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**“On and On” until “All Out”: Seeking Silence within the Postmodern Paradigm of Samuel Beckett**

*His predicament [Beckett] described as that of “one on his knees, head against a wall—more like a cliff—with someone saying ‘go on.’” Later he said, “Well, the wall will have to move a little, that’s all” (Cochran 96).*

In his biography of Samuel Beckett’s life, James Knowlson writes that Beckett failed miserably as a teacher (88); had Beckett not failed, he would have spent his life as a scholar, teaching and writing brilliant essays like his award winning Proust study. The sizable amount of literature on Beckett’s creative writing, however, seems to indicate that Beckett’s pedagogic failure metamorphosed into a dazzling success for the humanity, which so frequently themes his work, through literature. Yet, some groups, proponents of Christianity in particular, might have preferred for Beckett’s influence to have trickled through the one or two schools in which he might have taught rather than to have flooded classrooms from Japan to Midwestern America, simply because the prototypical postmodern world of his work seemingly rejects the fundamental tenets of societies that ingest chicken after church as easily as the equally fatty truths obtained from the pulpit. Beckett’s world, as Andrew Kennedy writes, is characterized by “the sense of a cosmic run-down, the loss of the human sense of the divine, and the breakdown of language itself” (41), realities diametrically opposed to ideas like “Heart for God, mind for truth, friends for life, and service for eternity,” the motto of an absolute-abiding liberal arts university in Ohio (*Cedarville University Home Page*). In light such absolute ideals, it is little wonder that proponents of Christianity find authors like Beckett difficult to swallow. Yet, if any group of

beliefs could resonate with a writer like Beckett, it would seem that Christianity, with its emphasis in passages like John 1 and Philippians 2 on form and content, or as Abbot terms them, structure and meaning (116), two concepts with which Beckett wrestled his entire life (Murphy 236) would most dynamically speak to his work. And perhaps by critically assessing Beckett's world, Christians and others will find something underneath the "muck" of postmodernism sufficiently solid to prolong living in *Murphy*, to support a journey in *How it is*, and, eventually, to nourish a tree in *Waiting for Godot*. In each of these works, Beckett presents silence within the temporary postmodern paradigm as humanity's only reprieve from its own condition.

In suggesting that Beckett is something more than a postmodern writer and in framing the discussion of Beckett within the larger discussion of Christianity and postmodernism, however, one must not suppose that Beckett presents a ready-made response, either ideological, philosophical, or artistic, to the postmodern predicament. Kennedy warns that approaching the text with the foregone conclusions of existentialist, Marxist, Freudian, Christian, or other ideological interpretations leads to ignoring the complexities and ambiguities crucial to the texts' understanding (31), thus readers should not assume Beckett's work will bend easily to classification. Furthermore, when asked about an existentialist key to his work, Beckett himself said that "if the subject of my novels could be expressed in philosophical terms, there would have been no reason for my writing them" (Fletcher 228), suggesting that his work provides no narrative illustration for any past or present philosophical thought. Fletcher continues to say, "Eclectic in its thought, freely selective in its symbolism, recognizing no binding engagement whatsoever to any philosophical system or religious creed, the Beckettian *oeuvre* is sufficient unto itself" (232), asserting in his own words the discrepancy between previously established ideas and Beckett's own thoughts. Although traces not only of philosophical and religious

thought (Sen 62), but also of various artistic movements (Knowlson 161), punctuate his texts, Beckett's work exhibits his artistic integrity. As Kennedy states

“In the formative years, when art was experienced upon the pulses, Beckett caught the fever of innovation from various avant-garde movements of the interwar period – the expressionists, surrealists, and dadaists – without becoming a devotee of any one ‘ism’. What mattered was the general thrust towards artistic experimentation which, however varied and multi-directional, went against the grain, and beyond the forms and languages, of naturalism and realism – in short, away from the photographic and towards the radiographic.” (21)

Kennedy implies Beckett's ability to pick and choose elements from artistic trends which would allow him best to articulate his particular response to the postmodern condition of humankind. Thus, it is only logical that Beckett in gathering from, without subscribing to, past and current philosophical, ideological, and artistic movements, responds differently and yet relevantly to the postmodern situation of the twenty first century.

Yet, Beckett's writing, in pointing to silence as a solution for the postmodern predicament, does not coincide with the postmodern thought with which critics have associated it. Despite admissions of Beckett's ability to choose discriminatorily from philosophies and movements, most Beckettian criticism leaves Beckett as merely foreshadowing or perhaps as swallowed by the shadow of the postmodern movement. For instance, Fletcher and Kennedy, critics already quoted at length, both link Beckett with postmodernism in their respective works *The Novels of Samuel Beckett* (55) and *Samuel Beckett* (104), and other critics like Robert Cochran in *A Study of the Short Fiction*, Maurice Nadeau in “Samuel Beckett: Humor and the Void,” S.E. Gontarski with “The Intent of Undoing in Samuel Beckett's Art,” and Dieter

Wellershoff in “Failure of an Attempt at De-Mythologization: Samuel Beckett’s Novels” also correlate Beckettian thought with the dissolution of absolutes and meaning. Even Ruby Cohn, who characterizes Beckett’s work as humorous, if darkly so, in *Samuel Beckett: The Comic Gamut*, summarizes *Comment C’est*, or *How it is*, as “man [...] going round in circles, repeating a few ridiculous phrases, a few ridiculous gestures” (207); Cohn describes life in *How it is*, however comical, as pointless and trapped and the human as an object of indifference and indefiniteness, awash in the muck of postmodernism. Additionally, Richard Begam in his scrupulously crafted *Samuel Beckett and the End of Modernity* argues that Beckett was a reference point for poststructuralists like Foucault and Derrida, concluding “More than any other writer of the last half-century, Samuel Beckett has found and said the words that have carried our epoch toward the threshold of its dissolution, the threshold where modernity finally encounters its own equivocal but inevitable end” (187). Begam brings Beckett to the end of modernity, but leaves him there, as do Cohn and other critics if they even bring him that far; but by thrusting his work within the boundaries of modernity, they ignore any response of his, which seeks to move beyond it.

Since “postmodernism” and “modernism” figure centrally to this argument, the terms necessitate a specific context before a discussion of Beckett’s solution to the postmodern predicament. Loosely, ‘postmodernism’ or the ‘postmodern condition,’ which Beckett’s works reflects, refers to the aftermath of the Enlightenment tradition or as Begum puts it, “the extended critique of the intellectual heritage of the Enlightenment” (17). Specifically, it encompasses both modernism, in which the idea that there is truth to be discovered has been dropped, if not the concept of truth itself (Rorty as quoted in Begum 9), and the postmodernism in which a distinction is made “between the claim that the world is out there and the claim that truth is out

there” (Rorty as quoted in Begum 16). In other words, truth’s inability to be known characterizes modernism while it’s nonexistence drives postmodernism. Beckett, however, exhibits both modernist and postmodernist trends in his text (Klaver 112), which makes sense since, in this definition, postmodernism functions simultaneously as an extension and rejection of modernism through the idea of truth. As Elizabeth Klaver has said, “Postmodernism continues the project of rejection begun by modernism in the destabilization of various entrenched master narratives” although it “rejects the aesthetic groundings modernism installed in their place” (112). Thus, since postmodernism, by definition and implication (Begum 6), contains both modernism and the departure from modernism and since Beckett’s response to those either of those trends necessarily addresses them both, “postmodernism” will encompass both modernism and postmodernism and the irrelevance of absolute meaning that characterizes those periods.

It is important that the definition of postmodernism contain references to the Enlightenment tradition because the sense of historicity and continuation implied by tradition plays an important part in the development of Beckett as writer who transcends the limits of postmodernism. Beckett had a keen sense of the tradition from which he came and connected with that tradition through his writing. After commenting on a long string of Beckett’s literary influences, Knowlson writes, “However richly innovative much of his own later writing was to be, Beckett always saw himself as belonging to and drawing from a wide European literary tradition” (70). To illustrate Beckett’s habit of accumulating pieces of this tradition and inserting them in his writing, Knowlson quotes a contemporary and cheeky reviewer of his first novel, *Fair to Middling Women*,

“to cope with this book you will need some French and German [he could have added Italian, Spanish, and Latin], a resident exegete of Dante, a good

encyclopedia, OED, the patience of Job, and your wits about you. What an addition to company they would be! It's uphill all the way, but then so was Calvary, and the view from the top redeems the pains taken" (Knowlson 145).

If Beckett's writing is highly allusive, it shows the extent and enthusiasm of his reading. In fact, despite Beckett's dislike of the man (Bair 181), Beckett seems to have embodied the model author of his contemporary T.S. Eliot in "Tradition and the Individual Talent," by working hard to inherit the European tradition which gave

"[...] perception not only of the pastness of the past, but of its presence; the historical sense [which] compels a man to write not merely with his own generation in his bones, but with a feeling that the whole of the literature of Europe from Homer and within it the whole of the literature of his own country has a simultaneous existence and composes a simultaneous order." (2375)

Having an excellent command of English, French, German, Italian, and Latin and as a disciple of his countryman James Joyce, Beckett had indeed studied "the whole of the literature of Europe from Homer and within it the whole of the literature of his own country." Beckett's use of the European tradition informs readers not only of his literary influences, but also of his place within the tradition.

However, Beckett's sense of the European tradition provides not simply a reference point for readers, but also proof of Beckett acknowledges the temporality and philosophical incoherence of the postmodern condition. In itself Beckett's sense of tradition implies movement and meaning, or a historical continuation, not to be confused with progress, and communicative connection. The references to Shakespeare, Dante, and the Bible would not merit inclusion in Beckett's works if their author didn't appreciate their ability to communicate,

and, often, it is his allusions to the European tradition that create meaning in his work. For example, the reader must connect the names and thoughts referenced to grasp the significance of a particular paragraph as in *How it is* where the reader must be able to connect Haeckel, a German biologist and philosopher and Potsdam, his birth place in Germany with Klopstock, a German poet and his residence in Altona (Beckett *How it is* 542). Beckett uses the European tradition in his work to remedy the sense of isolation pervading the postmodern condition. Christopher Lasch in “The Culture of Narcissism” describes the isolation of the seventies, which one could argue pervaded the entirety of the twentieth century, “We are fast losing the sense of historical continuity, the sense of belonging to a succession of generations originating in the past and stretching to the future. It is the waning of the sense of historical time—in particular, the erosion of any strong concern for posterity—that distinguishes the spiritual crises of the seventies [...]” (4). Beckett, by incorporating tradition in his work, forces the reader to engage the tradition, thereby continuing its dialogue. Consequently, Beckett, by assuming meaning and movement through privileging the European tradition in his texts, allows for both to exist within the context of postmodernism.

To examine more specifically the meaning and movement to which Beckett alludes by emphasizing the European tradition within his work and also Beckett’s suggestion of silence as enable of life within the postmodern condition, one can consider Beckett’s novel *Murphy* published in 1938, his novel *How it is*, or *Comment C’est*, published in 1961, written in French and translated by Beckett into English, and his play “Waiting for Godot,” also written in French and translated by Beckett into English and first produced in 1949. These texts provide a basis for discussing Beckett works which reflect a postmodernism not as a condition that limits man by



isolation and futility but as a temporary condition offering productive silence or false duality of mind and matter.

The text of *Murphy* demonstrates the beginning of Beckett's attempt to show the postmodernism as a temporary condition in which man can carve out a space which enables living through silence. *Murphy's* text, for example, shows the title characters' search for silence. The novel follows the character as he searches for a job at the request of his lover, Celia, so the two can live together. Murphy eventually finds a job at Magdalen Mental Mercyseat but also takes residence in the mental institution's garret attic while Celia stays in his apartment and Miss Counihan, Murphy's intended, and her crew search tirelessly through Dublin for Murphy. Murphy dies in a gas explosion in his room after doing night-rounds at Magdalen Mental Mercyseat, and his cremated body eventually spills over the floor of a Dublin pub. Miss Counihan and crew disperse, and Celia returns home. Judging from externals, this plot bleeds postmodernism, prompting conclusions like Kenneth and Alice Hamilton's that "Beckett evidently wishes his readers to understand that dreams of escaping from the mess in front of us are delusive" (72). Yet, Beckett hints that meaning can reside even amidst the mess, and although Murphy only glimpses it and Miss Counihan and crew fail in recognizing its existence, Celia seems to grasp it.

The novel opens with Murphy vainly attempting to achieve the ultra-pleasurable "life in the mind" through binding the physical. He sits in a chair, out of the sun, bound by seven scarves in an effort to appease his body so his mind can be free (Beckett *Murphy* 2), but finds he cannot achieve a transcendent state because of externals like ringing phones and even internal distractions such as his own thoughts (7). In chapter six, Beckett indicates the reason Murphy cannot enter the "torpor" (2), suggesting dormancy or inactivity, he craves (105), by describing

Murphy's brand of Cartesian dualism (Murphy 6) that made him feel "split in two, a body and a mind" (109). Earlier, Murphy had tried to achieve transcendence through the sensual, but had gone to the "other extreme" by employing all his powers of concentration (107). Yet, despite his efforts to achieve a dormant state, he still he wonders about the "sights and sounds" external world (2). He fails to achieve the pleasurable nothingness not only in his apartment when he is distracted by Celia but also the night of his death on which he has no distractions. He simply cannot achieve the productive silence, which gives insight into people and relationships (252), but rather is distracted by "scraps of bodies, of landscapes, hands, eyes, lines, and colours evoking nothing" (252). If the extremes of living in the physical and sensual exist (105), but both fail to admit Murphy into a life of meaning and if Beckett is indeed pointing to silence amidst the existent mess in which to create meaning, then Beckett provides an answer to the narrator's inquisitive ramblings, "Perhaps there was, outside space and time, a non-mental non-physical Kick from all eternity, dimly revealed to Murphy in its correlated modes of consciousness and extension, the kick *in intellectu* and the kick *in re*. But where then was the supreme Caress?" (109). Beckett answers that question which Murphy raises, by pointing to the arms of the plot: the Miss Counihan group and Celia.

While Murphy raises the question of whether one can achieve meaning, Miss Counihan, Neary, Wylie, and Cooper ignore it, choosing to be distracted by superficialities within the context of society. For instance, Neary, for all his pretense of reconciling mind and matter, is satisfied by banal considerations of Miss Dwyer. While "teaching" Murphy how to "blend the opposites of Murphy's heart," Neary says, "To gain the affections of Miss Dwyer, [...] even for one short hour, would benefit me no end" (4). He calls Miss Dwyer "The one closed figure in the waste without form, and void! My tetrakyt!" (5), suggesting that he chose to find meaning in

her; ironically, however, Neary and Miss Counihan walk off the page at the end of the novel (273). Neary's casual transfer of affections from Miss Dwyer to Miss Counihan indicate his lack of concern for life outside society.

Miss Counihan herself wastes little time after the death of Murphy to transfer her quest for meaning to Neary whom she follows at the end of the novel. In fact, the narrator foreshadows her actions by saying "Miss Counihan had a sad feeling that after Murphy was found there might be still less to be done" after Wylie had stated there was nothing to be done until Murphy was found (127); yet, Miss Counihan doesn't question the purpose of the search, finding the sufficient purpose in the superficiality of the search itself and when the search ends in her quest for Neary.

The characters of Wylie and Neary also indicate their bourgeois contentment with the distractions of society. Wylie was "intelligent enough to thank his stars he was not more so," which suggests his avoidance of any quest for meaning, and Cooper, as unthinking as his comrades, "did not pause to enquire" when he suddenly found himself free of the all-consuming search for Murphy (273), instead turning to a pub in which he finds further distractions (274). Each of these characters refused to address the question of meaning that Murphy struggled with until his death, choosing rather to construct meaning with the apparatus of distraction provided by society.

Perhaps Celia is the one character who finds silence within the chaos. While at her desire to start a "new life" (64) with Murphy and not as a prostitute compels her to prod Murphy to seek employment, Murphy's position as the zenith of her life changes as she discovers the fruitful effects of silence. When Murphy is job-hunting, Celia sits in his apartment in the sunlight, "steeping herself in these faint eddies till they made an amnion of her own disquiet," a

state she preferred to “wandering in the Market, where the frenzied justification of life as an end to means threw light on Murphy’s prediction, that livelihood would destroy one or two or all three of his life’s goods” (67). It is by allowing herself silence, which encapsulated her innermost disquiet, that she finally understands Murphy; she “began to understand as soon as he gave up trying to explain” (67). She feels the same sensations and inclination towards transcendence that Murphy did, yet unlike Murphy she requires no scarves to tie her. The difference, which Beckett contrasts by positioning Murphy’s chair experience in the dark and Celia’s in the light, lies Murphy’s attempt to contrive a state of torpor by altering his situation and Celia’s working within her existing situation. Celia, by using the silence around her, allows the paradigm of waiting to become a fruitful space producing an understanding of Murphy, knowledge of herself, and ability to endure life within the undesirable context of her existence.

Celia’s knowledge of her herself comes when she chooses to recognize the silence surrounding her. When Celia reappears within the chaos of the Counihan group, she is still unperturbed, “stretch[ing] herself out at the ease of her body as naturally as though her solitude had been without spectators” (262). Beckett did not say “as though she were in solitude,” he emphasizes rather that she is in a state of solitude despite those around her. She proceeds to produce her story with a “calm voice” (234) to the inquisitive group, punctuating it with four pauses: three rests, one long rest (234), further evidence of her ability to produce within the silence. Celia’s ability to produce her story as well as her unconscious poise between and within the intervals of silence indicate the self-knowledge she attains through silence.

Despite the fact that Celia returns to the life of a prostitute after Murphy’s death, she still uses the silence within her context to find the strength to continue her existence. Beckett ends the book with her, something, which many critics apparently forget as their analyses end with

Murphy's death, which unduly emphasizes her part in the novel. In the last scene, Celia pushes her grandfather in a wheelchair at the shore. Her grandfather flies a kite and lets out various amounts of string, which the narrator relates to a "hardened optimist" assessing various periods of history (279), meanwhile asking Celia about her business. The kite gets higher and higher as more and more periods of history are let out, but Celia's miserable condition, representative of humankind's, remains the same. Eventually the kite crashes, the hardened optimist collapses-- a possible stab at logical positivism, but Celia, pushing him along, "toil[ing] along the narrow path into the teeth of the wind, [...] up a wide hill," closes her eyes. The last words of the novel "All out," suggest the embracing of silence that enables her to help her grandfather and continue the arduous path of her life, suggested by the narrow, windy, uphill path. Thus, through Celia rather than through physical distraction or intellectual concentration, *Murphy* illustrates how embracing silence within one's situation, however miserable, allows not for progress in the historical sense, but for perception, progression, and productivity.

In *How It Is*, Beckett, who surrounded himself with silence at his country retreat while writing the novel (Knowlson 413), also encourages the postmodern man can carve a space of silence amidst distraction. The novel, divided into three parts, consists of the unnamed narrator, slinking around in the mud muttering phrases rather than sentences. He eventually encounters another figure and then trades him for another, before continuing his slow crawl eastward. On the novel's form, Ruby Cohn in *Back to Beckett* notes,

Though most of the verses of *Comment c'est* endure for longer than a breath, the reader is forced to breathe as guided by the verses. [...] [R]est-breaths correspond to the blank spaces on the page. And within the verses, only the reader's voice can determine how the phrases are grouped.

The reader's voice has to echo the voice of the narrator of *Comment c'est*, even if both are mute. 230

Cohn's comments indicate how Beckett uses the verse divisions and even phrasal divisions to force the reader to pause, in essence to create silences within the reading experience. If the reader's voice echoes the narrator's, then Beckett by describing how it is for the narrator, also describes how it is for the reader, making the novel an evaluative parody of the reader's predicament. Wanda Balzano concurs with Cohn's description of the novel as a story punctuated by rest-breaths, but further suggests that anarchy drives the abolished syntax and degrammaticized, subverted language (102). If "the black of writing seems to blend with the white of page into a gray, muddy, entropic form of writing, in which there is neither order nor hierarchy" (Balzano 102), then 'how it is' for the narrator/reader seems to mirror the postmodern condition, in which nothing is privileged, everything is deconstructed, and human contact proves meaningless. Only because of the pauses, the silences between the sounds of the narrator's voice, can the reader engage meaningfully with the text. The reader/narrator cannot escape the text to find meaning, as evidenced by the book's repetition and cyclical structure (Cohn *Back to Beckett* 233), but he can find meaning through his silence.

Additionally, the content of *How it is* demonstrates the need for silence. H. Porter Abbot calls the text "verbal background noise" which perhaps illuminates the reader/narrator's postmodern condition which is perhaps further identified by the narrator's existential questioning: "how I got here no question not known not said" (Beckett *How it is* 507). He further describes his condition as one of temporary silence, saying, "other certainties the mud the dark I recapitulate the sack the tins the mud the dark the silence the solitude nothing else for the moment" (508). For the moment, the narrator has uncertainty, in the form of darkness and mud,

symbols of consumerism with the sack and food tins, and isolation and silence. Although the narrator thinks “he’s better than he was better than yesterday less ugly less stupid less cruel less dirty less old less wretched,” he also admits “there is something wrong there” (509), perhaps belying the fact that he is continually faced with uncertainty of darkness and mud in each of the three parts. Like Willoughby Kelly, Celia’s grandfather, in *Murphy*, the narrator seems to have a progressivist’s view of the future by making comparisons about time or the human condition in time. “Abject ages each heroic seen from the next when will the last come when was my golden every rat has its heyday I say it as I hear it” (510) also expresses his hope that in time his condition will improve. The narrator’s condition does not improve over time, of course, and because it does not, critics like Cohn summarizes the human condition as man going in circles making ridiculous gestures (*The Comic Gamut* 207).

However, the narrator does hint that silence may offer a solution. Towards the end of the first part, he suggests, “the voice time the voice it is not mine the silence the silence that might help I’ll see do something something good God” (Beckett *How it is* 540). The narrator’s connection between silence and God, suggests that silence might enable the narrator to engage with something beyond the mud and darkness, and if not that, than the silences at least permit the narrator to resume his journey. “To end is, as Beckett wrote elsewhere, to end yet again. That is, to begin.” As Abbot says (116), the beginnings and endings made possible only by the punctuating silences of the background noise of language. Thus, the narrator of *How it is* must work within his paradigm, allowing silence to give meaning to the words and relief from them.

Punctuating silence also emerges as a central theme in *Waiting for Godot*, which further illustrates Beckett’s call for silence in the postmodern era. In Deborah Weagel’s “Silence in John Cage and Samuel Beckett: 4’ 33’’ and *Waiting for Godot*,” the author shows Beckett’s and

Cage's use of silence to achieve an "organic coherence" that allows their audiences to appreciate silence as a productive force. "The coexistence of sound and silence is a particularly significant feature in *Waiting for Godot*. Beckett creates a certain musical rhythm in the play, and there is power in the silence which becomes productive space" (254), Weigel says, but the "productive space" she refers to applies to the audience and artist, rather than the characters. However, an analysis of the play shows that Vladimir and Estragon also may carve a productive space through silence within their context or endure the paralysis of waiting.

Even in the first lines, the reader sees Beckett's privilege working within the silences of one's own condition over attempting to escape through action. Estragon, after vainly attempting to pull off his boots, rests before getting up to say to Vladimir, "Nothing to be done." Vladimir returns, "I'm beginning to come round to that opinion. All my life I've tried to put it from me saying, Vladimir, be reasonable, you haven't yet tried everything. And I resumed the struggle" (Beckett *Waiting for Godot* 370). It is after Estragon rests from boot pulling that he concludes there is nothing to be done, a silence which enables a conclusion. Vladimir, by concurring, suggests that the 'struggle' comes from trying everything, attempting to do something to relieve one's condition. The pair resumes the struggle, however, by trying discussion (374), dreams (378), and suicide (380) all the while waiting perturbedly for Godot, the waiting itself, binding them beneath the willow tree. In the following piece of dialogue, the two show a false dichotomy between doing and waiting:

Vladimir: Well? What do we do?

Estragon: Don't let's do anything. It's safer.

Vladimir: Let's wait and see what he says.

Estragon: Who?



Vladimir: Godot.

Estragon: Good idea.

Vladimir: Let's wait till we know exactly how we stand.

Estragon: On the other hand it might be better to strike the iron before it freezes.

(381)

The two have set up a dichotomy between doing and waiting, but to wait is to do as Vladimir illustrates when he combines the two with the line "Let's wait and see what he says." He presents this as an alternative to Estragon's, "Don't let's do anything. It's safer," which hints at a third solution: that of using the silence within their context. The mistaken idiom "On the other hand it might be better to strike the iron before it freezes" shows the lose-lose nature of their false dichotomy since they could endure the paralysis of waiting or harm themselves by striking an iron before it freezes.

When the pair does experience silence, they benefit from it. For instance, the natural silence between Act I and Act II produces "four or five leaves" on the willow (429), and the following dialogue shows Estragon's attempt to use silence to communicate:

*Long silence.*

Vladimir: Say something!

Estragon: I'm trying.

*Long silence.*

Vladimir: (*in anguish*). Say anything at all!

Estragon: What do we do now?

Vladimir: Wait for Godot.

Estragon: Ah!

Estragon seems to try to speak through the silence while Vladimir, waiting for his response and for Godot, writhes in anguish. Andrew Kennedy suggests that “Waiting, both in life and in drama, can involve a whole range of experience, from a sense of paralysis to fruitful silence, the empty or the anxious mind trying to cope by inventing distractions (25). In the above dialogue, Estragon attempts to use the silence fruitfully by trying to communicate with it while Vladimir demands he say something, anything to deliver him from the paralysis of waiting.

In keeping with the distractions that infiltrate the text, Pozzo and Lucky that pair that twice encounters Vladimir and Estragon distract from any potentially fruitful silence. For instance, when Vladimir shouts “Silence!” to Estragon, Pozzo, and Lucky, each listens, bent double (Beckett *Waiting for Godot* 417). Estragon hears something, which Vladimir identifies as the heart. Pozzo, disappointed, says “Damnation!” (417). Although silence brings the group physically close to the heart, fostering a consideration of their internal beings, Pozzo deflect their attention from such considerations of inner life by bringing their attention back to their present condition. Also indicative of their distracting tendencies, Pozzo treats Lucky as a circus master would treat his show animal or “pig” as Pozzo calls him (412). The pig, however, can not only dance to distract the pair (411), but also fill the space by shouting a three-page text of noise, a “tirade” as Beckett terms it (413). Lucky’s tirade causes dissatisfaction, a “general outcry,” and the other three to jump on him in an effort to stop him, all actions which suggest consternation at the unnecessary vomit of words. Pozzo and Lucky distract Vladimir and Estragon, leaving them no closer toward a meaning of their existence.

The two do not find meaning because they fail to work within the parameters of their condition, which remains the same despite the passage of time. By insinuating that Vladimir and Estragon’s condition will not change as time moves, Beckett alludes to the temporality of the

postmodern condition in conjunction with the stagnation of the human condition. As twilight approaches with the end of the play, Vladimir and Estragon pull on a cord to see if it is strong enough to allow them to escape their condition by hanging, but the cord breaks, the couple standing underneath the tree which they see as the means of that escape nearly falls, and Vladimir says, "Not worth a curse" (474). Beckett seems to imply the unchanging nature of the fallen human condition as well as the futile struggles of humankind since Adam and Eve within each time period, signified by the days, to futility of escaping the human condition.

Yet, Beckett doesn't give up on Vladimir and Estragon: at the play's end, which will only serves as the beginning of another end, the pair determines to continue waiting for Godot. They haven't moved and cannot go far, being bound by the present condition until it ends and the pair crawls away to sleep, at which point they'll be bound by another condition, indicated by the promise of waiting through the next day. In light of that fact that they will return to wait another day, it seems Beckett maintains hope in humankind to persevere until they can work within the silence of their present condition without submitting themselves to the paralysis of waiting: looking forward to a future time or supernatural intervention, symbolized by Godot, which may or may not come to change their condition. It was, after all as Beckett suggested at the beginning of the play (374), in the silence and pain of his immediate condition that the dying thief was saved.

Beckett's suggestion of silence as the solution especially, but not only, to the postmodern condition through *Murphy*, *How it is*, and *Waiting for Godot* as well as his other texts which become increasingly silent towards the end of his career (i.e., *Act Without Words I* and *Act Without Words II* both of 1956 and *Quad* of 1982 contain no words at all [Cooke 28]) raises the question "Why did Beckett, who had the whole of the European tradition from which to draw,

stress silence?" To answer this requires a look at Beckett's artistic vision in relation to the times in which he wrote. Beckett's artistic vision and his response to the distraction and pastiche of his time fostered a response of silence to the postmodern predicament.

Beckett's emphasis on silence perhaps results from Beckett's own aesthetic theories and practices. Beckett's belief that silence engenders meaning beyond the nothingness of postmodernism perhaps germinated from his belief in the idea that true art is a prayer. Knowlson describes when Beckett solidified this idea, saying,

It was while discussing [Schapire's painting] that Beckett found himself drawn into restating his own criterion of true art, in which he not only repeated his view that the authentic poem or picture was a prayer but developed the image further than he had ever done up to that point: "The art (picture) that is a prayer sets up prayer, releases prayer in onlooker, i.e. *Priest*: Lord have mercy upon us. *People*: Christ have mercy upon us." This is an attitude that few readers will associate with Beckett, yet it was essential to his view of art at the time, whether this was the art of the writer, painter, or musician." 222

If, as in this statement, the artist functions as a priest, Beckett returns to the European tradition in which the artist functions as a mediator between God and man and indicates his suspicion of something beyond the external world, a "third zone," like that of Murphy's mind, which supersedes the Cartesian dichotomy of mind and matter. At the end of *Waiting for Godot*, Vladimir's line "Christ have mercy upon us!" nestles between two silences (Beckett *Waiting for Godot* 473), indicating Beckett's aesthetic theory as well as the yield of silence. If, indeed, true art is a prayer, then the most profound silence in art will produce a prayer, a simultaneous recognition of the limits of one's own condition and determination to work within it to engage

something beyond it. Neither Murphy, nor the protagonist of *How it is*, nor Vladimir and Estragon can alter their conditions, but they can accept them and through the silences speak outside them.

In addition to Beckett's aesthetic vision, the distractions and pastiche of the twentieth century prompted Beckett to offer silence as salvation from uncertainty. Gilbert Sewall in "Revisiting the Eighties" writes, "One aspect of the sixties—small is beautiful—lost its appeal. [...]" (xv); while Sewall writes in the context of the new materialism of the 1980's, his comment can apply to the largeness of noise associated with the materialism he describes, which Beckett counteracted with artistic work punctuated by pauses and silences. It is true Beckett wrote before the dawn of the information age, and yet as Begum has argued, he predicts the effects of its background noise through his work (11). Beckett, in response to his culture's emphasis with getting, hearing, and constructing to its own distraction and as a means to escape the inherent wretchedness of their condition, offers nothing in response: a silence. Although Beckett didn't comment frequently on his work, he, in fact, has encouraged critics to view his works through the lens of nothing; as Ruby Cohn says, "Beckett has told several critics that, were he unfortunate enough to be a critic commenting on Beckett's work, he would begin with two quotations: Nothing is more real than nothing. (Democritus) Where you are worth nothing, there you should want nothing. (Geulinx)" (*Back to Beckett* 6). Beckett is presenting nothing because society needs it to find the silences through which to transcend their condition that is in fact "worth nothing." He stresses silence as a response to an over-stimulated, distracted humanity in need of a way beyond their condition. In a chapter entitled "The Aesthetics of Silence," Susan Sontag equates society's need for silence with a spiritual need which modern art has attempted to fill (3). Sontag suggests Beckett, among other authors, uses silence as "a form of speech (in many

instances, of complaint or indictment) and an element in a dialogue” (11). If this is the case, then Beckett, as a modern artist, uses silence to dialogue with his society. Although Sontag also suggests the work of Beckett and others attempts to “talk oneself into silence” (27), Beckett perhaps does not talk himself into silence as he out-talks it, providing a uniform background of noise, as in the narrator’s rhythmic utterances and repetition in *How it is*, by which to emphasize the silence. The words reflect the condition of postmodernism and perhaps hint at the answer, but the silence provides the solution. This is evident in the character of Celia in *Murphy*, through the form of *How it is*, and within the paradigm of waiting in *Waiting for Godot*. By presenting silence within the human condition as a means through which humanity can engage with what lies outside of their wretchedness—just what this is Beckett does not say, Beckett addresses the postmodern predicament by counteracting its excesses with nothing.

If Beckett indeed counteracts the postmodern condition by emphasizing its need for silence and quittance of distraction, then perhaps he doesn’t ultimately present such an antithesis to Christian absolutes within his works, although in them he most tellingly represents the postmodern condition. Beckett careful avoids suggesting what humanity may encounter as it experience the silences within its condition. The idea of art as a prayer might imply that it is God whom mankind may meet in the silence, an especially tempting thought considering Psalm 46:10 (New American Standard), “Be still and know that I am God” and Beckett’s nearly word perfect knowledge of Scripture (Knowlson 105). Yet, whether it is God, whether of Beckett’s construction or of his Protestant heritage does not seem to be the point of his works, and, consequently, they do not oppose Christianity as they do postmodernism. He seems to impress upon his readers, and especially those of the postmodern condition, the futility of escaping their inherently stagnated condition on their own terms or by the salvation of some future day, rather

suggesting that only within their condition can mankind access what lies outside it. Thus, Beckett speaks not only to his particular postmodern situation, but also to the ages of humanity to come, Christian or otherwise, who may still by trying to wait or escape, when they can only really “go on.”

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