

NAMES IN BECKETT'S THEATER:

IRONY AND MYSTIFICATION

Jesse Levitt

"In the beginning was the pun," Samuel Beckett writes in his novel Murphy, in a parody of the opening sentence of the Gospel of St. John: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God."¹ The names Beckett gives to his anti-heroes are an intriguing mixture of puns, parodies, satire, scatology, and learned mystification.

The title of Waiting for Godot suggests a parallelism with Simone Weil's Attente de Dieu (Waiting for God). For Robert S. Cohen, Beckett's play can be interpreted as "a religious allegory with the catechism provided by Simone Weil. Vladimir and Estragon are anonymous, afflicted souls, incapable of either bettering their situation by action or seeking an answer to their problems by thinking. They wait for God, whom they call Godot, to come to them and, if they accept Him, to plant the seed of salvation in them, which will grow into their tree of life. But the story may also be an "ironic fable" showing "the predicament of those who place blind faith in a non-existent saviour," and Cohen concludes that "if Beckett took from Weil the situation, the characters and the symbolism, he did not take her ultimate faith."²

Kenneth Tynan³ and G.S. Fraser note similarities with Clifford Odets' Waiting for Lefty; Lefty is a trade union organizer who fails to appear at a meeting because he has been murdered.⁴

Godot has generally been interpreted as God -- either the familiar Irish word for God, Godo,⁵ or the English word plus a French suffix. Just as Charlie Chaplin becomes Charlot in French, so God is supposed to have become Godot.⁶ Godot certainly has many traits in common with the God of the Bible. "His white beard reminds one of the image of God's old-father aspect. His irrational preference for one brother recalls Jehovah's treatment of Cain and Abel; so does his power to punish those who would dare to drop him. The discrimination between goatherd and shepherd is reminiscent to the Son of God as the ultimate judge; as a savior for whom men wait and wait, he might well be meant as a cynical comment on the second coming of Christ; while his doing nothing might be an equally cynical reflection concerning man's forlorn state."⁷

Pozzo speaks of Godet, Godot, Godin, thus seeming to suggest a trinity. Beckett's fellow writers, Jacques Audiberti and Alain Robbe-Grillet both interpret Godot as God.⁸

Yet the suffix -ot may have a pejorative sense. In his novel Malloy, Beckett has his protagonist call his mother Mag because "the letter 'g' abolished the syllable ma"; similarly, according to Nathan A. Scott, "the suffix -ot (with its heavy implication of nullifying skepticism) may be intended to negate God, as the actual content of the play might lead us to conclude."⁹ According to G.S. Fraser, Godot is a "local landlord" whose

name might have been suggested by the name of Clifford Odets, the author of Waiting for Lefty. It is also "obviously a half-comic adaptation of the English word 'ho' and the name 'God' ('God ho' like 'Right ho')." ¹⁰ Other interpretations make Godot a syncope of the German Gott ist tot, ¹¹ a reference to General de Gaulle, or a derivative of various French words starting with god -- which generally suggest unpleasant images: godailleur, to guzzle; godenot, runt; godelureau, bumpkin; godichon, lout. ¹² Beckett himself informed Roger Blin, the first French producer of the play, that the name Godot was suggested by two French slang terms for boot -- godillot and godasse, a reference to Estragon's continuous difficulties with his boots. ¹³ This explanation can probably be dismissed as facetious. On another occasion Beckett has said: "If I knew what Godot was, I would have said so." ¹⁴

Many commentators have noted the similarity between Beckett's play and Balzac's mid-nineteenth century play Mercadet. Godeau, an off-stage character, is Mercadet's business partner who has mysteriously disappeared with the company's funds. In Act III, scene 6, one creditor, Violette, exclaims: "Mercadet! you're waiting for Godeau!" To which Mercadet replies: "But I give you my word of honor that I am not waiting for Godeau today." Not till the end of the play does Godeau return with piles of money like a deus ex machina saving the situation. As S.A. Rhodes points out, "the golden-calf Godeau gives way to Godot with the 'barbe blanche,' unrevealed but ever hoped for. The nineteenth century social

satire gives way to the twentieth century mystery play."¹⁶

Hugh Kenner dismisses the interpretation of Godot as God, noting that there was a bicycle raced named Godeau whose career Beckett used to follow in the sporting press, and that there is a street in Paris named Rue Godot de Mauroy. The name Godot also bears a similarity to that of Manuel de Godoy (1767 - 1851), the royal favorite and minister of Charles IV of Spain, who was given the title of "Prince of Peace" for his role in peace negotiations with France. As the author of a generally disastrous national policy for Spain, he can be regarded as a kind of false Messiah.¹⁷ Emile Lavielle suggests that Godot may be derived from the Italian verb godere, "to enjoy, feel joy," since Godot is expected to bring joy to the vagabonds.¹⁸

The two vagabonds, Vladimir and Estragon, call each other Didi and Gogo. Since Vladimir is the more intellectual and talkative, Ruby Cohn suggests that his name comes from the French verb for "say" dis. Estragon is more obsessed with his physical needs and complaints, and the name Gogo may therefore come from the English very go.¹⁹ Vladimir is the name of a Slavic saint and means "ruler of the world," but it could also be derived, according to Frederick A. Busi, from an Italian-German or Spanish-German combination meaning "fly from me" (Italian, volate da; Spanish, volad de; German, mir), since the two vagabonds sometimes talk of separating. Estragon means "tarragon wormwood," often used as a medicinal remedy, possible a remedy for Vladimir's kidney ailment.²⁰ Lavielle sees the English word "straggle" in Estragon's name.²¹

One vagabond has a Slavic name, the other a French or Spanish name. A second couple, Pozzo and Lucky, have respectively an Italian and an English name. The diverse national origins of the names of the characters seem to suggest that Beckett is stressing first and foremost the universality of the human condition.²²

The name Pozzo, which a Frenchman would pronounce [pozo], bears a superficial similarity to Godot. Twice the vagabonds take Pozzo for Godot, and Lavielle considers that the name Pozzo "seems chosen so that we may confuse it with Godot."²³ In Italian, pozzo, is "a well," i.e., a source of life, inspiration, and fertility. Applied to an insensitive egoist and pseudo-humanist of bad faith, the name seems ironic. But pozzo nero means "a cesspool," and this is the interpretation given to Pozzo's name by Colin Duckworth, who asks: "What could be more evil than the Italian sewer his name is derived from?"²⁴

Beckett, as an Italianist, may have been thinking of Dante's Inferno. In Canto XVIII, Dante describes the eighth circle of Hell, in which betrayers and seducers are punished; it slopes down to the edge of a central hole, a rather broad and deep ditch -- in Italian, "un pozzo assai largo e profondo."²⁵ Frederick A. Busi finds Pozzo's name suggestive of a "creature of infernal proportions."²⁶ Pozzo's name also suggests the powerful Pozzo di Borgo family, of Corsican origin.²⁷ It may also be noted that the word pozzo differs only slightly from puzzo, "a stink or stench." The French equivalent of pozzo is puits, a homonym of puis,

"I can," which suggests a learned pun. Je puis comes from the Latin verb posse, "to be able." A derivative of posse is potestas, "power," from which potentate is derived -- an apt description of Pozzo.²⁸

Lucky is Pozzo's slave, and the name thus seems ironic. When Colin Duckworth asked Beckett: "Is Lucky so named because he has found his Godot?" Beckett replied: "I suppose he is lucky to have no more expectations..."²⁹ According to Eva Metman, "he deserves his name because he has a master who, however, cruelly, organizes his life for him...Only within the pattern of a mutual sado-masochistic relationship between himself and Pozzo is there any safety for him."³⁰ The name Lucky is one that is apt to be given to a dog; and he is, in fact, thrown the bones of the chicken that his master has devoured. Pozzo warns: "Be careful! He's wicked. With Strangers." He is used, however, as a porter, i.e., like a horse, and Pozzo calls him a hog. He lives like an animal because he fears his freedom.³¹

In his famous monologue, Lucky refers to presumed academic scholars named PUNCHER (In French, Poinçon), WATTMAN, FARTOV, BELCHER, TESTEW (French, Testu), and CUNARD (French, Conard). The names PUNCHER and WATTMAN in reality suggest motormen -- WATTMAN being the streetcar conductor, PUNCHER the man who punches tickets; poinçon in French means "a perforating punch."³³ FARTOV and BELCHER have the obviously scatological connotations and seem to have been suggested by William Blake's satirical fragments "Let the brothels of Paris be opened" and

"When Klopstock England defied," in which old Nobodaddy "farted and belched and coughed."³⁴ Cunard, according to A. Alvarez, is a private joke, referring to Nancy Cunard, who was Beckett's first publisher and who awarded a prize to his poem "Whoroscope."³⁵ In French, however, conard is merely a derivative of the vulgar term con, the female sex organ, and means "a stupid person."³⁶ Testew, in French Testu, may mean "stubborn," from French tetu (spelled testu before the eighteenth century); but its juxtaposition with Conard also suggests a derivation from testes or testicles. The works of Testew and Cunard, Lucky says, have been crowned by the Acacacademy of Anthropopometry; in French caca is a child's word meaning "feces," and popo means "buttocks." Other "authorities" are Steinweg (German, "stone road") and Peterman (i.e., stone man), whose names suggest the theme of the "abode of stones" to which Lucky refers four times toward the end of his speech.³⁷

Endgame, in French Fin de partie, refers to the last phase of a game of chess in which the king is endangered. Hamm, who is blind and cannot walk, has himself propelled by the castors of his armchair about his territory like a king, while Clov, his servant or adopted son, who cannot sit, acts as his knight, moving to and fro. The names of Hamm and Clov suggest ham and cloves, i.e., food and a spice. The verb clove also suggests cloven-footed animals, or else the past of cleave, which may refer to Clov's desire to abandon Hamm. In Biblical times, corpses were wrapped in linen cloths and anointed with oil and spices. Ruby Cohn notes that "Clov may be a spice anointing corpses."

The name Hamm also suggests "ham actor", "Hamlet", and "hammer." Hamm constantly tries to tell and act out stories and is most anxious to remain at the center of the stage. He is also a domineering tyrant, suggesting a comparison with a hammer. Clov could then be regarded as a nail (French, clou). Nagg and Nell, Hamm's aged, legless parents who live in two garbage cans, may also be regarded as "nails" -- Nagg from German Nagel, "nail," and Nell from English nail. There is a reference to Mother Pegg, who died for lack of light because Hamm would not lend her oil for her lamp. A peg is also a kind of nail. The name Hamm itself may be derived from Latin hamus, "hook," i.e., a kind of nail.

In St. John's Gospel, doubting Thomas says after the crucifixion: "Except I shall see in his hands the print of the nails, and put my finger into the print of the nails, and thrust my hand into his side, I will not believe." All proper names in Endgame refer to nails, and as Ruby Cohn notes, "'nailhood' seems sardonically to symbolize humanity whose role is to nail Christ to the Cross. All the characters are thus instruments working towards the play's paradoxical opening word, 'Finished.'"³⁸

Nagg and Hamm recall Noah and Ham of Genesis; both are survivors of a cosmic catastrophe. In the Bible, Noah curses Ham for seeing him naked; Beckett's Hamm curses his father for having begotten him. But while the Biblical Noah was ordered by God to be fruitful and multiply, Beckett's Hamm tries instead to stamp out life. The names Nagg and Nell

also seem to suggest horses. A nag is a kind of horse, and the name Nell is often given to horses. Both are kept in garbage cans and are occasionally fed sugarplum by Clov.³⁹ The name Pegg may possibly refer to Peggy Guggenheim, who tried, but failed, to establish an emotional relationship with Beckett.⁴⁰

The title of All That Fall comes from Psalm 145: "The Lord upholdeth all those that fall and raiseth up all those that be bowed down." This is the text of the new preacher's sermon, and when Mrs. Rooney so informs her husband, "they join in wild laughter."⁴¹ The entire play parodies Christianity. Mr. Slocum stops to give Mrs. Rooney a ride to the railroad station; then his car will not start. When Tommy leaves his work to help Mrs. Rooney, he is reprimanded by his supervisor, Mr. Barrell. "And that's what you get for a Christian act," Tommy mutters. The name of the heroine, Maddy Rooney, suggests several puns. Maddy is ma or mother, shown by her warm feelings toward her presumably departed daughter, Minnie. Rooney suggests ruin; Maddy and her husband feel they have been failures. Maddy's maiden name was Dunne, i.e., done, which reflects her feeling that all is finished for her and that she has nothing left to do but die.

Mr. Christy's name is a diminutive of Christ; while Jesus rode into Jerusalem on an ass's colt in order to bring new life to man, Mr. Christy, a dung peddler, who has "no head for heights," walks beside his hinny and brings new life through fertilizer.⁴² Mr. Slocum, i.e., slow come, a clerk at the race track, helps Mrs. Rooney into his car, and by

ambiguous statements seems to suggest that they are having sexual intercourse. He says: "I'm coming, Mrs. Rooney, I'm coming. Give me time. I'm stiff as yourself." And Mrs. Rooney replies: "Stiff! Well I like that! And me heaving all over back and front. The dry old reprobate."⁴³

Leaving Mrs. Rooney at the station, "Mr. Slocum drives away in a grinding of gears," which Mr. Barrell calls "crucifying the gear box."⁴⁴ Mrs. Rooney then meets Miss Fitt, i.e., misfit, the Protestant zealot who fails to see the collection plate in church when she is communing with her Lord. When the train is mysteriously delayed, Miss Fitt fears for the life of her mother and for the fresh sole her mother is carrying for lunch, rather than for her mother's immortal soul.⁴⁵

Happy Days is likewise an ironic title. Its heroine, Winnie, who is half buried in quicksand and is destined to sink completely into the earth under a burning sun, maintains a cheerful optimism which is a "savage parody of pious resignation."⁴⁶ At the end of the play, her senile husband Willie, who until then has been out of sight, "summoning the will power that puns his name,"⁴⁷ appears in front of her, "dressed to kill -- top hat, morning coat, etc." Willie barely mutters "Win," and Winnie repeats "Win," adding: "Oh, this is a happy day! After all. So far."⁴⁸ The play thus ends with a mock victory for Winnie.

In the course of the play, Willie refers to the death in a tub of "His Grace and Most Reverend Father in God, Dr. Carolus Hunter," whose name becomes in the French version Carolus Chassepot, or more familiarly,

Charlot Chassepot.⁴⁹ The name Hunter seems ludicrous or satirical as applied to an ecclesiastic who died in a tub; the French form Chassepot, which is the name of a breech-loading rifle used in the French army between 1866 and 1874, seems even more farcical. Winnie refers to a Mr. Cooker or Shower who came upon her, saw her predicament, and did nothing to free her from her prison. Cooker and Shower suggest the German words Gucker and Schauer, "one who looks";⁵⁰ in the French version, Mr. Shower becomes Mr. Piper, which a Frenchman would pronounce [pipɛr] or [pipœr], suggesting the English word peeper.⁵¹

In Krapp's Last Tape, the sixty-nine year old Krapp, a "wearish" or unsavory old man with a "grimy white shirt" and "dirty white boots," listens to a tape of his made thirty years before, describing a passionate love affair on a boat on Lake Como. His face is white, his nose is purple, his gray hair is disheveled and he is unshaven.⁵² Every detail of his appearance suggests the slovenliness to which he owes his name. The choice of his name is by no means accidental, as can be seen from Beckett's unpublished and unproduced play Eleutheria, i.e., "freedom," in which the hero, Victor Krap, lives in "sordid inertia" in a dirty room after leaving his parents house. Other characters in the play are names Piouk, Skunk, and Meck, the las being the French slang term mec, "pimp."⁵³ The word tape in the title of the play may also be a pun, since in British slang it means "alcoholic beverage."⁵⁴ The French title, La Derniere Bande, similarly suggests the obscene verb bander, "to have an erection."

Beckett's names thus rarely seem accidental, but provide a wealth of puns, metaphors, jokes, learned mystifications, Biblical allusions, and scatological references. He himself continues to maintain an almost complete silence on the meaning of his plays. In a letter to his director, Alan Schneider dated December 27, 1957 dealing with Endgame, Beckett states that "the only line is to refuse to be involved in exegesis of any kind." "My work is a matter of fundamental sounds (no joke intended) made as fully as possible, and I accept responsibility for nothing else. If people want to have headaches among the overtones, let them. And provide their own aspirin. Hamm as stated, and Clov as stated, together as stated, nec tecum nec sine te, in such a place and in such a world, that's all I can manage, more than I could."⁵⁵

Jesse Levitt
University of Bridgeport

NOTES

¹Ruby Cohn, Samuel Beckett: The Comic Gamut (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University, 1962), p. 233; Renato Oliva, Samuel Beckett: Prima del silenzio (Milan: Mursia, 1967), p. 15

²Robert S. Cohen, "Parallels and the Possibility of Influence Between Simone Weil's Waiting for God and Samuel Beckett's Waiting for Godot," Modern Drama, Feb. 1964, pp. 432, 435-436.

³Kenneth Tynan, Curtains (New York: Atheneum Press, 1961), pp. 101-102.

⁴George Sutherland Fraser, The Modern Writer and His World (London: Deutsch, 1964, revised edition), p. 62.

⁵Jean-Jacques Mayoux, "Le Théâtre de Samuel Beckett," Études anglaises X (1957), p. 356.

⁶Martin Esslin, The Theatre of the Absurd (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1961), p. 16.

⁷Eva Metman, "Reflections on Samuel Beckett's Plays," in Martin Esslin, Samuel Beckett: A Collection of Critical Essays (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1965), p. 125.

⁸Ruby Cohn, editor, Casebook on "Waiting for Godot" (New York: Grove Press, 1967), pp. 12, 14.

⁹Nathan A. Scott, Samuel Beckett (New York: Hillary House, 1965), p. 93.

¹⁰Fraser, p. 62.

¹¹Henry L. Butler, "Balzac and Godeau, Beckett and Godot, a Curious Parallel," Romance Notes, III, vol. 2 (Spring 1962), p. 13.

¹²Ruby Cohn, Back to Beckett (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1973), pp. 131-132.

¹³Cohn, Back to Beckett, p. 132; John Fletcher, "Roger Blin at Work," in Cohn, Casebook, p. 26; Gérard Durazoi, Beckett (Paris: Bordas, 1972), p. 80.

¹⁴Alan Levy, "The Long Wait for Godot," in Cohn, Casebook, p. 75.

¹⁵Honoré de Balzac, Mercadet in Joseph L. Bergerhoff, Nineteenth Century French Plays (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1959), pp. 367-368.

¹⁶S. A. Rhodes, "From Godeau to Godot," French Review, Jan 1963, p. 265.

¹⁷Hugh Kenner, A Reader's Guide to Samuel Beckett (New York: Farrar, Strauss, and Girous, 1973), pp. 28, 120. The similarity between Godot and Godoy was suggested by Professor Grace Alvarez-Altman of the State University College at Brockport, New York.

¹⁸Emile Lavielle, En attendant Godot de Beckett (Paris: Hachette, 1970), p. 45.

¹⁹Cohn, Back to Beckett, p. 135.

²⁰Frederick A. Busi, "Waiting for Godot, A Modern Don Quijote?" Hispania, Dec. 1974, p. 879.

²¹Lavielle, p. 37.

²²A. J. Leventhal, "Le Héros de Beckett," Les Lettres nouvelles, June-August 1964, p. 49.

²³Lavielle, p. 40.

²⁴Colin Duckworth, "Beckett's Dramatic Intensity," New Theatre Magazine, XI, no. 3 (1971), p. 24.

²⁵Dante Alighieri, La Divina Commedia (edited by C.H. Grandgent) (Boston: Heath, 1913), pp. 144-145.

²⁶Busi, p. 881.

²⁷Lavielle, p. 40.

²⁸Lavielle, p. 40.

²⁹Colin Duckworth, "The Making of Godot," in Cohn, Casebook, p. 95.

³⁰Metman, p. 122.

³¹Lavielle, pp. 43-44.

³²Samuel Beckett, Waiting for Godot (New York, Grove Press, 1954), pp. 28-30; Samuel Beckett, En attendant Godot (New York: French and European Publications, 1952), pp. 43-45.

³³Anselm Atkins, "Lucky's Speck in Beckett's 'Waiting for Godot': A Punctuated Sens-Line Arrangement," Educational Theatre Journal, XIX (Dec. 1967), p. 430.

³⁴William Blake, Poetry and Prose (New York: Doubleday, 1965), pp. 490-491.

- ³⁵A. Alvarez, Samuel Beckett (New York: Viking Press, 1973), p. 84.
- ³⁶Etienne and Simone Deak, A Dictionary of Colorful French Slang and Colloquialisms (New York: Dutton, 1959), p. 50.
- ³⁷Atkins, p. 432.
- ³⁸Cohn, Comic Gamut, pp. 232-233.
- ³⁹Cohn, Back to Beckett, p. 141.
- ⁴⁰Eugene Webb, The Plays of Samuel Beckett (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1972), p. 145.
- ⁴¹Samuel Beckett, All That Fall, in Krapp's Last Tape and Other Dramatic Pieces (New York: Grove Press, 1960), p. 89.
- ⁴²David Alpaugh, "The Symbolic Structure of Samuel Beckett's 'All That Fall,'" Modern Drama, IX (Dec. 1966), pp. 324-328; Beckett, All That Fall, p. 35.
- ⁴³Beckett, All That Fall, pp. 46-47.
- ⁴⁴Beckett, All That Fall, p. 50.
- ⁴⁵Beckett, All That Fall, p. 63.
- ⁴⁶Richard M. Eastman, "Samuel Beckett and 'Happy Days,'" Modern Drama, Feb. 1964, p. 423.
- ⁴⁷Cohn, Comic Gamut, p. 257.
- ⁴⁸Samuel Beckett, Happy Days (New York: Grove Press, 1961), pp. 61, 64.
- ⁴⁹Beckett, Happy Days, p. 15; Samuel Beckett, Oh! les beaux jours (Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 1963), p. 21.
- ⁵⁰Beckett, Happy Days, pp. 41-42; Cohn, Back to Beckett, p. 182.
- ⁵¹Beckett, Oh! les beaux jours, pp. 55-57.
- ⁵²Beckett, Krapp's Last Tape, p. 7.
- ⁵³Cohn, Back to Beckett, pp. 125-126.
- ⁵⁴Cohn, Comic Gamut, p. 249.
- ⁵⁵Samuel Beckett, "Letter to Director Alan Schneider," Village Voice, March 19, 1958, pp. 8, 15.