WAITING FOR GODOT:
A Beckettian Counterfoil to Kierkegaardian Existentialism

In this paper I will endeavour to analyse Beckett’s Waiting for Godot as a play typical of Kierkegaardian existentialism and also to defend it against the post-modernist attempt at interpreting the play as a series of language games which all the dramatis personae indulge in to pass the time while waiting for the inevitable. It was Jeffrey Nealon who said that “Waiting for Godot is the play of Vladimir and Estragon’s words, not any agreed-upon meaning for them, which constitutes their social bond.”1 And he quotes Frederic Jameson:

(...) utterances are now seen less as a process of transmission of information or messages, or in terms of some network of signs or even signifying systems than as (...) the ‘taking of tricks’, the trumping of a communicational adversary, as essentially conflictual relationship between tricksters.2

“Such it seems to me,” concludes Nealon, “is the state of language games in Waiting for Godot.”3

But like all great works of literature Waiting for Godot, too, is elusive. “There is something misleading about this printed text”4 is a precautionary warning from Hugh Kenner, who himself has reservations about finding out “other contexts” in the play; however, he realises that “this play’s world contains more than Vladimir and Estragon.”5 And the play does contain Godot who seems to exist as a reference to the whole context of the play. This referred-to entity, outside the play, is the mysterious one for whom we all wait.6 The sum and substance of the play is waiting, just waiting, without certainty, for the inevitable. As Kenner puts it: “The play constructs about its two actors the conditions and the quality of waiting, so much so that no one blames the dramatist’s perverse whim for the withholding of Godot and the disappointments of their expectations.”7

Beckett’s “perverse whim” of withholding Godot from the play and the waiting itself have compelled critics to call the play absurd as “the patient hopefulness (of two tramps) demonstrates the absurdity of hope itself, and likewise the absurdity of reason.”8 But this absurd nature of the play seems Kierkegaardian and not what Sartre came to mean by it. “In Sartre ‘the absurd’ which (...) for Kierkegaard meant ‘that which cannot be reduced to rule’ has come to mean that which is totally meaningless and irrational.”9 It is generally supposed that Kierkegaard derived his word ‘absurd’ from the mathematical term ‘surd’: that which cannot be fitted into the pattern, the remainder that is left over
when we have done our best to find a neat and tidy solution. It is somewhat in this sense at Kierkegaard used the word in his *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*.

In Beckett’s play, Godot, for whom so much waiting has taken place throughout the play, seems to have been a Kierkegaardian ‘absurd.’ ‘Godot’ is possibly formed on ‘God,’ but what real connection with God is very unsure indeed.” He is ‘the other’ in the play but this ‘other’ is not a threat or a menace as Sartre might have thought. Right from the very beginning of the play, the impression given to the audience is that Godot is the person/thing the whole play is about, not a threat or a menace but something/someone who even in its/his absence is most welcome. His unseen presence throughout the play is referentially humanized and so he becomes a participant, one of the dramatis personae in the play. With a masterstroke of irony, Beckett makes Vladimir and Estragon realise the objective reality of Godot subjectively:

Vladimir : Let’s wait and see what he says.
Estragon : Who?
Vladimir : Godot.
Estragon : Good idea.
(…) 
Estragon : And what did he reply?
Vladimir : That he’d see.
Estragon : That he couldn’t promise anything.
Vladimir : That he’d have to think it over.
Estragon : *In the quiet of his home.*
Vladimir : *Consult his family.*
Estragon : *His friends.*
Vladimir : *His agents.*

Here Beckett employs the *maieutic* method of Socrates as used by Kierkegaard in his *Postscript*.

For Beckett, as for Kierkegaard, truth is subjectivity. It is what man creates and through creation realizes. Vladimir and Estragon are the creators of Godot through their objective reflection on him. But in Kierkegaardian theology, this objective reflection tends to make the subject accidental and transforms his existence into something indifferent and abstract. At various places in the play the reader is made conscious of the accidental and indifferent existence of Vladimir and Estragon, who “are the raw substance so commonly dressed up in accidents of occupation, role, relationship. They are unaccommodated men.” Thus for Vladimir, “Time has stopped,” and again:

Estragon : It’s so we won’t think.