



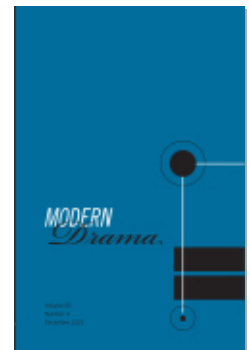
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“A Positive Statement of a Negative Thing”: Nietzschean Eternal Recurrence as Dramatic Form in Samuel Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot*

MATTHEW FOGARTY



ABSTRACT: *Much has been written in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries about the pessimistic tenor of Samuel Beckett’s middle-period plays. With specific reference to *Waiting for Godot*, however, this essay draws a distinction between the pessimistic appearance of the content that partially constitutes this text and the nature of the formal medium through which it is realized. In short, I argue that there is a critical disjunction between what this play says and what this play does. Conceptually speaking, this essay is primarily concerned with Beckett’s textual engagement with the theory of eternal recurrence, that is, the idea that all occurrences have happened innumerable times before, and will happen again, and again, in an infinitely recurring cycle. Focusing on how *Waiting for Godot* developed, both in translation and as a performance piece under the direction of its author, I demonstrate that Beckett’s metatheatrical dramatization of eternal recurrence explores this theory’s capacity to function as an ethical imperative in the morally nihilistic atmosphere of post-Holocaust Europe. In doing so, Beckett’s play implicates the viewer in a dramatization that is aligned with the axiological iteration of eternal recurrence that modern and contemporary scholars associate with Friedrich Nietzsche. Indeed, it is in this sense that *Waiting for Godot* is, as Beckett himself puts it, “a positive statement of a negative thing.”*

KEYWORDS: *continental philosophy, ethics, Badiou event, Holocaust, absurd theatre, metatheatre*

In his 1961 appraisal of Samuel Beckett’s *Endgame* (1957), Theodor Adorno categorizes Beckettian drama as an aesthetic experience through which “philosophy, or spirit itself, proclaims its bankruptcy [...] and the poetic process shows itself as worn out” (121). To support this central thesis, Adorno identifies a two-pronged philosophical strain in Beckett’s middle-period writing. On the

one hand, he detects resonances of the anti-teleological and anti-essentialist principles espoused by contemporaneous philosophers, such as Karl Jaspers, Martin Heidegger, and Jean-Paul Sartre (127). On the other, he perceives counterbalancing reverberations of the pessimistic principles that Beckett encountered in the respective philosophies of Arthur Schopenhauer and Arnold Geulincx.¹ The outcome, so Adorno's argument goes, is that the Beckettian subject is denied the requisite freedom to become a self-determined subject by the author's commitment to a profound and enduring nihilism. Beckett did not place much stock in Adorno's assessment of *Endgame*. According to Siegfried Unseld, who shared a lunch with Beckett and Adorno before a 1961 event billed as a "Homage to Samuel Beckett in the Presence of the Author," Beckett became "a little angry" at Adorno's insistence that "'Hamm' [...] derives from 'Hamlet'" and "that 'Clov' was a crippled 'clown'" (qtd. in Knowlson 479). In the final version of his *Endgame* essay, published shortly after this acrimonious encounter, Adorno nonetheless maintains that Hamlet's name "is grimly foreshortened by Beckett" and that "Hamm, the key to power and helpless at the same time," personifies an irreconcilable tension between existentialist and nihilistic principles that excludes the possibility of autonomous self-determination (143).

Like Beckett's other middle-period plays, the events dramatized in *Endgame* appear to support Adorno's wholly negatory evaluation. However, readings that prioritize the significance of these nihilistic resonances are to some degree at odds with Beckett's appraisal of his own middle-period writing. As Patrick Bowles recalls in a diary he kept while working closely with Beckett on the English translation of *Molloy* during the early 1950s, Beckett deemed these works to be "a positive statement of a negative thing" (26). It would be reductive to treat Beckett's pithy if perplexing remark as a kind of skeleton key for his entire body of work. It does, however, insinuate that Beckett saw some redeeming quality in these ostensibly nihilistic works. Indeed, the specific timing of this remark, dated 15 September 1953, renders it all the more intriguing, coming as it does just nine months after the Paris premiere of *En attendant Godot*. Although the original French manuscript was completed sometime between October 1948 and January 1949, Beckett continued making substantial revisions to that manuscript and to his English translations of the play throughout the early 1950s.² Cognizant of these personal reflections and textual genetics, this essay re-evaluates key contributions to the early twenty-first-century debate concerning Beckett's literary ethics to demonstrate how exactly *Waiting for Godot* operates as a positive statement of a negative thing. In doing so, I argue that the play's metatheatrical engagement with the theory of eternal recurrence generates an aesthetic intervention that destabilizes the deeply pessimistic action that plays out upon the stage.

BECKETT AND THE ETHICS OF ALTERITY

In the twenty-first century, literary scholars and philosophers have identified two possible solutions to the ways in which Beckett's work might operate as a positive statement of a negative thing. Both these possibilities stem from what Russell Smith calls the "ethical turn" away from poststructuralism inspired by Emmanuel Levinas's philosophy in the late 1990s.³ One was advanced as a response to Martin Esslin's influential *The Theatre of the Absurd* (1960), in which Beckett is designated an absurdist playwright who expresses "the senselessness of the human condition and the inadequacy of the rational approach by the open abandonment of rational devices and discursive thought," (24). In *Reassessing the Theatre of the Absurd* (2011), Michael Bennett conversely argues that *Waiting for Godot* "purports growth and purpose out of nothingness through continued struggle and friendship and that it is not a despairing reaction to life's meaninglessness," (36). Although Bennett does not make explicit reference to Levinas, this idea that the stripping away of existential illusions, whether they are based on religious, political, or other cultural orthodoxies, reveals one's ethical responsibility for the other is, in effect, the cornerstone of Levinas's ethics of alterity. The second possible solution was advanced by French philosopher Alain Badiou. Although Badiou rejects Levinas's ethical alterity on the grounds that it depends upon religious assumptions that masquerade as ontological principles, he also identifies an ethical dimension in Beckett's late work.⁴ In *On Beckett* (2003), Badiou argues that, from the late 1960s onwards, Beckett's writing "goes from a programme of the One [...] to the pregnant theme of the Two, which opens out onto infinity," (17). This reading of Beckett's literary ethics evolves from Badiou's theory of the "event," a term he uses to denote disruptive occurrences that incorporate a transformative potential insofar as they make visible those societal differences that are ordinarily concealed by cultural hegemony. Drawing on the language of mathematics, Badiou uses the term "void" to describe those whose behaviour reifies these hegemonic societal standards, and the term "excess" to describe those who do not fit neatly within the universalizing parameters established by the "void" (*Being and Event* 1–20). In Beckett's prose writing, such as *Enough* (1965) and *Ill Seen Ill Said* (1981), Badiou identifies representations of these societal ruptures, which ultimately transcend the preoccupation with Cartesian dualism that marks much of Beckett's earlier writing.⁵

Andrew Gibson has offered a detailed and substantial response to Badiou's reading of Beckett's literary ethics. In *Beckett and Badiou* (2006), Gibson forges something of a middle ground between the ethico-political ramifications that Badiou associates with the event and the strain of aporetic uncertainty that Adorno describes in his analysis of *Endgame*. While Gibson acknowledges that Beckett constructs peculiar environments in which the event is "always

theoretically possible, to the extent that his characters invoke it and even appear to recall it, that his works conjure it, mimic it, [and] assess the conditions that might make it possible," he concludes that these Beckettian realities are ultimately worlds "in which the event can scarcely be said to take place at all" (26). Where Badiou sees representations of potentially transformative societal ruptures, or "events," in Beckett's later works, Gibson sees representations of alternative experiences and realities that are typically obscured by cultural hegemony. Applying the mathematical term "remainder" to describe what Badiou calls "excess," Gibson argues that Badiou "largely banishes the remainder to the margins of philosophy, as beneath thought, though without entirely annulling it," whereas, Beckett "locates his work squarely within it, as the stuff of art" (26). Shane Weller also concentrates on this sense of aporetic uncertainty in his rejection of the idea that an ethical dynamic can be found in Beckett's writing. In *Beckett, Literature and the Ethics of Alterity* (2006), Weller proposes that Beckett's work is essentially "anethical" because it refuses to "establish or negate the difference between the ethical and the unethical, nihilism and anti-nihilism, philosophy and literature, thought and action, the terminal and the interminable," (194–95). However, I would argue that yet another middle ground can be established between the readings of Beckett's literary ethics advanced by Badiou, Gibson, and Weller when their respective analyses are considered from a theoretical vantage point that includes the audience's participation in the immediate experience generated by Beckett's metatheatrical aesthetic.

To bring this middle ground to the forefront, this essay approaches theatrical performances of *Waiting for Godot* as a kind of aesthetic nexus in which Badiou's and Gibson's divergent interpretations of Beckett's engagement with the Badiouian event can conceivably coexist. Within the context of the manufactured onstage reality, there are, as Gibson suggests, instances that seem to invoke, recall, and mimic a disruptive event of the type that Badiou describes, all while presenting a reality that exclusively focuses on the "remainder" of the event. When considered within a broader context that includes onstage and offstage realities, however, and that encompasses both the attendees and the performers, theatrical productions of *Waiting for Godot* can be read as aesthetic interventions that mobilize the revelatory power that Badiou ascribes to the event, insofar as the onstage performances expose existential realities that are usually concealed by cultural hegemony, that is, performances that accentuate the coexistence of "void" and "excess." Indeed, while the onstage activities are "anethical" as Weller defines it, insofar as these activities do not convey a message that can be classified as ethical or unethical, the metatheatrical structure of *Waiting for Godot* does far more than simply strip away existential illusions in accordance with Esslin's evaluation of Beckett's absurdism.

Drawing a distinction between the pessimistic tenor of the play's textual content and the disruptive dramatic form through which it is ultimately realized, this essay demonstrates that a critical disjunction exists between what this play *says* and what this play *does*. Paying close attention to the play's metatheatrical dramatization of eternal recurrence, I propose that *Waiting for Godot* explores this theory's capacity to function as an ethical imperative in the morally nihilistic atmosphere of post-Holocaust Europe. In doing so, Beckett's play implicates the viewer in a dramatization that is aligned with the axiological, or value-based, iteration of eternal recurrence that modern and contemporary scholars associate with Friedrich Nietzsche.

This essay does not make a foundationalist case for Nietzsche's influence on Beckett, even though Beckett was, as Matthew Feldman has observed, "at least passingly, familiar" with Nietzsche's ideas ("Beckett and Philosophy" 335). The earliest record of this familiarity can be found in the "Dream" notebook, which Beckett kept between 1930 and 1932 while working on the posthumously published *Dream of Fair to Middling Women* (1992). Here, Beckett transcribes the term "*ipsissimosität*" (97), in the original German, from Max Nordau's chapter on Nietzsche in *Degeneration*. In a 1934 letter to George Reavy, Beckett also mentions having "*Zarathustra to hand*" (*Letters* 213n2). As the editorial glosses acknowledge, however, this could be an allusion to Nietzsche's *Thus Spake Zarathustra* or to the ancient prophet, also known as Zoroaster, upon whom Nietzsche's title character is loosely based. In addition, Nietzsche makes something of a cameo appearance in Beckett's "Psychology Notes," compiled between 1932 and 1936. On this occasion, Beckett's interest was, at least momentarily, piqued by Otto Rank's allusion to Nietzsche in *The Trauma of Birth* (1924), and so he left himself a reminder to read two of Nietzsche's books, again using the original German: *Die Geburt der Tragödie aus dem Geiste der Musik* (*The Birth of Tragedy*) and *Philosophie im tragischen Zeitalter der Griechen* (*Philosophy in the Tragic Age of the Greeks*). A very brief summation of Nietzsche's philosophy appears as the last entry in Beckett's "Philosophy Notes" (*Beckett's Philosophy Notes* 475). This note was transcribed from Wilhelm Windelband's *A History of Philosophy* (1874) during the autumn of 1937.⁶ Beckett's extant library in Paris also holds a French edition of *The Gay Science* (*Beckett's Library* 279) and what Feldman calls a "far more philosophically-directed, indeed Nietzschean, 1930 edition of Jules de Gaultier's *From Kant to Nietzsche*" (*Falsifying Beckett* 79). Be that as it may, there is nothing in any of this that proves Beckett actually read Nietzsche's philosophy.

From a theoretical perspective, Nietzsche's philosophy does nonetheless provide an important context for *Waiting for Godot* for two reasons. On the one hand, Nietzsche's philosophy was largely formulated in response to Schopenhauer's philosophy of will and G.W.F. Hegel's dialectical idealism, both

of which prominently feature in Beckett's play. Certainly, Nietzsche praises Schopenhauer's counter-Enlightenment pessimism in *The Birth of Tragedy* (1872) and "Schopenhauer as Educator" (1874). But by the time he had written *Human, All Too Human* (1878), Nietzsche had already determined that one must remove "the motley leopard-skin" of Schopenhauer's metaphysics "if one is to discover the real moralist genius behind it" (222). Nietzsche's contempt for Hegel's Enlightenment idealism can similarly be traced to the mid-1870s. In "On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life" (1874), Nietzsche even goes so far as to suggest that "there has been no dangerous vacillation or crisis of German culture this century that has not been rendered more dangerous by the enormous and still continuing influence of this philosophy, the Hegelian" (*Untimely Meditations* 104). Indeed, we will subsequently see that Beckett's metatheatrical dramatization of eternal recurrence in *Waiting for Godot* is similarly engaged with these contrasting strands of Enlightenment and counter-Enlightenment thought. On the other hand, Nietzsche's philosophy operated as a touchstone for the iterations of existentialism that Adorno identifies as key philosophical strands in Beckett's middle-period writing. This is exemplified by Nietzsche's most recognizable philosophical principle, "God is dead," which personifies the anti-teleological and anti-essentialist principles championed by Beckett's existentialist contemporaries. For Nietzsche, the proclamation of God's death is not merely a renunciation of all *monotheistic* claims to absolute authority. It is, rather, a renunciation of *all* claims to absolute authority, whether they are made in the name of religion, science, morality, or politics.⁷ As such, it constitutes a rallying cry for what Nietzsche calls a "[r]evaluation of all values" (*Ecce Homo* 782). In the broader context of Nietzsche's philosophy, the term *Übermensch*, sometimes translated as "Superman" or "Overman," describes those who would seize this emancipatory power and with it the authority to recreate themselves as gods in an image of their own making.⁸

In addition to these theoretical correlations between Nietzsche's ideas and the philosophemes addressed in *Waiting for Godot*, the formal means through which this play strips away existential illusions brings Beckett's dramatic practice into alignment with the "Anti-Theatrical Turn" that David Kornhaber discerns in Nietzsche's middle-period writing (70). In a passage titled "On Theatre," for example, published in Book Two of *The Gay Science*, Nietzsche endorses a brand of theatre in which "the entire event – including theatre and audience and poet – becomes the actual tragic and comic spectacle to [the attendee], so that the piece that is performed means little to him by comparison" (86). Although conceived as an alternative to the dramatic naturalism that Nietzsche decried as Wagnerian spectacle, this is precisely the kind of performance art that Jonathan Kalb describes when proposing that Beckettian

theatre does not merely “represent scenes from another time – or rather it does not only to do so. It creates scenes whose subject matter is their duration in present time” (3). Focusing on how Beckett’s performers occupy a liminal space between the onstage and offstage realities, Kalb points out that this metatheatricality, in effect, creates “a new *kind* of theater, one involving a type of audience/stage transaction that does not fit either side of the traditional Stanislavsky/Brecht dichotomy” (38). Indeed, Shimon Levy observes a similar commitment to the present moment in Beckett’s self-referential use of theatrical components and dramatic devices that conspire not merely to facilitate “the service of some overall message” but to convey a meaning that “must first be looked for in the actual components of drama as a genre, and in theatre as a medium” (15). As Martin Puchner has observed, Beckett’s metatheatrical commitment to the specific moments in which these performances are produced is related to “anti-theatricalism” as Nietzsche conceives it (157–62). In the context of *Waiting for Godot*, these dramaturgical manipulations engineer a mode of eternal recurrence that is quintessentially Nietzschean, both in form and content, because it immerses the viewer in a metatheatrical experience which actively responds to the apparent shortcomings of Schopenhauer’s and Hegel’s divergent yet similarly deterministic philosophical models.

ETERNAL RECURRENCE AS AXIOLOGICAL IMPERATIVE

Critics who have explored the correlations between Beckett’s writing and Nietzsche’s philosophy largely agree that Beckett’s middle-period works reject the life-affirming potential that Nietzsche ascribes to the death of God in favour of a nihilism that is reminiscent of Schopenhauer’s philosophical principles. The only outlier is Richard Lane’s analysis of *Krapp’s Last Tape* (1958), which employs the logic of aporia to demonstrate that Nietzsche influences Beckett, and that Beckett “influences” Nietzsche.⁹ For their part, Thomas Dilworth and Christopher Langlois argue that *Endgame* expresses a “thoroughgoing contradiction of the Nietzschean optimism about the putative nonexistence of God” (168). Likewise, Stewart Smith contends that *Endgame* dramatizes “useless suffering, including that of invoking and implicating the audience in the characters’ exegetical impasse” (161–62). Mary Massoud reads *Waiting for Godot* in much the same vein, seeing only a renunciation of “Nietzsche’s theory that the death of God is the door to unprecedented freedom” (45). This is certainly an accurate evaluation of the dramatized proceedings that constitute the play’s content. Indeed, the entire cast of characters epitomize the distinctly Schopenhauerian notion that “suffering is the direct and immediate object of life” (“Sufferings of the World” 381). From the outset, Estragon complains of aching feet and is routinely subjected to inexplicable violence at the hands of unidentified assailants. His onstage counterpart, Vladimir, is tormented by a

bladder infection and labours "with short, stiff strides, legs wide apart" (11–12). The thoroughly dehumanized Lucky is arguably the play's most vivid personification of anguish, as he stoops in perpetual servitude beneath the weight of his master's burden. Even the masterful Pozzo, who initially appears to be the exception to this Schopenhauerian rule, is eventually stripped of all dignity and consigned to wail for "help" and "pity" when he reappears in Act Two (73). For his part, the fearful unnamed boy who enters at the conclusion of Act One cannot rightly determine whether or not he is "unhappy" (49). The source of this trepidation remains as elusive as Beckett's title character. The boy's exchanges with Vladimir and Estragon suggest that it may be attributable to Godot's mistreatment of his brother. However, it is also conceivable that this unnamed boy is the "sick" brother of the unnamed boy who appears near the end of Act Two (86). In any event, there is nothing about the events described by this unnamed boy, or indeed these unnamed boys, that mitigates the overwhelming sense that theirs is a reality essentially characterized by incessant pain and suffering.

These Schopenhauerian connotations are further amplified by the ways in which Godot's conspicuous absence operates as a metaphor for Schopenhauer's philosophy of will. In accordance with Schopenhauerian metaphysics, the phenomenal world is merely an illusion, generated by a great causal force, or "will," that drives and determines the collective fate of humankind. Even the corporeal elements that constitute the human subject are, for Schopenhauer, illusory manifestations of this all-commanding will. He proposes, for example, that the "[t]eeth, throat, and bowels are objectified hunger; the organs of generation objectified sexual desire," and that the "grasping hand" and "hurrying feet" are merely manifestations of "the more indirect desires of the will which they express" (*World as Will* 336). In the context of *Waiting for Godot*, the title character's absence dramatizes this determinist hypothesis as it provokes Estragon and Vladimir to perform unwittingly as conduits for this underlying causal force. It is only the act of waiting that imparts to these characters' otherwise pointless existence a vague sense of purpose, and so Godot's failure to materialize undermines the sanctity of their existence. This absent omnipresence insinuates that notions such as existential purpose and salvation, which is one of central themes addressed in Vladimir and Estragon's opening exchange (14–15), are but soothing mythological fables. Indeed, for Schopenhauer, notions such as these are simply false promises, generated by this underlying causal "will," which simultaneously distract and further aggravate the human consciousness as it languishes in the hopelessness of its predicament.

It is not a coincidence that Nietzsche mobilizes the term "will" in a fashion that is antithetical to Schopenhauer's philosophy of will. This is, rather, an example of Nietzsche's penchant for subverting established philosophical

principles in ways that undercut the value systems that these theories were designed to bolster. In the case of his “will to power,” Nietzsche adopts a term used by Schopenhauer to denote a deeply fatalistic vision and recasts it as a catchword for the pursuit of existential authenticity that he ascribes to the *Übermensch*. This philosophical dissent is also evident in Nietzsche’s reformulation of the theory of eternal recurrence, which simultaneously recalls and renounces the ascetic principles that underpin Schopenhauer’s fatalism. In its most traditional form, the theory of eternal recurrence posits that everything that has happened, everything that is happening, and everything that will happen has happened before, and will happen again and again, in an infinitely recurring cycle. Its origins may be traced to the Buddhist tradition and other non-theistic schools of Eastern thought. As a cosmological hypothesis that requires neither a beginning nor an end, it proved useful to Schopenhauer as he sought to challenge Hegel’s progress-orientated idealism.¹⁰ Where Hegel identified a master-slave dialectic that was driving humankind toward a state of optimum enlightenment in the annals of history, Schopenhauer could see only a sequence of meaningless events that were destined to play out within the confines of a deceptive and inconsequential world. Drawing on Eastern thought, Schopenhauer suggests that this cosmic mirage is buttressed by an orthodox formulation of eternal recurrence that casts all animate entities as performing a lifetime of pointless actions in an infinitely recurring cycle: “[t]he existence of the plant is just such a restless, never satisfied striving, a ceaseless tendency through ever-ascending forms,” he writes, “till the end, the seed, becomes a new starting point; and this repeated *ad infinitum* – nowhere an end, nowhere a final satisfaction, nowhere a resting place” (*World as Will* 298–99). As Nietzsche’s proclamation of God’s death rejects all claims to absolute authority, whether they are made in the name of religion, science, morality, politics, or indeed Schopenhauerian metaphysics, late twentieth-century and contemporary scholars largely agree that Nietzsche reformulates this cosmological iteration of eternal recurrence to function as a litmus test for the radical mode of existential authenticity that is personified by the *Übermensch*.¹¹

The rhetorical strategies Nietzsche deploys when broaching this subject do a great deal to bolster the validity of these late twentieth-century readings of Nietzsche’s eternal recurrence. When Zarathustra awakens from the catatonia triggered by the nauseating prospect of eternal return, for example, Alexander Nehamas, quoting *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, noted that it is not Nietzsche’s title character but rather the surrounding animals who regurgitate what they understand Zarathustra to have taught: “everything goes, everything comes back; eternally rolls the wheel of being. Everything dies, everything blossoms again; eternally runs the year of being” (146–47). These creatures thus personify the “Nietzschean herd,” both in appearance and in their pliant acceptance

of a cosmological hypothesis that Zarathustra himself dismisses as "a hurdy gurdy song" (330). When the theory of eternal recurrence is addressed in *The Gay Science*, the passage begins with an all-important question: "What if some day or night a demon were to [...] say to you: 'This life as you now live it and have lived it you will have to live once again and innumerable times again; and [...] all in the same succession and sequence [...]. Would you not throw yourself down and gnash your teeth and curse the demon who spoke thus?'" (194). As Ivan Soll explains, Nietzsche thus circumvents the question of the theory's veracity because it is expressed "not as a truth but as a thought experiment" (323). This initial question is promptly followed by another: "Or have you once experienced a tremendous moment when you would have answered him: 'You are a god, and never have I heard anything more divine'" (*Gay Science* 194). Even the statement that follows incorporates yet another question: "If this thought gained power over you, as you are it would transform and possibly crush you; the question in each and every thing, 'Do you desire this again and innumerable times again?' would lie on your actions as the greatest weight!" (194). To conclude, the passage poses one final question to the reader: "Or how well disposed would you have to become to yourself and to life *to long for nothing more fervently* than for this ultimate eternal confirmation and seal?" (194–95, emphasis in original). Much like Zarathustra, then, Nietzsche's demon narrator never proposes that the theory of eternal recurrence might operate as a viable cosmological hypothesis.

When read as a thought experiment, Nietzschean eternal recurrence can be summarized as an axiological principle: if you had to live the same life over and over again, would you be happy to make the same choices, or to adhere to the same value systems that underpin these choices? As an ethical imperative that can function in a reality devoid of all meaning and value, this axiological reading of eternal recurrence proves all the more consistent with Nietzsche's philosophy as it possesses the capacity to stand resolute in spite of Nietzsche's contention that there are no legitimate claims to absolute authority. In the end, it is an axiological principle that requires only the creative capacity to envision the multitudinous return of endlessly recurring events. Despite the emphasis *Waiting for Godot* places on the apparent inevitability of suffering, and the Schopenhauerian echoes that undercut the sanctity of the characters' existence and the nature of their reality, the play is distinctly Nietzschean in its dramatization of eternal recurrence as it operates as an axiological principle within the broader structure of the play. Although *Waiting for Godot* is, as Vivian Mercier famously quipped, "a play in which nothing happens, *twice*" ("Uneventful Event" 6, emphasis in original), Acts One and Two really only mirror each other on a structural level: Vladimir meets Estragon, they encounter Lucky and Pozzo while awaiting Godot's arrival, and then an unnamed boy

reveals that Godot “won’t come this evening but surely tomorrow” (49). There is, however, another highly significant yet under discussed textual detail that completes this structural mirroring and underscores the axiological significance of the play’s cyclical structure: in both acts, the arrival of Lucky and Pozzo poses an ethical dilemma to Vladimir and Estragon.

In Act One, this occurs as Vladimir and Estragon examine the “running sore” on Lucky’s neck and three times repeat, “it’s inevitable” (26–27). This refrain indicates that no interventions are necessary, in spite of the egregious maltreatment inflicted by Pozzo, because this abuse is somehow in keeping with the natural order of things. This casual disregard for human anguish can be justified by the Schopenhauerian claim that all pain and suffering is merely an inconsequential manifestation of some underlying causal force, or in accordance with the Hegelian master-slave dialectic that Lucky and Pozzo personify. The obvious correlations between the Lucky-Pozzo relationship and the Hegelian contention that all social, economic, religious, philosophical, and political advances are destined to be propelled by conflictual motions between “masters” and “slaves” until the “other” is assimilated or obliterated have been well documented.¹² Richard Halpern has observed that it would even have been “clear to the play’s original audiences that [...] Pozzo and Lucky spoofed the master-slave dialectic in Hegel” (228). Therefore, Lucky and Pozzo’s reappearance in Act Two would have expressed that the Enlightenment values championed by Hegel and his Idealist contemporaries were irreconcilable with the nihilistic atmosphere of post-Holocaust Europe. As Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno explain, Enlightenment thinkers such as Hegel used concepts like “freedom” and “justice” as their principal stock-in-trade, but these aspirations, however noble in theory, were “hopelessly implicated” in the imperial horrors of the past (184–85). This incapacity to recognize the callousness inherent in these Eurocentric schools of thought is underscored by Pozzo’s blindness, which renders this contorted caricature of the Hegelian dialectic unfit for Enlightenment meliorism.

Despite Beckett’s abiding admiration for Schopenhauer’s philosophical principles, and the fact that he did not place much importance on Hegel’s philosophy, *Waiting for Godot* effectively juxtaposes the inevitable suffering at the centre of Schopenhauer’s counter-Enlightenment pessimism against its mirror image in Hegel’s Enlightenment idealism. In doing so, Beckett deconstructs the apparent distinctions between these divergent philosophical systems in a manner that foregrounds their respective ethical failings. Within the context of the play, the ethical dilemma that confronts Vladimir and Estragon in Act Two, as they consider whether they should help the blinded Pozzo or “subordinate our good offices to certain conditions” (73), echoes the ethical quandary that is introduced in Act One and prompts Vladimir and Estragon

to dismiss Lucky's suffering as "inevitable." More importantly, however, the ethical question posed to Vladimir and Estragon when they encounter the equally helpless Pozzo in Act Two further mirrors the meta-ethical quandary that confronted all those who attended the Paris premiere of *Waiting for Godot* on 5 January 1953 – namely, from what basis might Europe rebuild itself philosophically in a post-war cultural climate that has shown the principles underpinning Enlightenment idealism to be as ineffectual as those that bolstered counter-Enlightenment pessimism?

ETERNAL RECURRENCE AS METATHEATRICAL PERFORMANCE

Over the last two decades, scholars have successfully challenged the long-standing misconception that Beckett's work is somehow divorced from the sociopolitical contexts in which it was created. Peter Boxall, for example, has rejected the notion that Beckett's minimalist aesthetic, as manifested in his "perceived longing for silence, for voicelessness and placelessness," constitutes "an abdication from, a denial of, or an indifference to the political" (159). This is true of Beckett's literary engagement with the sociopolitical contexts of his native Ireland.¹³ However, Emilie Morin has demonstrated that this is equally true of Beckett's engagement with the broader European cultural contexts in which he lived and worked. Indeed, Morin interprets Beckett's minimalism as the by-product of a lived experience in which "the domain of the political was frequently boundless, and the dichotomies between political and aesthetic reflection frequently obscure" (*Political* 6). For his part, James McNaughton regards Beckett as a "writer who is politically alert in specific historical moments and who addresses the failed political, aesthetic, and philosophical solutions to modernity with surprising sensitivity to the limitations of interpreting from one perspective alone" (3). When considered alongside William Davies's acknowledgement that Beckett's writing "treats history, and war in particular, through its referential rather than representational methods" (8), it seems reasonable to expect that any ethical response to the cataclysmic tragedies of World War II and the Holocaust would make its presence felt in comparably opaque and elusive forms. Joseph Anderton, for instance, regards the Lucky–Pozzo relationship as a synecdochical representation of how "the pursuit of power and the racial hierarchy that gripped Europe in the middle of the twentieth century gave Beckett an acute awareness of the more aggressive aspects of social and political relations" (III).

When viewed from the vantage point established by the aggregate of these perspectives, the ethical questions introduced with the arrival of Lucky and Pozzo in Acts One and Two initiate a real-time dramatization of Nietzschean eternal recurrence because this component of the play's cyclical structure explores this theory's capacity to operate as an axiological imperative in

a world devoid of all meaning and value. This is not to suggest that Beckett is consciously engaging with the ramifications that Nietzsche associates with the death of God, but rather that the nihilistic atmosphere of post-Holocaust Europe brings *Waiting for Godot* into a productive philosophical dialogue with Nietzsche's philosophy because that cultural moment epitomized the radical and profound uncertainty that the death of God personifies. The significance of this cultural context is underscored in the original French manuscript of *En attendant Godot*. The character now known as Estragon, for example, was originally called "Lévy," a Hebrew biblical name meaning "attached to" (see Hulle and Verhulst 173). Setting this genetic detail alongside Vladimir's contention that "Lévy" would be reduced to a "heap of bones" without his interventions, Dirk Van Hulle and Pim Verhulst have noted that these characters' opening exchange calls to mind the Soviet liberation of Nazi concentration camps in 1945 (173). The original French manuscript also situates *Waiting for Godot* in this post-Holocaust cultural moment when Vladimir says, "[W]e should have thought of it half a century ago, around 1900" (*Making of Godot* 173). In subsequent iterations of the play, this cultural connection is masked somewhat as Vladimir instead remarks, "We should have thought of it when the world was young, in the nineties" (12). Although these subtle alterations distance *Waiting for Godot* from recognizable cultural signifiers, the play never strays too far away from the philosophical questions that urgently presented themselves in post-Holocaust Europe.

Even in the 1965 Faber and Faber edition, which consolidated the disparate English translations of *Waiting for Godot* that were published as a result of the author's persistent revising during the 1950s, it is clear that Beckett wanted to implicate the viewer in the ethical dilemma that confronts Vladimir and Estragon in Act Two. When considering whether they should assist Pozzo, for example, Vladimir appears to make explicit reference to the Holocaust when he says, "To all mankind they were addressed, those cries for help still ringing in our ears!" (73). The exchanges that follow provide a prime example of how Beckett's scripts engineer a metatheatricality that allows the actors to embody their characters while simultaneously drawing attention to their status as performers. As Kalb succinctly puts it, these characters are, at once, "*in the play and of the play*" (36, emphasis in original). This is exemplified by Vladimir's allusion to the most recognizable soliloquy in the English language, Hamlet's "To be, or not to be, that is the question" from Act Three of William Shakespeare's *Hamlet*: "what are we doing here," Vladimir asks, "*that is the question*" (74, emphasis in original). The metatheatrical immediacy generated by this use of collective pronouns persists when Vladimir subsequently states, "We are men" (76), because they allow an opportunity to include the audience. All of these scripted metatheatrical signifiers materialize while Vladimir and Estragon contemplate whether

they should assist the blinded Pozzo or "subordinate our good offices to certain conditions" (73). Were there any question that this allegorical ethical predicament is designed to simultaneously address the audience, they are promptly set aside when Vladimir claims he has begun "to weary of this motif," before Estragon points to Pozzo and says, "He's all mankind" (78). This implicates the audience in an ethical dilemma that mirrors the quandary that prompts Lucky and Pozzo to dismiss Lucky's suffering as "inevitable" in Act One. In effect, these recurring ethical quandaries generate an iteration of eternal recurrence that aligns with Nietzsche's axiological imperative.

In the first dramatization of *Waiting for Godot* produced under the author's directorial supervision, at the Schiller Theater in Berlin in 1975, Beckett incorporated a number of dramaturgical effects that were specifically contrived to more fully immerse the audience in this axiological dramatization of eternal recurrence. Perhaps most notably, he introduced twelve strategically placed moments of stillness, six in each act, which Beckett describes as "waiting points," or "tableaux." As Dougald McMillan and James Knowlson explain, these moments submerge "the spectator immediately into the atmosphere of 'waiting,' which is a main subject as well as a fundamental characteristic of the play," (xiii). The tenth tableau was introduced at the specific moment in which Pozzo lies helplessly at the feet of Vladimir and Estragon in Act Two. In fact, it occurs immediately after Vladimir states, "We are men," (*Godot Notebooks* 164). Beckett inserted another of these long silences as a "Pause" after Vladimir says, "[A]t this place, at this moment of time, all mankind is us," (*Godot Notebooks* 163). In addition, he stipulated that Vladimir and Estragon should edge closer toward Pozzo, halt, and then retreat, as they consider their response to the ethical question that lies before them, that is, whether they should or how they might intervene, and instructed them to repeat this approach and retreat on three occasions (*Godot Notebooks* 162). Much like the prolonged instances of silent waiting, these carefully choreographed movements accentuate the significance of the meta-ethical dilemma that Pozzo embodies while simultaneously drawing those in the audience closer to the experience of their onstage counterparts because the audience is also compelled to wait in these critically important moments. Even the lighting used in the Schiller Theater production was designed to more fully immerse the viewer in the events dramatized on stage. As Levy explains, Beckett's use of unnatural lighting draws the viewer's "attention to light itself rather than just to the stage lit by it" (32). Along with unsettling the audience in a manner reminiscent of Bertolt Brecht's *Verfremdungseffekt*, this grey lighting distorts the distinction between the onstage and offstage spaces. Although Beckett first describes this particular shade of lighting in the stage directions of his second play, "*Bare interior. Grey light*," (*Endgame* 92), the theatrical notebooks for the Schiller Theater production of

Waiting for Godot provide a detailed account of the liminal effect that Beckett wanted to be generated through stage lighting:

The play emerges from the dark, is played in deepening twilight, finishes in moonlight and fades back into the dark. With the opening curtain, the light fades up from darkness to half evening light, then Vladimir brings up full evening light when he moves in after the opening line, "Nothing to be done." The exit of Pozzo and Lucky brings a return to half evening light. With the exit of the Boy, night falls instantaneously, bringing up the moonlight and, five seconds after the final "Let's go," the light fades into darkness for the curtain. The pattern is then repeated exactly in Act II, except that it is Estragon who brings up full evening light by moving in at the end of Vladimir's "dog song" at the beginning of the act. (90)

The importance Beckett placed upon the lighting in this production is further amplified by the instructions he gave to the performers with respect to the finale. McMillan and Knowlson have acknowledged that "by agreement with Beckett, the actors in these productions took no curtain call so as to avoid breaking the final silence and darkness before the house lights came up. The intensity of the full evening light on stage was not bright but there was, of course, no difficulty in perceiving the action. The atmosphere of evening was maintained by attaching blue gels to the lights, thus giving the grey set a cold colourless effect," (*Godot Notebooks* 90). Like Vladimir's and Estragon's carefully choreographed movements, these instructions appear specifically designed to immerse the viewer in what is dramatized on stage while simultaneously prolonging this liminal effect until the last possible moment.

BECKETTIAN DRAMA AS BADIOUIAN EVENT

If one remains cognizant of the fact that all performances of *Waiting for Godot* are live events that function in comparable ways, it becomes apparent that the most significant manifestation of eternal recurrence that these performances generate is not derived from the repetitions that structure Acts One and Two. It is, rather, the expression of eternal recurrence that is created every time a production of *Waiting for Godot* is performed on stage because it invariably responds to the meta-ethical quandary posed by the play's content: from what basis might Europe rebuild itself philosophically in the aftermath of the Holocaust? Aligning itself with Nietzschean eternal recurrence, the cyclical structure of Beckett's play repeatedly invites its audience to consider how they might respond to an ethical dilemma if they were fated to re-encounter this dilemma an infinite number of times. Even during the nascent stages of his development as a writer and creator, Beckett recognized this potential in literature that formally engages with cyclical theoretical models. In his 1929 defence of James Joyce's *Finnegans Wake*, Beckett states: "Here form is

content, content *is* form. You complain that this stuff is not written in English. It is not written at all. It is not to be read – or rather it is not only to be read. It is to be looked at and listened to. His writing is not *about* something; it is *that something itself*," ("Dante" 10, emphasis in original). Indeed, Richard Begam has made a compelling case for approaching Beckett's first foray into the realm of theatre not as a radical departure from the preoccupation with the limits of language that largely characterizes Beckett's early writing, but as a means through which to explore the notion that "language was essentially performative [...] through the aesthetics of performance" (139).

In addition to corresponding with the poetry and prose fiction Beckett penned in the time that elapsed between his reflections on *Finnegans Wake* and the 1953 Paris premiere of *En attendant Godot*, the play's axiological engagement with eternal recurrence is similarly compatible with the complex attitude toward subjectivity that Beckett outlines in *Proust* (1930). In this academic evaluation of Marcel Proust's *In Search of Lost Time*, Beckett proposes that Proust's protagonist, also called Marcel, exemplifies the perpetual state of flux that constitutes the human subject. According to Beckett, the human subject is an entity that is continuously reborn anew in every passing second; at any given moment, this ever-evolving subject is therefore the culmination of all its previous experiences. When this subject reflects upon its experiences from the vantage point of the present, it does so not as the entity it was when these experiences occurred, but as the subject it has become as a result of having had this multitude of experiences. As a consequence, the Beckettian subject finds itself enclosed within a cycle in which it is continually alienated from the configurations of existence that constitute its former self. This is what Beckett means when he describes life as a process in which "the subject has died – and perhaps many times – on the way," (*Proust* 14). In Proust's novel, this process is most notably dramatized as the protagonist tastes a tea-soaked madeleine biscuit for the first time in many years and is, in effect, transported backward through time, compelled to reassume the configuration of existence that constitutes just one of Marcel's many former selves.

The intensity of this sensorial experience prompts Marcel to relive this past moment, not as the manifestation of Marcel who has raised the teacup to his lips, but as the Marcel he once was at a time long since passed. For Beckett, the human subject is essentially distracted from this underlying reality by the illusory charms of "Habit," a term he uses in *Proust* to describe the repetitious activities that fill every second of each passing day and create a stable, coherent, and ultimately deceptive sense of self. Although Beckett published this academic essay over a decade before the 1953 Paris premiere of *En attendant Godot*, this understanding of subjectivity features prominently in Beckett's first performed play. It is, for instance, exemplified by the sense of disorientation

that overwhelms Estragon and Vladimir whenever they attempt to recall prior experiences, thus echoing the limitations Beckett associates with voluntary memory. Indeed, Estragon appears to make explicit reference to this Beckettian mode of “Habit” when he says, “We always find something, eh, Didi, to give us the impression we exist?” (*Waiting for Godot* 64). Considered in light of the revelatory potential that Esslin associates with absurdist drama, *Waiting for Godot* can certainly be interpreted as a positive, and relatively straightforward, dramatization of Beckett’s ostensibly negative contention that “Habit is the ballast that chains the dog to his vomit,” (*Proust* 19). However, the ethical questions posed to Vladimir and Estragon with the arrival of Lucky and Pozzo in Acts One and Two further explore the possibility that a stable and coherent ethical code might emerge from multifarious repetitions in much the same way as the Beckettian subject is essentially born out of the succession of Habits that constitute our day-to-day existence. Just as these habitual recurrences can generate the impression of a stable and coherent sense of self, so too can repetitions based on ethical quandaries generate a subject that responds to these quandaries in a manner that expresses a certain uniformity.

Like Nietzschean eternal recurrence, then, Beckett’s exploration of these ethical possibilities within the context of *Waiting for Godot* is framed as a response to the apparent shortcomings of the Schopenhauerian and Hegelian philosophical models that are signified onstage. Coupled with the subtle reverberations of the Holocaust that materialize in this manufactured onstage reality, these philosophical resonances point to what Gibson describes as “remainder,” that is, the cultural and sociopolitical no-man’s-land that develops in the aftermath of the Badiouian event. Like the rudderless Vladimir and Estragon, the sick and suffering unnamed boy, or boys, and the thoroughly dehumanized Lucky, even the once masterful Pozzo is reduced to a marginalized position when he reappears blinded and powerless in Act Two. Even if the manufactured world of *Waiting for Godot* is deemed but one slice of a broader societal system where the Enlightenment and counter-Enlightenment strands of thought endorsed by Hegel and Schopenhauer can conceivably exist, Beckett’s eye remains firmly focused on those who exist on the margins of this societal system, as Gibson has rightly observed. And while it is certainly the case that none among those whom Beckett casts to perform in this nihilistic wasteland can be described as ethical or unethical, underscoring the suitability of Weller’s “anethical” reading of Beckett’s writing, this onstage reality is but one half of a theatrical totality that encompasses the attendees and performers alike. In addition to establishing a live performance that positions this dramatization of the “remainder” squarely within this totality, Beckett’s meta-theatrical aesthetic further immerses the viewer in what is dramatized onstage. By complicating the distinction between these onstage and offstage realities,

Waiting for Godot engineers an aesthetic intervention that harnesses the transformative power that Badiou associates with the event. Rather than operating as an aesthetic experience through which "philosophy, or spirit itself, proclaims its bankruptcy" ("Trying" 121), as Adorno has suggested, Beckett's play orchestrates a live experience that establishes an axiological imperative for the ages by directly implicating the viewer in the onstage proceedings during critical moments of ethical ambiguity.

This suggests that Badiou's assessment of Beckett's literary ethics can be refined in two important ways. Although some of Beckett's writing does generate a representation of the Badiouian event, this occurs only in the realm of theatre where the marginalized "excess," or "remainder" as Gibson would have it, inhabits the manufactured onstage reality and where those in the audience complete Badiou's equation by representing the "void." Certainly, the audience is at times implicated in this manufactured onstage reality, but they simultaneously occupy the offstage reality where a coherent societal system still exists. When viewed from this perspective, it becomes apparent that this ethical dimension materializes in Beckett's writing some fifteen years before Badiou suggests. It is certainly true that Beckett's theatrical notebooks for the 1975 Schiller Theater production place additional emphasis on the ethical dynamics that mediate these onstage and offstage realities in a manner that is consistent with the ethical strain that Badiou identifies in Beckett's later work. Rather than marking a new departure, however, these formal amendments accentuate the preoccupations with ethical alterity and the metatheatrical dramatizations of eternal recurrence that feature prominently in all productions of *Waiting for Godot*. In this way, Beckett's play establishes an axiological blueprint that can operate as an ethical imperative in a world devoid of meaning and value. It matters little whether we call this world the realm of the "remainder" or a world in which "God is dead." The metatheatrical mode of eternal recurrence that generates this axiological blueprint by implicating the viewer in this world is at once quintessentially Nietzschean and a positive statement of a negative thing.

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NOTES

1. For more on Schopenhauer's and Geulincx's influence on Beckett's art and thought, see Steven J. Rosen's *Samuel Beckett and the Pessimistic Tradition*; Matthew Feldman's *Beckett's Books: A Cultural History of the "Interwar Notes"*; Ulrich Pothast's *The Metaphysical Vision: Arthur Schopenhauer's Philosophy of Art and Life and Samuel Beckett's Own Way to*

Make Use of It; Anthony Barron's *Against Reason: Schopenhauer, Beckett and the Aesthetics of Irreducibility*; John Pilling's "Beckett's Proust" and "Proust and Schopenhauer: Music and Shadows"; James Acheson's "Beckett, Proust and Schopenhauer"; J.D. O'Hara's "Where There's a Will There's a Way Out: Beckett and Schopenhauer"; Erik Tønning's "'I am not reading philosophy': Beckett and Schopenhauer"; Han van Rule, Anthony Uhlmann, and Martin Wilson's *Arnold Geulincx's Ethics: With Samuel Beckett's Notes*; and David Tucker's *Samuel Beckett and Arnold Geulincx: Tracing "A Literary Fantasia."*

2. Dirk Van Hulle and Pim Verhulst offer a detailed exposition of these revisions in *The Making of Samuel Beckett's En attendant Godot / Waiting for Godot: Beckett Digital Manuscript Project*, vol. 6, 267–76.
3. For more about Levinas's ethical alterity as a response to poststructuralism, see Russell Smith's "Introduction" to *Beckett and Ethics*, 2–3.
4. For a concise explanation of Badiou's objections to Levinas's ethical alterity, see Peter Hallward's "Ethics Without Others: A Reply to Critchley on Badiou's Ethics."
5. For an overview of René Descartes's influence on Beckett's early and middle works, see Michael Bennett's "The Cartesian Beckett: The Mind-Body Split in *Murphy* and *Happy Days*"; Anthony Uhlmann's "A Fragment of a Vitagraph: Hiding and Revealing in Beckett, Geulincx, and Descartes"; John Wall's "Murphy, Belacqua, Schopenhauer, and Descartes"; and Irit Degani-Raz's "Cartesian Fingerprints in Beckett's *Imagination Dead Imagine*."
6. Matthew Feldman provides a synopsis of Beckett's psychology and philosophy notes in "Beckett's Poss and the Dog's Dinner: An Empirical Survey of the 1930s 'Psychology' and 'Philosophy Notes.'"
7. For a detailed discussion of "God's death" and its association with Nietzsche's "revaluation of all values," see Walter Kaufmann, "The Death of God and the Revaluation," in *Nietzsche: Philosopher, Psychologist, Antichrist*, pp. 96–118.
8. For more on the radical freedom that Nietzsche ascribes to the "Übermensch" figure, see Wolfgang Müller-Lauter, "The Way to the Overman," in *Nietzsche: His Philosophy of Contradictions and the Contradictions of his Philosophy*, pp. 72–83.
9. See Richard Lane's "Beckett and Nietzsche: The Eternal Headache."
10. For an overview of Schopenhauer's philosophical engagement with Buddhism, see Moira Nicholls's "The Influences of Eastern Thought on Schopenhauer's Doctrine of the Thing-in-Itself."

11. Beginning with Georges Bataille's *On Nietzsche*, the development of this interpretation of Nietzschean eternal recurrence can be traced through Giles Deleuze's *Nietzsche and Philosophy*; Ivan Soll's "Reflections on Recurrence: A Re-examination of Nietzsche's Doctrine, *die Ewige Wiederkehr des Gleichen*"; Alexander Nehamas's *Nietzsche: Life as Literature*; and Bernard Reginster's *The Affirmation of Life: Nietzsche on Overcoming Nihilism*.
12. See, for example, Günther Anders's "Being without Time: On Beckett's Play *Waiting for Godot*"; Victor Carrabino's "Beckett and Hegel: The Dialectic of Lordship and Bondage"; Theodor W. Adorno's *Aesthetic Theory*; James M. Harding's "Trying to Understand *Godot*: Adorno, Beckett, and the Senility of Historical Dialectics"; Paul A. Cantor's "*Waiting for Godot* and the End of History: Postmodernism as a Democratic Aesthetic"; and Angela Moorjani's "Diogenes Lampoons Alexandre Kojève: Cultural Ghosts In Beckett's Early French Plays."
13. Beckett's literary engagement with Irish history and culture is discussed in Vivian Mercier's *Beckett/Beckett*; David Lloyd's "Writing in the Shit: Nationalism and the Colonial Subject"; Declan Kiberd's *Inventing Ireland: The Literature of the Modern Nation*; Patrick Bixby's *Samuel Beckett and the Postcolonial Novel*; Seán Kennedy's edited volume *Beckett and Ireland*; Emilie Morin's *Samuel Beckett and the Problem of Irishness*; and Fergal Whelan's *Beckett and the Irish Protestant Imagination*.

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