GODOT IS DEAD: Nietzsche and Beckett on Salvation and Suffering in a Godless Universe

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Abstract

There are many parallels and points of similarity between the themes of the play *Waiting for Godot* by Samuel Beckett and the themes explored by Friedrich Nietzsche. This essay examines the play in light of some of Nietzsche’s key concepts, such as the Will to Power, the Übermensch or Overman, the Eternal Recurrence, as well as the aesthetic conception of existence.

The essay argues that while *Waiting for Godot* shares many of the premises and conclusions of Nietzsche’s philosophy, the play can also be interpreted as a critique of the same. The play presents a post-religious world marked by pessimism and resignation rather than affirmation and Nietzschean *amor fati*. The characters are as far removed from the heroic Overman ideal as can be imagined, unable to harness the Will to Power, which is absent or distorted or even unknowable. Communication is fraught with difficulty and uncertainty. The dynamic of the Eternal Recurrence is present but rather than being affirmed it is a source of crushing boredom, tediousness and existential angst. The characters are unable to embrace the Eternal Recurrence and are in a continual state of mental flight from its implications. They suffer from a vague recollection of the past while projecting their hopes into the future in order to diminish the unbearable suffering of the existing present, or state of perpetual becoming. Beckett can thus be said to be offering a satirical critique of the concept of salvation, both in its traditional religious sense as well as in the sense implied by Nietzsche’s concept of the Eternal Recurrence. However, Beckett does offer a sense of hope by suggesting, paradoxically, that the abandonment of hope of salvation may lead to a sort of salvation of resignation.

**Keywords:** Beckett; Nietzsche; salvation; redemption; Eternal Recurrence; Will to Power; Overman; Godot
It is only as an aesthetic phenomenon that existence is eternally justified.

- Friedrich Nietzsche (The Birth of Tragedy)

On the face of it, Samuel Beckett and Friedrich Nietzsche have quite a lot in common. Both writers have had an enormous influence on twentieth century thought and they are widely regarded as two of the most important critics of many of the central issues pertaining to modernity. Their work can be said to occupy an elusive space between modernism and postmodernism, and they are often seen as both devastating critics of modernity as well as precursors of a new, postmodern outlook. Nietzsche is often considered to have been “the grandfather of postmodernism”, a thinker who analysed and mapped out the limits of the modern mindset, while Beckett explored the limits of modernism within literature and consequently paved the way for postmodern approaches within this field. In addition to these general similarities, both writers deal with similar themes in their work, and often they seem to share similar premises or perspectives regarding these themes, although they do not necessarily reach the same conclusions. Some of these themes include but are not limited to: religion, redemption, the meaning of life or lack thereof, nihilism, consciousness, language and the nature of power, human relations and the concept of time.

This essay explores the connections between these two important figures with a focus on the ways in which Nietzschean themes are reflected and transformed in Beckett’s writing.

The concepts of modernism and postmodernism are important to this essay’s attempt to connect and compare the two writers. However, these terms can be elusive and difficult to define, as they encompass both philosophical and literary movements
as well as more general attitudes toward and within modern society. It is therefore important to define the way these terms will be used for the purposes of this essay.

The modern era is usually associated with a series of seismic revolutions; the American, French, and Industrial Revolutions, all inspired by the Enlightenment idea that reason is of central value. These cataclysmic events facilitated the ushering in of a new way of thinking about and relating to the world. In the realms of religion, politics, economics and culture old dogmas were challenged and a new philosophic, socio-cultural and aesthetic outlook emerged.

One can summarize the modern mindset as a belief in reason, rationality, science, empiricism, secular humanism, individual freedom, equality of rights as well as a linear view of history which grounds an unshakeable faith in progress. In philosophy, Rene Descartes’ slogan, “I think, therefore I am”, can be said to summarize a new approach to ontological research, emphasizing subjective experience and mind/body dualism. In the realm of literature and the visual arts, the modern period can be described as a trajectory whereby Realism, that is to say the disposition that art should mirror objective reality, dominates in the early period and is later challenged by the Modernistic movement, which identified itself in opposition to Realism and sought to challenge conceptions of empirical reality and objective truth.

Postmodernism is usually seen as a reaction to modernism, the most general of its dispositions being a sustained critique of “grand narratives”. Postmodernism rejects the Enlightenment idea of progress and proclaims objective truth to be merely an amalgamation of social constructs and power relations. Further, it enhances the self-conscious and critical attitude implicit in Modernism itself to focus on language, power, deconstruction and a “critical” approach to all established truths and conventions.

As mentioned above, Nietzsche is often seen as a fountainhead for much of postmodern thought. Many of the central themes with which he is concerned can be said to belong to a postmodern perspective. Firstly, Nietzsche is recognized as a critic of many of the key Enlightenment values which constitute some of the core values of modernity. Although Romanticism engaged in similar criticisms, Nietzsche was equally critical of this movement. However, his ideas do retain a residue of romanticism, as we shall see.
Nietzsche criticized the idea of progress, positing the “Eternal Recurrence of the same” as an alternative view of temporality opposed to the linear view that sees human history as constantly progressing toward a better future. This critical attitude toward progress can be discerned in Beckett’s writing as well. Disillusionment with progress shaped Beckett’s literary aesthetic, his attempt to take writing into a “diametrically opposite” direction. He claimed that the modernists, and Joyce in particular, had exhausted the limits of knowledge. Indeed. While Joyce’s aim was “to put everything, the whole of human culture” (Boulter 5) into his writing, Beckett claimed to have come to the realization that “Joyce had gone as far as one could in the direction of knowing more, being in control of one’s material” (Boulter 5).

Beckett saw himself as an analyser whose “own way was in impoverishment, in lack of knowledge and in taking away, in subtracting rather than in adding” (Boulter 5). Beckett’s literary task then became to strip down all the conventions of writing in order to reach “the bedrock of the essentials, the archetypical” (Boulter 5). As a consequence, Beckett’s writing becomes fundamentally focused on language itself, the way it is used and for what purpose, the meaning or lack of meaning it conveys, its ultimate potential and limitation as a tool of communication. Here we find another strong correlative between Beckett and Nietzsche, as the latter was also deeply concerned with the analysis of language and the way it structures our thinking.

The work of Beckett with which I shall be primarily concerned in this essay is the play Waiting for Godot, which is without question Beckett’s most famous work. It is a bleak, if not altogether nihilistic, absurdist exploration of the travails of two tramps, Vladimir and Estragon, seemingly stranded in a deserted place where they endlessly wait for the title character, Godot, to appear. Vivian Mercier famously described it as a play where “nothing happens, twice” (Gibson 52), and indeed the concept of nothing seems central to the work. Godot never appears, and the play ends very much the same way it began, with the two tramps waiting, by the same tree, for something to happen that never does. Absence, or lack, as well as the desire for something to appear which is not currently present, is thus the defining motif of the work. This essay focuses on some of the ways in which some of Nietzsche’s key ideas are reflected, transformed and critiqued in the play. The ideas in question concern the nature of language and truth, the self and fragmentation, faith and nihilism, will and suffering, and are represented in the concepts of the Overman, the Will to Power, the Eternal Recurrence and the aesthetic conception of the essay. The central thesis of this
Valsson

An essay is that the transformation of these ideas in *Waiting for Godot* can be framed as a transition from modernism to postmodernism, as these terms are defined above. Further, the essay argues that some of the divergent attitudes towards the ideas in question may be traced to each author’s temporal position in relation to these terms. The method employed to conduct the analysis can this be said to be of a historicist nature.

In his famous essay “*On Truth and Lies in a Non-moral Sense*” Nietzsche questions the ability of language to be a medium through which human beings can authentically express their experiences, both to themselves as well as to others. He describes all language as being merely “metaphor”, and every application of a word to a thing or concept as a process whereby fundamentally diverse experiences are grouped together and made common in order to facilitate social cohesion and stability. In questioning language in this way, Nietzsche is also fundamentally questioning our ability to formulate “truth”, which can be seen both as an attack on tradition as well as on established Enlightenment values connected to modern modes of thinking, and thus this particular mode of thought can be associated with both modernism and postmodernism. Indeed, in the same essay Nietzsche defines truth as “A movable host of metaphors, metonymies, and; anthropomorphisms: in short, a sum of human relations which have been poetically and rhetorically intensified, transferred, and embellished,” (“On Truth” 5.)

This critical, ambiguous approach to the question of language is also present in the work of Beckett, where key themes include the inability to communicate, a general sense of alienation, loss of meaning, loss of memory, deconstruction of traditional modes of narrative and storytelling etc. Through these means Beckett calls into question not only our ability to communicate truth but also the coherency of our very self-consciousness as a thinking subject.

Vladimir: Was I sleeping, while the others suffered? Am I sleeping now? Tomorrow, when I wake, or think I do, what shall I say of today? That with Estragon my friend, at this place, until the fall of night, I waited for Godot? That Pozzo passed, with his carrier, and that he spoke to us? Probably. But in all that what truth will there be? (81.)

Who are “the others” Vladimir is referring to? It is possible to interpret this as a reference to Vladimir’s prior states of consciousness, rather than to other people. Nietzsche was also concerned with issues pertaining to the plurality of the subject and the fragmentation of the self, going so far as to state, in *Beyond Good and Evil*, that
there was no such thing as a coherent, thinking subject with an integrated consciousness and free will, in a sense no “I”, but merely a constantly fluctuating Will to Power, inevitably expressing its full quantum of force at any given moment. In Beyond Good and Evil, Nietzsche attacks the notion of the integrated subject by deconstructing Descartes’ famous slogan: “I think, therefore I am.”

When I analyse the event expressed in the sentence ‘I think’, I acquire a series of rash assertions which are difficult, perhaps impossible, to prove – for example, that it is I who think, that it has to be something at all which thinks, that thinking is an activity and operation on the part of an entity thought of as a cause, that an ‘I’ exists, finally that what is designated by ‘thinking’ has already been determined – that I know what thinking is. (46.)

Nietzsche follows this line of argument by launching into a critique of the linguistic notions of subject and object and cause and effect, claiming that “a thought comes when ‘it’ wants, not when ‘I’ want; so that it is a falsification of the facts to say: the subject ‘I’ is the condition of the predicate ‘think’” (“Beyond” 47).

The question of the meaning of existence, or lack thereof, occupies a central place in both writers’ thought. Although Nietzsche began his academic career as a pious student of theology, he gradually came to believe that modern scientific discoveries had undermined the core tenets of the Christian faith. He concluded that an intellectually honest, informed person could no longer retain belief in God with any degree of intellectual integrity. His famous claim that “God is dead” was thus a descriptive claim about the state of western culture, a diagnosis of the condition of a civilization rather than simply a provocative burst of blasphemous rhetoric. He did not consider the death of God to be an altogether positive thing. Indeed, he thought it was one of the most catastrophic events in history, one that most people had yet to face up to. He predicted that the next couple of centuries would bear witness to calamities of unprecedented proportions as people tried to replace their faith in God with a new faith and new values.

Nietzsche’s critique of secularism was influenced by Schopenhauer’s pessimism. Nietzsche read Schopenhauer at an impressionable age and was for a time converted to his philosophy, but later he came to refute it in its entirety and spent the rest of his days trying to come to terms with its claims while at the same time affirming life. Schopenhauer saw life as endless striving, which he called Will to Live, and which was inherent not just to living creatures, but to everything in the entire universe. Following Kant’s transcendental idealism, Schopenhauer identified
the thing-in-itself, i.e. that which lies beyond subjective experience, as pure will. He came to this conclusion by referring to our unique insight into one phenomenon in the universe, namely ourselves. We experience ourselves as representations, the same way we experience everything else, as bodies, but we also experience ourselves “from the inside” as will.

To the subject of knowing, who appears as an individual only through his identity with the body, this body is given in two entirely different ways. It is given in intelligent perception as representation, as an object among objects, liable to the laws of these objects. But it is also given in quite a different way, namely as what is known immediately to everyone, and is denoted by the word will. (“The World as Will” 66)

Schopenhauer thus argued that this insight gave us a clue about the nature of the whole universe. Following this he identified everything we experience subjectively as objectified will, including the motion of the planets, the movement of both animate and inanimate objects, the urge to procreate, and even music. Absolutely everything is will, and will, according to Schopenhauer, contains inherent suffering. Living creatures constantly strive for something, which indicates a lack, which in turn indicates suffering. If, against all odds, all one’s desires are satisfied, one does not reach a state of euphoria but a state of boredom, until a new desire appears. Life thus inevitably alternates between the states of suffering and boredom, and inherently contains a great deal more suffering than joy or pleasure. Suffering is a positive state, whereas pleasure is negative in the sense of being merely the absence of suffering, and the experience of suffering vastly outweighs in its intensity the experience of pleasure.

Nietzsche rejected Schopenhauer’s solution of resignation as a way to extinguish Will, accusing it of nihilism, a concept with which Nietzsche was passionately concerned, since he believed that it was the inevitable fate of western civilization after the destruction of Christianity. Indeed, he believed that the west was already in a state of nihilism when he was writing, although people had not yet realized it. He described churches as tombs where people went to worship the remains of their shattered God, a God they did not truly believe in anymore, although they were too cowardly to admit it. The irony was, according to Nietzsche, that Christendom itself had facilitated its own destruction, since the Scientific Revolution launched by Christians to explore the glories of God’s world had uncovered truths which might have been best left in the realm of the unknown. Nietzsche’s project thus
became to overcome nihilism, to face it head on in order to find a way to affirm life anew. Nietzsche defined nihilism as the state which persists after the highest values have devalued themselves, and consequently he wanted to create new values, or at least create the foundation upon which new values could be built, since the foundations of the previous value system had in his view proved to be false.

Nietzsche’s philosophical project can thus be said to have been an attempt to redeem existence in the face of a Godless universe, to affirm optimism in the face of Schopenhauer’s unabashed pessimism, and to confront nihilism head on. To combat these states Nietzsche advocated an unconditional affirmation of every aspect of existence through the concept of *amor fati*, or love of fate. Instead of rejecting the will, one should embrace it. Nietzsche claimed that the will was not primarily focused on survival but on power, and thus renamed it Will to Power. In this view, the amount of suffering one goes through is of no importance, indeed it is necessary to suffer in order to achieve the state of “overcoming” which produces a feeling of power. Thus, Schopenhauer’s claim, that life contains more suffering than pleasure, ceases to be a valid negation of existence, since pleasure or lack of suffering is not valuable or worth striving for in itself. A person with a Nietzschean attitude toward existence would in fact seek out suffering in order to overcome it and grow as a person, attaining meaning through the very act of overcoming and transcending suffering.

The key concept in this view of existence is the Eternal Recurrence of the same, an idea that posits the notion of everything that happens, down to the smallest detail, recurring endlessly in a never-ending cycle. According to Nietzsche, in order to truly affirm life one must come to terms with the concept of Eternal Recurrence. One must come to accept, even to love, the idea of living the same life over and over in an endless cycle. In so doing, one redeems life in the face of nihilism by achieving the state of ultimate affirmation. In *The Gay Science*, Nietzsche expresses this view thusly:

*The Heaviest Burden.* What if a demon crept after thee into thy loneliest loneliness some day or night, and said to thee: “This life, as thou livest it at present, and hast lived it, thou must live it once more, and also innumerable times; and there will be nothing new in it, but every pain and every joy, and every thought and every sigh, and all the unspeakably small and great in thy life must come to thee again, and all in the same series and sequence … Wouldst thou not throw thyself down and gnash thy teeth, and curse the demon that so spake? Or hast thou once experienced a tremendous moment in which thou wouldst answer him: “Thou art a God, and never did I hear anything so divine!”
If that thought acquired power over thee as thou art, it would transform thee, and perhaps crush thee; the question with regard to all and everything: “Dost thou want this once more, and also for innumerable times?” would lie as the heaviest burden upon thy activity! Or, how wouldst thou have to become favorably inclined to thyself and to life, so as to long for nothing more ardently than for this last eternal sanctioning and sealing? (129.)

Most people, presented with the prospect of the Eternal Recurrence, would no doubt throw themselves down and gnash their teeth, since, in accordance with Schopenhauer’s view, their lives have doubtlessly been filled with suffering and tragedy, memories of which are at the forefront of their minds due to the positive nature of suffering. However, Nietzsche invites us to consider the possibility of a “tremendous moment” in which we would meet the prospect of the Eternal Recurrence with joy. But what is this “tremendous moment”, and how do we achieve it?

It is not clear whether Nietzsche was positing the Eternal Recurrence as merely a thought experiment, a poetic metaphor or as a genuine scientific thesis on the nature of the universe, but in any case the concept presents us with a radically different view on time than the modern one. For Nietzsche, one of the most serious false beliefs of the modern age was the belief in progress. He attributed this belief to the linear conception of time introduced by Christianity and posited a circular, cyclical conception to counter it, the Eternal Recurrence. He did not believe that humanity would inevitably progress to ever-higher heights. Indeed, he believed there was ample evidence for the opposite trajectory.

In Nietzsche’s view, the ancient Greeks and Romans had been considerably better human beings than the men of the modern age, and Nietzsche feared that as modernity progressed humanity would deteriorate until it reached the stage of “the last man”, a creature without ambition or courage who only thinks of his own comfort and believes in nothing at all. To counteract this trajectory, Nietzsche put forward the idea of the Overman as a new ideal for humanity to aspire to. The thinking behind this concept was that humanity should constantly seek to overcome itself, to become something more than it was at present, and that the goal of civilization should be the production of “great” individuals. This is the meaning behind Nietzsche’s assertion that the only justification or meaning of existence is aesthetic. The human being is the measure and measurer of beauty, and if the only meaning of existence is to create beauty, that must entail the creation of beautiful human beings. For Nietzsche, a
beautiful human being was not simply a person possessing physical beauty but one possessing inner beauty, which to him meant someone possessing a beautiful “character”, which essentially meant a virtuous person. But his notion of virtue differed from the Christian conception of virtue.

Nietzsche ascribed to the ancient, Aristotelian conception of virtue such as found in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, where the concept of “good” is inseparably linked to the concepts of nobility and excellence. He contrasted this “master” morality with Christian “slave” morality, where the former defined “good” in terms of strength, honour, courage and loyalty and “bad” in terms of weakness, lowliness, cowardice and dishonesty, whereas the latter defined “good” in terms of meekness, humility, compassion and obedience and “evil” in terms of strength, cruelty, cunning, selfishness etc. In short, the slave’s conception of good and evil is an inversion of the master’s conception of good and bad. For Nietzsche, for a moral principle to have any value, courage, or rather strength of will, is a prerequisite, the reason being that the essence of a moral action consists in restraining one’s impulses, or rather organizing ones impulses in a hierarchy, for the sake of a higher principle. If a person’s morality only requires them to act in a way concordant with their base impulses, the morality serves no purpose, and if it requires them to act in opposition to those impulses, they will need strength of will to “organize” their impulses into an “order of rank” conducive to applying the principle. Strength of will, or courage, thus becomes the basis of all morality. For Nietzsche, any morality deriving from slaves, such as Christian morality, which first spread among the slave classes of the Roman empire, is thus inherently suspect, the reason being that, according to Nietzsche, to be a slave one necessarily has to be a coward. The logic here is that if one were not a coward, one would not become a slave, since one presumably would die rather than submit to one’s enslaver. Surely this view has many flaws, and can be described as advocating what we now call “the genetic fallacy”. For now, it is enough for us to assert that Nietzsche considers strength of will or courage to be the litmus test for value. In order to achieve the goal of being a beautiful human being, which after all, according to Nietzsche, is the only possible meaning of existence, one must be courageous, and Nietzsche’s formula for the highest possible degree of courage is the affirmation of the Eternal Recurrence of all things. If one can accept this idea to the full, that is, rejoice in the prospect of living one’s life again and again in an endless cycle, one has
taken a big step toward becoming an Overman and thus rescuing existence from the jaws of pessimism and nihilism.

But how is one to achieve this affirmation? Surely all of us can affirm some parts of our lives, and many of us surely can affirm the greater part of our lives, but can any of us truly say that we would, if given the choice, choose to live our lives exactly, down to the smallest detail, the way we have lived it up until that moment? Is it possible to affirm all the bad things that have happened in ones life? Is it even desirable? Is a person like that truly “affirming life”? Wouldn’t a person who said “I affirm my life, but if given the choice I would change some things to my benefit” also be affirming life? A person who truly affirmed everything seems scarcely imaginable, and that is perhaps why Nietzsche chose to call this kind of person an Overman. Perhaps no such person can truly exist, perhaps it is merely a goal, an ideal to strive toward but one that will forever remain elusive and out of reach.

Despite Nietzsche’s reputation, partly unearned, as a dyed-in-the-wool atheistic philosopher, there is a discernible religious element in many of his ideas, especially in the ideas of the Eternal Recurrence and the Overman, which can be said to be related to the ideas of salvation and of the redeemer or messiah, a lingering hope in the possibility of a future redemption of both the past and the present state of man. In Thus Spoke Zarathustra, Nietzsche speaks of redemption in these terms, as a sacred willing of past events. According to this view, the possibility of redemption lies in one’s ability to will the willing of all of one’s past actions and all the events that have transpired in one’s life. The will cannot will backwards, and thus it broods and resents the past, but it is, on some level, in control of its attitude toward the present, and thus the possibility of redeeming the past in the present is always, at least in theory, a possibility. It is not altogether clear whether Nietzsche considered this attitude to be attainable at all by modern men, or whether it is merely an attitude available to the future Overman. Sometimes he seems to suggest that our role is merely to “prepare” for the coming of the Overman, an attitude which contains traces of the Christian concept of self-sacrifice as well as an undeniable messianic, prophetic aspect.

The world Beckett presents us with in Waiting for Godot is a world that has seemingly passed on. The play’s two main protagonists inhabit a post-apocalyptic milieu where time seems to stand still. The only scenery is a leafless tree and a country road. Vladimir and Estragon are tramps, dressed in rags, subsisting on turnips and carrots while they wait for Godot to arrive. We are never told where they are, or
indeed when they are, or why they are waiting, although there are some clues which suggest that they are somewhere in France, perhaps sometime during the German occupation. It is possible that Beckett’s involvement in the French resistance against the Nazi occupation during the Second World War influenced the play. There is a certain post-war feeling to the whole play, and it has been suggested that the tramps are involved in the French resistance and that Godot is some type of informant, although this is never verified. The play was originally written in French, its title in that language being *En attendant Godot*. The word *attendant* evokes associations to the term *attentisme*, which was commonplace in Vichy France and referred to the attitude toward the Nazi occupation of those who “did not believe ‘the Pétain experiment’ would succeed, but argued that there was no possibility of an immediate return to the battlefield. It was necessary to defer any final decision until the situation ‘clarified itself’. France should wait for the right moment to ‘jump back into the war’” (Gibson 103). The attitude of *attentisme* could conceal mild support for the Vichy regime, or simply a hard-edged, practical outlook, or even outright cynicism or moral confusion, but it could also mask an apathetic, cowardly stance, adopted by those who wished someone else would take care of the dangerous business of liberating France without having to get involved themselves. Despite these various manifestations of the attitude, *attentisme* “involved a particular kind of ambiguity, and a particular disposition towards it” (Gibson 104). It was an attitude that both Beckett as well as his original Parisian audience would have been aware of, and vestiges of it are certainly discernible in the play itself. The protagonists of the play are decidedly unheroic, which ties in with the concept of *attentisme* and provides a sharp contrast to the Nietzschean Overman ideal.

The most striking thing about the world the play presents us with is its abject sense of meaninglessness. Indeed, the play evokes such a palpable sense of nihilism that it is almost as if nihilism itself assumes the role of a character in the play. Vladimir and Estragon seem stranded in a world where all values and all meaning have disappeared. This state of affairs is visualized by the barren scenery and claustrophobic atmosphere. While they wait, the tramps try to pass the time in various ways. The activities they engage in for this purpose are mostly mundane and trivial, pointless and tedious. Their only purpose is to fill the empty void in which they find themselves with something to do while they wait. For instance, they try on boots.

Vladimir: What about trying them?
Estragon: I've tried everything.
Vladimir: No, I mean the boots.
Estragon: Would that be a good thing?
Vladimir: It'd pass the time. [Estragon hesitates] I assure you, it'd be an occupation. (59.)

The play is filled with moments such as these, where the tramps do things simply to avoid facing up to the unbearable passing of time. We find here a stark presentation of the facts of existence as presented by Schopenhauer. Life for the tramps consists of an endless string of alternations between boredom and suffering. When they have finished with an activity and cannot come up with another to take its place, the characters are forced to confront existence head on, they are forced to merely “be”, to experience the pure, unvarnished moment in all its agony, and so is the audience.

We seem here to have arrived at the state of perfect nihilism prophesied by Nietzsche, a post-religious world in which God is dead and nihilism persists. But it is not a world that has reached the positive state of affairs that Nietzsche imagined, or at least hoped such a cataclysmic event would or could bring about. Far from the death of God leading to a new optimism and affirmation of the present, the post-religious, post-apocalyptic world of Waiting for Godot is marked by pessimism. While Nietzsche argued that Christianity was a “life-denying” religion and that casting it aside was the first step in adopting an outlook of life-affirmation, the post-Christian world of Beckett’s play is characterized primarily by a bleak lifelessness and a melancholy yearning for the dead God, or some other form of salvation.

Vladimir: Did you ever read the bible?
Estragon: The Bible... [He reflects.] I must have taken a look at it.
Vladimir: Do you remember the Gospels?
Estragon: I remember the maps of the Holy land. Coloured they were. Very pretty. The Dead Sea was pale blue. The very look of it made me thirsty. That’s where we’ll go, I used to say, that’s where we’ll go for our honeymoon. We’ll swim. We’ll be happy. (6.)

Although it is not altogether clear whether or not Vladimir and Estragon are representatives of the “last men” who Nietzsche claimed would inhabit this nihilistic world, they do certainly display some of the characteristics of these purported “last men”. As Corcoran states: “They are Nietzsche's sick ones, utterly baffled and marginal. Their hopes and expectations are absurd” (Corcoran 513). On the other hand, the last men were purported to be quite content with their meaningless existence, believing that they had “invented happiness” and being only concerned with their own comfort. Vladimir and Estragon are anything but happy with their
situation. They wish to change it, but are utterly unable to do so. Indeed, they seem utterly unable to do most anything. The characters of *Waiting for Godot* are as strikingly far removed from the Overman ideal as can be imagined. They are weak and frail, mentally, physically and spiritually. They are uncertain, unsure of themselves and their surroundings, alienated, dislocated, unable to make decisions or take decisive action on anything. They have trouble remembering things, even things that happened the day before, and the things they do remember seem to weigh them down. They don’t have a clear conception of why they are there or why they are waiting. Their consciousness seems fragmented and broken, and they are thus unable to will, unable even to decide on what to will, and when they do will something, they are unable to act, either out of timidity, uncertainty or sheer physical exhaustion. The scene in the second act where Pozzo has fallen and calls for help exemplifies this. Instead of helping him right away, Vladimir and Estragon debate the situation endlessly, unable to come to a decision.

Vladimir: Perhaps we should help him first.
Estragon: To do what?
Vladimir: To get up.
Estragon: He can’t get up?
Vladimir: He wants to get up.
Estragon: Then let him get up.
Vladimir: He can’t.
Estragon: Why not.
Vladimir: I don’t know. (68-69.)

When they finally muster the will to attempt to help Pozzo they fall down themselves. We might interpret this vision of humanity as a critique of the ideas of the Will to Power and the Overman. Vladimir and Estragon seem unable to decisively will anything, and this may be connected, at least in part, to their uncertainty about themselves, their world, their past, present and future. The other two main characters, Pozzo and Lucky, provide us with an interesting exploration as well as a curious parody of Nietzsche’s master and slave dialectic. Pozzo, while in a sense being the representative of the “master” type, is very far removed from being concurrent with the master type as described and idealized by Nietzsche. Far from being self-sufficient, he is quite as dependent on others as are the other characters, perhaps even more so. He depends on Lucky for his every need, and he is eager to make an impression on Vladimir and Estragon. He comes across as a rather contemptible character, cruel and self-centred, which may or may not be characteristics fitting in
with Nietzsche’s idea of the master type, but he is utterly lacking in the positive characteristics Nietzsche associated with such a type. His dependence on Lucky has rendered him helpless, and indeed dependence is a common characteristic of all the characters in the play. Lucky is just as dependent on Pozzo as Pozzo is on him. It is even suggested that he remains Pozzo’s servant merely because he cannot bear to leave him and thus be alone with himself. Vladimir and Estragon are equally dependent on each other. This all-encompassing dependency seems to refute a central aspect of Nietzsche’s Overman, since a key feature of this higher type is a sort of glorious independence. The play seems to suggest that this independence is a mere fantasy. We may dream of it, but ultimately we need the other, if only to validate ourselves, and to provide us with the diversions we need in order to avoid facing up to the unbearable state of mere existence.

Beckett’s emphasis on human frailty can be seen as a challenge to Nietzsche’s emphasis on strength and dismissal of weakness. It can also be seen as a general critique of the Overman ideal, demonstrating just how far humans are from living up to this ideal. Beckett’s characters cannot begin to approach Nietzsche’s ideal because they are utterly unable to harness the Will to Power. It is not even clear that the Will to Power has a clearly defined existence as such.

Vladimir: [without anger] It’s not certain.
Estragon: No, nothing is certain.
[Vladimir slowly crosses the stage and sits down beside Estragon.]
Vladimir: We can still part, if you think it would be better.
Estragon: It’s not worth while now.
[silence]
Vladimir: No, it’s not worth while now.
[silence]
Estragon: Well, shall we go?
Vladimir: Yes, let’s go.
[They do not move.] (46.)

The characters’ dependence on each other highlights the problem of communication, another recurring motif in the play. Like Nietzsche, Beckett questions the ability of language to act as a reliable transmitter of thoughts and feelings. Beckett studied at the École Normale Supérieure in Paris, a stronghold of Cartesian thought, and his play engages with the problems presented by Cartesian dualism in various ways. “The problem of art for Beckett is a corollary of the Cartesian problem of communication between the material world and the mental world” (Stempel 264). None of the characters in Godot seem to properly understand themselves, let alone each other.
Often their conversations lack internal consistency and seem mainly to serve the purpose of filling the silent void with noise.

Estragon: In the meantime let us try and converse calmly, since we are incapable of keeping silent.
Vladimir: You’re right, we’re inexhaustible.
Estragon: It’s so we won’t think.
Vladimir: We have that excuse.
Estragon: It’s so we won’t hear.
Vladimir: We have our reasons.
Estragon: All the dead voices.
Vladimir: They make a noise like wings.
Estragon: Like leaves.
Vladimir: Like sand.
Estragon: Like leaves. (52-53.)

In these cases language functions as a tool for covering up rather than revealing truth. “[The characters] cannot communicate, cannot even remember events, statements, or each other from one day to the next. Social conventions are transparently selfish. There is nothing, or no one, out there. And while realizing this, they have nothing better to do than wait” (Corcoran 513).

Pozzo and Lucky, although they have presumably been together for a long time, are also stunted in their skills of communication. They suffer from disabilities such as muteness and blindness, and when Lucky finally gets a chance to speak he pours out a neurotic stream of gibberish and must be physically restrained from talking by the other characters in order to make him stop. Confusion, misunderstanding, deception, alienation, isolation and disability mark all forms of communication. Beckett “postulates deception as Descartes postulates truth. Descartes’ cogito is the foundation of a rational universe; Beckett’s cogito is the slow dissolution of the contents of consciousness, a bog into which everything sinks, lit by the flickering marsh gas of decay” (Stempel 265).

The only thing that Vladimir and Estragon seem to be able to decisively communicate to each other and agree on is their mutual will to keep on waiting, although even this is sometimes questioned. A few times during the course of the play they decide to give up their wait and leave, going so far as to declare their intention but then inevitably not moving.

What is it that keeps Vladimir and Estragon rooted to the spot, waiting for Godot? The question seems to invite another one, who, or what, is Godot? Etymologically, the word has several layers. In French, Godot means a type of army
boot. In English, Beckett’s native tongue, there is the obvious semantic connection to the word God, and by adding the French suffix –ot we arrive at something like “little God” or demigod. This seems like a reasonable enough explanation, were it not for the fact that Beckett himself vehemently denied that Godot was supposed to represent God and publicly expressed regret at having chosen a name which so readily invited that interpretation. Yet the notion of Godot as God persists in most readers’ minds. Besides the obvious semantic connection, the role that Godot serves in the context of the play seems to be very much the same one God plays in most religious peoples’ lives: an unseen presence or promise of presence, or of future salvation. Vladimir and Estragon seem to cling to the idea of Godot showing up in much the same way as non-religious people might accuse religious people of clinging to the delusion of a benevolent God in the face of the apparent absence of any divine presence in our day to day lives. If not God, Godot could still be seen as a Messiah-like figure, a prophet or soothsayer, bringing a message of salvation. It can also be argued that Godot represents faith in general, whether faith in God or in something else, a general hope for some kind of future salvation in the state of nihilism and absence of meaning which undeniably exists.

Yet this hope seems to prevent the characters from facing up to this state of nihilism. They don’t seem to know who Godot really is, but they cling desperately to the hope that he will show up nevertheless. One interpretation of the play might thus claim that while the world of *Waiting for Godot* represents the nihilistic universe prophesized by Nietzsche come to pass, Godot represents the denial of this state of affairs, the stubborn refusal of man to face up to nihilism and come to terms with his predicament.

If we adhere to this interpretation we might further argue that Beckett seems to reject or at least strongly critique the idea of salvation, or at least the hope for salvation. The protagonists spend the whole play waiting for the title character to appear, but he never does. Salvation, it seems, is not forthcoming. In Beckett, there is no magic, redemptive moment. Time drags on, unbearably, unchangeably, the past only a vague, dissipating memory which melds into the present. But the characters hold onto the idea of salvation through hope, the last evil in Pandora’s box. They hope that, somehow, Godot will save them when he shows up, redeeming their existence.

In this sense, Beckett’s vision of nihilism can be said to be even more bleak than Nietzsche’s, since there is no chance of any kind of salvation, neither from a
deity nor from a concept such as the Eternal Recurrence. This connects back to the
discussion on postmodernism and the critique of the idea of progress pertaining to
modernity. Beckett’s “studied nihilism” is “not something to be evaded, excused or
simply criticised; it is integral to what one may call post-structuralism’s very
possibility” (Miskinis 1047). Beckett’s pessimism stems from “the acknowledged
inescapability of writing within the aesthetically exhausted Western expressive
tradition” (Miskinis 1047).

In Beckett, we are presented with “the end of metaphysics, which coincides
with Nietzsche’s proclamation concerning the death of God and which is experienced
prominently in Beckett’s writing as the nihilistic exhaustion and dying of all ideals”
(Miskinis 1062). Beckett forces his audience to face up to life stripped of all
transcendental illusions while at the same time stripping away all superficial
diversions in order to reveal the naked wound of mere being. In Waiting for Godot
there is nothing but the eternal, unbearable moment, staring us in the face, devoid of
all its furnishings. We are forced to confront the fact that we cannot bear to just be,
but must fill our lives with some form of content. But ultimately, there is no content.
In life, Beckett seems to be saying, echoing Schopenhauer; you have the choice
between suffering and boredom.

Vladimir: Nothing you can do about it.
Estragon: No use struggling.
Vladimir: One is what one is.
Estragon: No use wriggling.
Vladimir: The essential doesn’t change.
Estragon: Nothing to be done. (15.)

So is Beckett a complete and utter pessimist and nihilist? Is there no glimmer of hope
in the world he presents us with? If there is any hope, it is of a different kind than the
type of hope found in the religious traditions or in optimistic philosophies such as that
proposed by Nietzsche. Miskinis claims that Beckett, despite his relentless pessimism,
“nevertheless maintains what we might call a religious posture” (Miskinis 1062).
While this might at first glance seem improbable, it is true that Waiting for Godot is
full of imagery, situations and references to religion, such as the discussion
concerning the two thieves at the beginning of the play as well as references to God,
Christ, Cain and Abel, hell etc. Religion thus has a presence in the play, perhaps a
vague presence, but a presence nevertheless. A yearning for redemption, whether
religious or not, permeates the actions and dialogue of the characters, and there are
indicators that this yearning may not be entirely based on false hope. For instance, at the beginning of the second act the tree has sprouted four or five leaves. Could this be a reference to a hope of sorts? Is there a possibility of meaning after all?

The concept of the Eternal Recurrence is present in the play, in a sense, but is presented in a different way from Nietzsche’s formulation. The Beckettian view of time is somewhat similar to Nietzsche’s. Rather than being an “a priori condition of appearance – a ‘form of sensibility’ that lies ‘at the basis of the empirical,’” Beckettian time “is not a condition preceding experience, but a conclusion drawn from experience and a means of expressing that experience” (Levy 90).

Far from being the source of vigorous life affirmation and amor fati, the Eternal Recurrence, as it finds expression in Beckett, is a source of crushing boredom and tediousness. The characters are unable to embrace the Eternal Recurrence and are in a continual state of mental flight from its implications.

Pozzo [suddenly furious] Have you not done tormenting me with your accursed time! It’s abominable! When! When! One day, is that not enough for you, one day he went dumb, one day I went blind, one day we’ll go deaf, one day we were born, one day we shall die, the same day, the same second, is that not enough for you? [Calmer.] They give birth astride of a grave, the light gleams an instant, then it’s night once more. (80.)

In Beckett “time is relegated to the status of illusion, as the driving aim of Beckettian texts is to express an abiding mentality or attitude toward experience which does not change and remains impervious to local circumstance” (Levy 89). Instead of time progressing in a linear flow, it is reconfigured so that “succession becomes addition. Moments do not pass, in the sense of elapsing once their momentary duration expires. Instead, they accumulate and cumulatively encumber experience with their aggregation” (Levy 92). The past thus intrudes upon the present in an oppressive way. Vladimir and Estragon are tormented by a vague recollection of the past while projecting their hopes for salvation into the future in order to diminish the unbearable suffering of the existing present, or state of perpetual becoming. “At bottom, the Beckettian attitude toward experience construes awareness in terms of the unremittingly uniform unpleasantness of suffering it” (Levy 89).

Beckett “displays a tendency to formulate the future as a revisiting of the past – not in the sense of regret or nostalgia, but in the sense of removing the possibility of change” (Levy 98). The Eternal Recurrence is thus presented not as a triumphant possibility of redeeming the past through a future “magic moment” but rather as the
complete opposite: the abandonment of hope for change. “The prime project of Beckettian mimesis is to protect experience from the risk of hope and hence from the moral suffering of disappointment, discouragement, and despair which hope threatens” (Levy 98). The hope that is to be found in Waiting for Godot is merely the consoling idea that even though one may think that one can’t go on like this, that is merely what one thinks, and that indeed one will go on like this, because one must. This is expressed at the end of the play in the following way:

Estragon: You say we have to come back tomorrow?
Vladimir: Yes.
Estragon: Then we can bring a good bit of rope.
Vladimir: Yes.
[silence.]
Estragon: Didi?
Vladimir: Yes?
Estragon: I can’t go on like this.
Vladimir: That’s what you think.
Estragon: If we parted, that might be better for us.
Vladimir: We’ll hang ourselves tomorrow. [Pause.] Unless Godot comes.
Estragon: And if he comes?
Vladimir: Then we’ll be saved. (84.)

This seems to be all that Beckett has to offer us in terms of salvation. This type of consolation may not seem like much, but it does suggest that if we abandon false hopes based on illusory ideals, we might be able to take fate into our own hands and find meaning by creating it ourselves.

Ultimately, despite their many similarities, Nietzsche and Beckett part ways in their fundamental attitude toward existence. While Nietzsche posited an unconditional (although often somewhat laboured and desperate) optimism, Beckett is ultimately an unapologetic pessimist. But Beckett’s pessimism does perhaps contain the seed of a kind of redemption that is more grounded and practical, although maybe not as aesthetically attractive, as Nietzsche’s extravagant and fatalistic optimism. By abandoning hope in the Beckettian sense, we are paradoxically freed from its burden, which allows for the possibility of a new kind of redemption of the present world, with all its flaws and inconsistencies. These differences in attitude may be related to the two writers’ different historical positions both as relates to the tragic events of the twentieth century, which Nietzsche missed but Beckett could look back on, as well as to their positions, in some sense, as “bookends” in terms of the concepts of modernism and, especially, postmodernism, seen from a certain perspective. While
Nietzsche’s disposition is full of the exuberant possibilities and joy of discovery inherent in the pioneering exploration of new modes of thought and ways of relating to existence which characterized his age and which he so vigorously engaged in. Beckett’s disposition contains a strong element of the world-weary resignation characteristic of many post-war intellectual and artistic currents. While Nietzsche was a critic of Romanticism, as mentioned above, his ideas retain a strong aspect of romantic hero-worship. This is completely lacking in Godot, which takes place in a world where there are no heroes left, if indeed there ever were any in the first place. While Nietzsche stresses the potentiality of superhuman strength, Beckett focuses on human frailty. By abandoning the idea of the heroic Beckett points the way to another form of redemption opposite to the Nietzschean ideal of Strength, a redemption that emerges out of the resigned acceptance of the frailty of the human condition.

Despite these differences, the similarities between the two thinkers as relates to their fundamental attitude toward existence persist on a deeper level. Ultimately, Beckett seems to be saying that salvation does not lie in any particular temporal or transcendental state or in any redeemer outside of ourselves, whether a God, Messiah or Prophet of any kind. Salvation, if it is to be found at all, is to be found in us, in our affirmation of our own being in the world as it is in the unchanging present, free from illusions or flights from reality. That, surely, is something Nietzsche would have agreed with.
Works Cited


