiting for Godot*.<sup>1</sup> On one level, I have to agree; but for a play of two acts wherein nothing happens, there are an astonishing number of undercurrents. The differences in perspective when examining the two main characters, Estragon and Vladimir, are telling and pointed observations of modern habit. This can’t be the only reason the play has survived so long when others fade into forgetfulness, but it is certainly one of them, and it is the one I’m going to look at now.

“Time, *n.*: A non-spatial continuum in which events occur in apparently irreversible succession from the past through the present to the future. An interval separating two points on this continuum; a duration: *a long time since the last war; passed the time reading.*” This might seem a clear-enough definition, and so it is... for a purely rational usage. Humans, however, are not objective by nature; rather we are subjective, and we are capable of experiencing time in a number of different ways. To Estragon, time does not exist in a linear sense. There is no yesterday, to Estragon, and there is no tomorrow. Now is the only time he knows, and everything else is a dream to him. When Vladimir tells him that it was Saturday that they were to wait for Godot, his response is, “But what Saturday? And is it Saturday? Is it not rather Sunday?

Or Monday? Or Friday?” (10) Fluid, time is more like a lake than a river, and undercurrents may swirl forward and backward while the surface is still smooth as a mirror of glass and iron.

Reality is a strange word: “The quality or state of being actual or true.” What is true to the mind? Certainly reality can be seen in different ways. Some perceive one thing and some another. A miracle is only a fluke chance of nature; a painting is ugly or beautiful. To Estragon, reality is harsh. Some would call him cynical; he’s jaded. “You should have been a poet,” Vladimir comments at Estragon’s description of the maps in a Bible’s back. Estragon responds, “I was,” and gestures towards the rags that serve him as clothing. “Isn’t that obvious?” (6) Expectations mean nothing to him. The strictures of polite society are not real. Many times, in the course of the play, he becomes bored with the current now.

Estragon: “Didi, let’s go.”

Vladimir: “We can’t.”

Estragon: “Why not?”

Vladimir: “We’re waiting for Godot.”

(8, 51, 76)

But to Estragon, Godot is an illusion, because Godot is neither here nor now. Existence is himself and Vladimir and whatever might happen by, but it doesn’t include the intangible obligation to wait for Godot.

There is a thing that is sometimes called faith and sometimes trust. It expects the best, even when there is no longer any reason to believe that it will occur. Its name is hope. “Hope is necessary in every condition,” Samuel Johnson wrote, and continued: “The miseries of poverty, sickness and captivity would, without this comfort, be insupportable.” Hope is the expectation of a future that is better than the now that one has.

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<sup>1</sup> Samuel Beckett, *Waiting For Godot: A Tragicomedy in Two Acts* (New York: Grove Press, 1954)

Estragon has none. He needs none, because he doesn't want a future. All he has is now, and he's content with that.

Vladimir is different. Though the two men have been together for fifty years and more, they do not share the same worldview or outlook. Their thinking processes are different. Where Estragon misquotes P. B. Shelley's "To the Moon," Vladimir is more inclined to ponder stories of the Bible (57, 5). Estragon is often beat; Vladimir is often the protector.

But more importantly, Vladimir knows the meaning of linear time; and if he does not always follow it, he does make the attempt. The past is the past, and yesterday was not six months or fifty years ago. A time spent in the Macon country is different than the *now*, here, in the Cackon country. Sometimes this angers Estragon, but Vladimir pursues the logical train of time and memory regardless:

*Vladimir:* All the same, you can't tell me that this (gesture) bears any resemblance to... (he hesitates) ... to the Macon country for example. You can't deny there's a big difference.

*Estragon:* The Macon country! Who's talking to you about the Macon country?

*Vladimir:* But you were there yourself, in the Macon country.

*Estragon:* No I was never in the Macon country! I've puked my puke of a life away here, I tell you! Here! In the Cackon country!

*Vladimir:* But we were there together, I could swear to it! Picking grapes for a man called... (he snaps his fingers) ...can't think of the name of the man, at a place called... (snaps his fingers) ...can't think of the name of the place, do you not remember? (68)

Yet even while Vladimir grasps after time, he considers it tricky: an enemy to be fought and laid hold of. Memory escapes him, and time is elusive, and of course Estragon is more conducive to the breakdown of time than anything else. The hours spent waiting for Godot are dreary, but alive, trying to trick him into Estragon's now - "All I know is that

the hours are long, under these conditions, and constrain us to beguile them with proceedings which – how shall I say – which may at first sight seem reasonable, until they become a habit." A little later, Vladimir becomes angry because, "A diversion comes along and what do we do? We let it go to waste... In an instant all will vanish and we'll be alone once more, in the midst of nothingness!"

Reality, also, is more solid to Vladimir. A bruise is a bruise. A tree is a tree, and things are bound by time and physical limitations. Sleeping dreams are not reality – when Estragon wants to share his dream, Vladimir's reaction is violent. "Don't tell me!" Estragon ignores him: "I dreamt that-" and is quickly cut off:

*Vladimir:* DON'T TELL ME!

*Estragon:* (gesture toward the universe) What, this one is enough for you? (silence) It's not nice of you, Didi. Who am I to tell my private nightmares to if I can't tell them to you?

*Vladimir:* Let them remain private. You know I can't bear that. (10)

The possibility that the dream could be as real as the present is terrifying, and Vladimir avoids this thought at all costs. Waiting is the most important thing to him, keeping an appointment. As he is proud to point out, "We are not saints, but we have kept our appointment. How many other people can boast as much?" (91)

In the final analysis, Vladimir has embraced a future, or the *concept* of a future, which is far beyond Estragon's grasp; and this future gives him hope. He may not be certain of what he is hoping for – is it Godot, to help free him from this perpetual "now" that he is (yet also refuses to be) trapped within? Or does he hope for the day where he is no longer dressed in rags and wanting for food and money? Regardless, it is enough to keep telling Estragon, "We can't [go]... We're waiting for Godot."