

Difference and Deference: Reading Deferral in Beckett, Derrida, and Gans in a Time of Disaster

Sandor Goodhart

Department of English
Heavilon Hall 438
Purdue University
West Lafayette, Indiana 47907
goodhart@purdue.edu

Time has stopped.

Vladimir in *Waiting for Godot*

[B]ehind this veil of gentleness and peace, night is charging and will burst upon us
(*snaps his fingers*) pop! like that! just when we least expect it.

Pozzo in *Waiting for Godot*

They give birth astride of a grave, the light gleams an instant, then it's night once more.

Pozzo in *Waiting for Godot*

Part One. Beckett

Two hobos enter the stage at the beginning of Beckett's most famous play.⁽¹⁾ Our expectations of them are high, and their expectations of themselves equally so. They have met a character named "Godot" who suggested they meet him (as one of them tells the story) on a certain day at a certain time in a certain place.⁽²⁾ They will wait for him for most of the play, and we will wait for him with them. There is little else on the stage to divert our (or their) attention.

Before the play's conclusions, both their expectations and our expectations will be met, although not necessarily in the manner we (or they) expect. Two series of things happen in the course of the first act. The characters talk, they eat, they philosophize, they joke, they struggle with their clothing (boots, hats, pants,

etc.)—they pass the time, doing all the normal everyday things one would expect them to be doing while waiting for something to happen, waiting for this character, with the slightly odd name of Godot, to appear. And in the course of that passage, some other, less everyday, more accidental things occur. Two other characters, Pozzo and Lucky—ebullient with their own internal dramas—happen by, and a great deal of stage time is spent following their relationship, both with each other and with our two attendant protagonists. Finally, a fifth character appears. A boy, presumably an individual who works for Godot, arrives to say that Godot will not come this evening.

Instead of the traditional structure of meaning we expect, in other words, it seems we will observe a different structure, a more “absurdist” drama in which we will learn more about what does not occur than what does, less about the missing arrival than about the energy they (and we) have invested (and continue to expend) in attending it. Godot will turn out—whatever else the name signifies—to be the name attached to their expectations. He said we were to meet him here on this day in this place, one of them notes at some point.[\(3\)](#) We will learn along with the characters in the course of this play what it means to say as much.

Act Two thus opens with a heightened sense of expectation. It begins with a kind of prelude, a poem (or song) that is built upon an internal infinite loop. A transgression leads to a retribution that outdoes the original transgression and then tells the story of that transgression and heightened retribution, and that story includes relating the transgression, the retribution, and the story—*ad infinitum*. The character singing the song—Vladimir—stops for a moment, befuddled, before he continues. Begun as a kind of entertainment, the song assumes in the course of its articulation a more serious weight for its singer as its infinite quality or endlessness progressively dawns on him, a movement that may presage in turn what is about to dawn on us in our experience of the play at large.[\(4\)](#)

And then a curious thing happens. The characters in Act Two—the same as those we saw in Act One—start repeating more or less conversation for conversation, gesture for gesture, all that happened earlier. Again the two lead characters talk, eat, joke, argue, struggle with their clothing, and philosophize. Again they find ways to pass the time. Again Pozzo and Lucky arrive. Some changes have admittedly occurred—between the acts, so to speak. Pozzo is now blind and Lucky is now mute. But by and large, the same drama ensues. Again the boy arrives, again to say that Godot will not come this evening, but surely tomorrow evening. And again Godot does not arrive. Life’s a bitch, it would appear. And then you die.

Or do you? In fact, precisely to the extent that Act One does repeat itself in Act Two, I would suggest that we begin to understand something new, an understanding that

assumes in general terms the form of what Freud identified as the conclusion of an analysis: namely, that this could go on forever. So much in fact is everything that happens in Act Two like what has happened in Act One that we are led to wonder whether what happened the first time was really “the first time” after all, whether, to the contrary, what we presumed to be the “first” time (and what the characters presumed to be the first time) was already in fact a second time, a repeat occurrence of some other previous “first time” now rather mired in obscurity.

And this new insight leads us quickly to another. If Act One was never in fact really “Act One” (but “Act Two” to some previous lost Act One), what gives us confidence that that earlier Act Two was ever really Act Two to begin with? We begin to wonder whether what happened last time was in fact already the *n*th time, a repetition of some “first” time now lost forever in the immemorial past (if in fact there was ever anything like an original event), in a structure that moreover will repeat itself forever, and thus a structure not unlike the poem marking the interval between Act One and Act Two, cited above. Or to put it in still another way, what gives us confidence that what happened “yesterday” happened yesterday and not eons ago, that “Act One” and “Act Two” are connected in some temporal contiguity, and not simply serially lodged as two arbitrary diachronic moments in some larger drama that has been unwittingly repeating itself incessantly?

And the idea of that second repetition, that potentially *n*th repetition, then, in turn and as a consequence, does something unexpected. It curiously confers yet a new meaning upon all they have experienced—perhaps the very meaning they have been awaiting, the meaning of the vague sense of meaninglessness they have been experiencing (and that we have been experiencing along with them) in “Act One” while waiting for meaning to arrive. Or more precisely, what begins to dawn on them (and on us) is that that earlier meaninglessness may in fact have been entirely meaningful although in an entirely unexpected fashion: that we have been dying while waiting for meaning to arrive, when in fact all ever we needed to do is stop. Like Kafka’s “man from the country” who comes before the guard to beg admittance to the Law, what they begin to suspect (and what we begin to suspect) is that all they needed to do, at some point along the way, was, precisely, something else. What has effectively passed them by, while they were waiting for Godot to appear and their lives to begin, has been their lives.[\(5\)](#)

You can already surmise, I suspect, in a conference on the work of Eric Gans, where this analysis regarding events in the immemorial past that turn upon a capacity to stop might be going. But let’s not get ahead of ourselves. This potential—to stop, to give up the procedures under way—is made clear within the play itself as the end of Act Two approaches. “And if we dropped him?” one of the characters muses, and the other quickly retorts, “He’d punish us” (59b). They protect themselves against

exiting with a non-sequitur that may prove more symptomatic of their dilemma than a commentary upon it. Beckett's play in that way is not unlike Sartre's *No Exit*; and this play is in some ways Beckett's version of his contemporary's drama. The characters cannot leave the theater they have created for themselves, even if the door stands wide open for them. The hell in which they are locked, in which they continue to exist even after death, is an inferno of their own making, an inferno they constructed and now are condemned to live out.

On the other hand, by virtue of that lack of freedom, if they cannot leave, we have the capacity to do so. We can leave the theater, we who have after all also freely attended this scene. The whole thrust of Act Two in fact is, I would suggest, upon the potential for freedom, upon what we as audience can do that they cannot, or upon what they can do that the individuals they meet along the road can no longer do. As they say "Let's go" and do not move in the play's final sequence (in a gesture that repeats a series of similar gestures throughout the play), so we are capable of leaving the theater, recognizing in the process that we have had the capability of doing that all along. In some productions I have attended, the final curtain does not in fact fall upon the actors, and the audience is compelled to exit the theater (and the drama it stages) self-consciously, to "walk out" on the actors, so to speak, if only to exercise the capacity to do so.

The idea of this Godot who never arrives continues to fascinate us long after we make our exit. Is there some trick solution to this conundrum that we have missed? we sometimes wonder. If the character they have presumably met never returns, is there a way in which there are some other "secondary" Godots available on the scene for our intellectual employment? What, after all, is the significance of the name? Is it a combination of "Gogo" and "Didi"—Go(go) plus Di(di)—with the second syllable altered to match the first? Does it mean "God" or "small God" containing as it does the English word God within it? If we await Godot, and if Godot will let us know when he arrives where we stand (as one of the characters suggest at one point), then is Godot not something like a minor deity? One of the innovations of a recent production (based, it is said, upon the production Samuel Beckett himself directed) in Sudbury, Massachusetts, was the pronunciation of the word "Godot" which was made to sound like "God-oh" with the accent on the first syllable, perhaps an echo of the appellation "Daddy-oh" that was used in the 1950s in America in the Bohemian language circulating for example in NYC.(6)

Or, to take still another approach, do not each of the characters in some sense play "Godot" for each other? Vladimir for Estragon (and Estragon for Vladimir)? Pozzo for Lucky (and Lucky for Pozzo)? The name "Pozzo" in Italian, which means "well," sounds very much like "pazzo," meaning "crazy." "Lucky" was a name in the fifties in America assigned to a carefree happy-go-lucky guy—an ironic appellation used,

for example, in the naming of a figure of the American Mafioso mythology—Lucky Luciano. Is not “playing Godot” for each other in fact precisely what defines relationship in this play? Does not “Godot” mean in the simplest sense *that which will save us*? Is that not what René Girard has been writing about with regard to mimetic desire in the nineteenth century novel—namely, the way in which the romantic heroes of our most famous novels enchain themselves to others in a manner that a reader of Hegel’s *Phenomenology* would recognize as slave to master, a relation signaled in the quote from Max Scheler that Girard places as a head note to his essay?[\(7\)](#) And so in that sense, Godot has never stopped appearing. What is missing is only something like a transcendental signifier.

None of these characters, of course, are “the” Godot. The vague sense that someone may have said he would meet us here at this place at this time on this day, plus the boy’s daily characterizations, are presented credibly enough. But they are about all we learn regarding the arrangement with Vladimir and Estragon. Perhaps there was a Godot and we (or they) missed him entirely. “Godot,” we gradually begin to realize, may constitute somewhat metaphorically an enigmatic reference to whatever reality gives meaning to their lives and lets them know where they stand. The arrival of Pozzo and Lucky is insufficient to accomplish that task for Vladimir and Estragon, although Pozzo and Lucky have their own sources of meaning—derived from their relationship with each other. The name “Godot” that Vladimir and Estragon recite means little to Pozzo and Lucky. And the boy retains his own Godot—presumably, the same one they await—but by the end of Act One, he has still failed to appear. Godot in short will turn out to be the name attached to an imagined (if not imaginary) individual, a force, an idea—serving as an interlocutor, or conversation partner—from whom in their view they have derived the structure that governs their current predicament.

Our expectations about what constitutes reality in the Platonic-Aristotelian West are based upon a notion of time conceived in a very specific way, and in particular based upon two sets of immutable assumptions: that what has occurred in the past really has already occurred; that what will occur in the future really has not yet occurred (and that once it does occur it will look in retrospect reasonably like the past); and that what occurs in the present really is occurring now somewhere, if not immediately before us, then within a reasonable proximity, and that it is fundamentally distinguishable from past and future. Moreover, that this time or temporality is linked in an important way to death. Time, in the English poet William Wordsworth’s conception of things is often said to be death minus now—and “Intimations of Immortality” is often cited as a primary example. Time in this conception is something like the filler between the two certain realities available to us, our death and the present moment. Time describes the interval between the two, the distance between death and now. “Time equals death minus now” is how I

like to say it.

What if time has stopped for these characters?(8) Then what we imagine to have occurred may or may not have occurred. And what we imagine as yet to happen may or may not happen (what is past may for example not yet have happened, and what is yet to occur may already have occurred). And what if it has stopped because for all intents and purposes they are dead? They imagine a future with a Godot (or God-oh) who will arrive based upon their imagination of a past with a Godot who did arrive and has spoken with them. But what if that formulation only obtains when time is intact, when death remains a “viable” future potential so to speak? The possibility of death ironically offers the possibility of a future.(9) But if that possibility has been abrogated, then the future in which Godot will arrive may never occur, not because there is a future and Godot will not arrive in it (for whatever reason) but because there simply is no future (and is no past). All that remains is the present. Godot has said to them he would arrive. And all things being equal, we have no reason to think he would not have done so, no reason to challenge their account of him or his account to them. But if time itself has stopped, then whatever future drama might have played out has stopped as well. All that remains is the elemental. Cultural constructions of time and space have in effect evaporated.

“Everything’s dead but the tree,” one of the characters observes at some point, and Beckett’s play seems to have worked out in full the literal consequences of that insight.(10) Like Sartre, what Beckett understands, in other words, is that in the shadow of the devastations of the early twentieth century, something else is lost beyond the possibility of a reliance upon liberal humanism. It is death itself that is no longer meaningful, death which is the very foundation of our conception of time, that has gone missing from its customary place in the future. We often identify this period in literary study, after Martin Esslin’s enigmatic phrase, as “Theater of the Absurd.” Sartre, Camus, Anouilh, Genet, Beckett, Artaud, Ionesco—all the writers of the early post-war period in France—share in this one idea, that what is absurd is not death but its absence. As long as we have a way out, as long as we feel there is a future, we may engender meaning—even if it is the anticipation of death.

But what if we take away that anticipation? What if death is no longer an obstacle because it has already occurred? What if time, as we have constituted it in the Aristotelian West, has been an elaborate ruse? Then the only possible recourse is to face what we have been avoiding by means of that excuse, a predicament that at least one postwar French thinker identifies as full responsibility for the other individual, for the neighbor, and by extension for human relations at large.(11)

In other words, what if Vladimir and Estragon are locked in here (wherever “here”

is) forever? We do have the sense that for them it is already too late, that this play has begun after the capacity to get out has expired, that we have understood their freedom relative to Pozzo and Lucky even if they have not. What if we eliminate the object of desire, not because it is no longer desirable, or because it is no longer available, but simply because it is just out of reach forever? What if we find ourselves like the lover on Keats' Grecian urn? What if art has eliminated death from the equation, if it begins with the premise that death has already occurred, and what remains is simply our dying? The world imagined by Kafka in *The Trial* is not far off the mark.

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No doubt you have realized by now what I have been avoiding in this presentation, the screen that I have put up by which I have put off or deferred talking about what I announced as the topic of my inquiry, namely, deferral in the work of Jacques Derrida and Eric Gans. And *Waiting for Godot* is certainly the ideal play for me to hide behind (perhaps not unlike Estragon hiding at one moment behind the tree within it) since what more clearly focused play could we imagine on the topic of deferral? The play is about deferral par excellence. Two characters are instructed to meet a third on a certain day at a certain place and someone arrives to defer that projected meeting endlessly, not to cancel it or render it unnecessary, mind you, but simply to reschedule it, and to do so repeatedly, infinitely, for the foreseeable future, if we are to trust certain intuitions about that deferral. And if we follow the thesis that we put forward about that particular deferral that Beckett has staged for us, we may gain from his analysis insights that can assist us in thinking about our larger and more immediate subject matter.

So let me, for the moment, put aside the deferral that Beckett has described for us—let us defer his deferral so to speak (I promise we will return to it)—and let me return more immediately to the work of these two thinkers of the concept of deferral who are undoubtedly the center of the interest of this conference on the theme of deferral: Jacques Derrida and Eric Gans.

Part Two. Derrida, Gans, and Deferral

You certainly do not need me in this context to point out how similar conceptually are the writings of Derrida and Gans on the topic of language and in particular its function as deferral. Their conjunction has long been noted by numerous commentators (and here I am thinking of the work of Andrew McKenna and more recently Peter Goldman), and of course by Eric Gans himself on numerous occasions.[\(12\)](#) I will not dwell in the present context of course upon the different directions in which they pursue their insights on language, which are in my view

significant, but only upon the assumption on which they are based, and one assumption in particular—the assumption of deferral.

Derrida's work needs little introduction. Derrida begins his work in the nineteen fifties with the work of Husserl and Heidegger. From Heidegger in particular—and especially from the notion of *Destruktion*—Derrida borrows the method of thinking that has become known in France and North America by the household name of *deconstruction*. Deconstruction is in effect, we may say, an analysis of presuppositions. Any project you may conceive in thought involves presuppositions, which is to say, a set of conceptual categories on which it is based and upon which the very possibility of thinking those ideas is based. But those ideas in turn are founded upon presuppositions, and those secondary presuppositions in turn founded upon presupposed categories, and so forth, until, sooner or later, you stumble upon the very conceptual categories or ideas you have undertaken this project initially to investigate, conceptual categories or presuppositions moreover whose meaning is in fact already entirely determined.

The very possibility of a philosophic project, in other words, is based upon a prior impossibility, and all such projects are foreclosed in advance by this metaphysical circularity of its conceptualization. But such circularity, Derrida is quick to point out (and here he is very much a student of Heidegger), is not a mistake or error of the system. It is not some kind of flaw that we introduce when we use the system badly or improperly. But rather it *is* the system. It is an example of the system working in its very capacity to do its job. It is a feature of the system that is “built-in,” so to speak, endemic to its very construction, to the very possibility of thinking at all, the very possibility, that is to say, of a philosophic project.

Thus, for example, Derrida comes to analyze the speech-centeredness of philosophic discourse, an onto-theology (using Heidegger's word) which derives from Platonism and Platonic reasoning or decision-making and which involves the determination of being as presence, a speech-centeredness or “logocentrism” which Derrida tells us is also a “phallo-centrism” and which has characterized the history of Platonism since its inception. And this logo-centric and onto-theological discourse constructs a hierarchical relationship to other conceptual possibilities in which it is embedded, to writing, for example, which it conceptualizes as secondary or supplementary to speech. But it turns out that this gesture of rendering secondary or supplementary or marginal the act of writing in relation to the act of speaking may be misleading, and that the formulation which views speech as primary and writing as secondary may suppress a more fundamental relation of writing to speech in which such writing (or *écriture*) is in fact constitutive of speech. Borrowing our language from Nietzsche (who famously says that truth is the fiction which governs), or from Plato (who shows that truth is the mimesis that wins, that

gets to call itself truth and everything else mimesis), we may say speech is the writing that wins, that gets to call itself speech and everything else writing.⁽¹³⁾ Writing is not secondary or auxiliary to speech, according to Derrida. Writing *is* speech. Speech is simply the name that such writing takes on when it assumes a dominant position and identifies itself as primary and everything else as secondary. Writing veritably precedes speech for Derrida. “Writing precedes speech” might seem at first glance an odd and unlikely slogan for this deconstructive insight (echoing somewhat obliquely, as it does, the existentialist credo that “existence precedes essence”). But that insight turns out in fact in Derrida’s view to contain in germ form the very foundation of the philosophic project, a foundation in which *l’écriture* (whether conceived as “handwriting”, or “text”, or “scripture”) enables or conditions its very possibility, not of course in the sense of the material manifestations of such writing, but nonetheless as its signature, its script, its holy writ. Writing, to use Saussure’s language, may be said to function as *langue* or the differential system in the way that logo-centric philosophic discourse functions as *parole*, which is to say as its execution and manifestation.

The reference to Saussure of course is not accidental, and Derrida has also long been critical of what he takes to be Saussure’s own unthinking subordination of writing to speech. Even if Derrida utilizes Saussure’s ideas at every turn—and Derrida’s conception of language as a system of differences, or language as a system of signs that are a system of differences remains foundational for him—he is still willing to criticize this inventor of “semiology” for failing to assess his own participation in the traditional logo-centric subordination of writing to speech. And such formulations, Derrida argues, formulations that are profoundly useful and enlightening in one context (language as a system of pure differences) and just as profoundly conventional and limiting in another (writing as secondary to speech) are not able to be assessed finally as either positive or negative. The issue of whether one is really dominant and the other really secondary is simply undecidable. No trans-contextual determination can be made about it, since in one instance we are dealing with one perspective (the way a formulation is innovative for example and opens new possibilities) and in another instance with a different perspective (another way in which that same perspective shuts down or forecloses those very possibilities).

And no activity of Derrida’s is more common. Derrida moves from system to system, from philosophic project to philosophic project, bringing his deconstructive analysis to bear, not unlike a kind of intellectual handyman or *bricoleur* (in contrast to an engineer who always proceeds with a defined plan or script or blueprint in mind), and just as Claude Lévi-Strauss has defined such *bricolage* as the very mindset of cultural thinking as such, adapting itself to whatever empirical circumstances in which it finds itself by discovering its intellectual categories to be

prior to those empirical determinations, even though Derrida by the same turn takes Lévi-Strauss to task for precisely his deployment of such methodology elsewhere.

Philosophic discourse proceeds by way of decision-making. Decision-making proceeds by way of language. Language can be conceptualized as a system of differences. But how do those differences themselves get produced? we may wonder. What produces the system of differences upon which for Derrida so much in culture and language depend?

Here, for example, is Derrida on the notion of *différance*. Although it is customary to pronounce this word, this Derridean neo-logism, as “difference with an a,” I will pronounce it for our purposes as if it were the made-up word “deferrance.”

First, *différance* [difference with an *a*] refers to the (active and passive) movement that consists in deferring by means of delay, delegation, reprieve, referral, detour, postponement, reserving. . . . Second, the movement of *différance*, as that which produces different things, that which differentiates, is the common root of all oppositional concepts that mark our language, such as, to take only a few examples, sensible/intelligent, intuition/signification, nature/culture, etc. . . . Third, *différance* is also the production, if it can still be put this way, of these differences, of the “diacriticity” that the linguistics generated by Saussure, and all the structural sciences modeled upon it, have recalled is the condition for any signification and any structure.[\(14\)](#)

And then Derrida concludes:

From this point of view, the concept of *différance* is neither simply structuralist, nor simply geneticist, such an alternative itself being an ‘effect’ of *différance*.[\(15\)](#)

In other words, “*différance*” for Derrida, difference with an *a*, is “the production of differences,” the production of the system of differences, the spacing in time and in space, the postponement, or deferral, of the object. Difference, Benveniste tells us, in his study of Indo-European words, which comes from the word differ (from the Latin *fero* “to carry” and *dis-* “away from”) means “to carry or bear away from the sacrificial altar,” to generate a separation or boundary between two otherwise continuous entities.

Derrida notes that that *difference* is primary.

Nothing, no present and in-*different* being thus precedes *différance* and spacing. There is no subject who is agent, author, and master of *différance*, who eventually and empirically would be overtaken by *différance*. Subjectivity—like objectivity—is an effect of *différance*, an effect inscribed in a system of *différance*. This is why the a of *différance* also recalls that spacing is temporization, the detour and postponement by means of which intuition, perception, consummation—in a word, the relationship to the present, the reference to a present reality, to a being—are always deferred. Deferred by virtue of the very principle of difference which holds that an element functions and signifies, takes on or conveys meaning, only by referring to another past or future element in an economy of traces.[\(16\)](#)

All of which is to say that deferral clearly plays for Derrida a critical role in his thinking and in that regard Derrida departs from Saussure, for whom no such role is indicated.

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Consider, now, the writing of Eric Gans on the same topic, the topic of deferral. The “originary hypothesis” that Eric Gans has put forth in so many books, journal articles, and internet columns (starting with *The Origin of Language* in 1981), is that at the origin of culture, “the deferral of violence takes place through representation,” which is to say, in his view, through language or sign use. Gans’s goal is to provide an account of the origin of culture in the origin of language. He sees language-use rather than victimization as the origin, and in this way distinguishes his view from that of his teacher, René Girard. “If generative anthropology has a role to play,” Gans writes, “in allowing us to transcend self-righteousness toward the ultimate horizon of mutual understanding, it is in showing us that society is not founded on victimization but on language and the deferral of violence.”[\(17\)](#) “The originary hypothesis explains language and culture in general as primarily motivated by the need to defer the violent consequences of mimetic desire.”[\(18\)](#)

The origin, in other words, for Gans, is also a scene of deferral. Gans shares with René Girard the idea that the context in which all of this takes place is one of mimetic desire. We desire imitatively and learn to appropriate the desires of others at a very early age, and this learning for Gans takes place at the proto-hominid level. But unlike Girard, who regards the sacrificial mechanism as the management

system of runaway appropriation, Gans sees the decisive event in human history at the level of desire itself, as the attempted appropriation of the attractive object of desire that “gets stuck” in the middle, so to speak, and the genesis (in that gesture of the aborted reaching for the object of desire) of the linguistic sign, of designation, of representation. Violence is thus averted, in Gans’ schema, deflected, deferred, by the process in which individuals in a community give up or abort their claim on the general object of desire, and their reach for it and its cessation becomes in effect the first sign. Rather than imitate their models, these proto-humans, Gans makes clear in later essays, imitate in effect their object.

Now, let us put aside for the moment the complications of comparing two such intricate theoretical models, let alone whether the claims that they make are accurate historically, and what it means to make that assertion. In fact, let us proceed, for the sake of the present argument, and on the present occasion, as if they are entirely accurate, as if they are completely true, and as if such truth-claims are not problematic. Both theorists make their arguments on the basis of a notion or set of notions that I would like to argue is itself supremely questionable, a theoretical foundation that may be incapable in short of sustaining the weight they place upon it, and one that may indeed challenge the very purpose to which it is put.

In a nutshell, the question I want to raise concerns time or temporality. Does not the idea of “deferral” presuppose Aristotelian time as we know it and have defined it above? Does it not presuppose a past, a present, and a future defined differentially and understood conceptually as we have discussed it in context of Samuel Beckett’s play, namely, in a certain meaningful relation to death? And does it not do so in either case—whether we are talking about the first primates to have emerged successfully from the difficulties of food gathering in the savannahs of Tanzania in the obscure history of hominization, or the structures of difference production at work in the thinking that has come down to us from Greek, Roman, and Germanic cultural practices of two thousand years ago, and whether we are talking specifically about the work of Eric Gans or the work of Jacques Derrida? Does it not rely already upon a certain understanding of spacing and of temporalization which it is, in part at least, the very purpose of both the work of Gans and the work of Derrida to examine?

And does not Beckett’s play, *Waiting for Godot*, raise such a question at its core? Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot*, it seems to me, has a great deal to tell us about such ideas. Does it not imagine a world in which time has stopped, and in which continuing to think that it has not stopped, that Godot will arrive at some point in the future, is itself the linchpin that locks them into their current predicament, which is to say, within a prison house or “lock down” in which they find themselves

and to which the audience alone is not subject since they are not “tied” and can get up and leave the theater?

What’s wrong with clock time? we may be tempted to ask. And the short answer is: nothing. Clock time provided a theoretical support for the rationalistic perspective that emerged in Miletus and other city-states in Greece in the ancient sixth century and that in the fourth and third century with the appeal of Aristotelian formalism and Platonic idealism in effect took over what was to become Western thinking. It is the model for our very Western conceptions of science and knowledge insofar as that knowledge derives from Plato and Aristotle.

But it is not universal. There are cultures in the world in which it is not dominant—in some Asian cultures, for example, or some cultures anthropologists identify as archaic. And even within our own culture there are moments in which it fails us: moments of trauma, for example, in which all of our perceptions of both time and space are conditioned by the black box event that has inaugurated such repetitions; or moments of religious fervor, in which the shattering supernatural event that breaks the hard core of our world leaves us similarly in a time and space of witness.

But we are getting ahead of ourselves again, So let us turn—or return—in the final section of our paper, to Beckett’s play in order to take up this question.

Part Three. Death, Time, and Disaster.

Here is the opening paragraph of Maurice Blanchot’s book, *The Writing of the Disaster*.

The disaster ruins everything, all the while leaving everything intact. It does not touch anyone in particular; “I” am not threatened by it, but spared, left aside. It is in this way that I am threatened; it is in this way that the disaster threatens in me that which is exterior to me—an other than I who passively become other. There is no reaching the disaster. Out of reach is he whom it threatens, whether from afar or close up, it is impossible to say: the infiniteness of the threat has in some way broken every limit. We are on the edge of disaster without being able to situate it in the future: it is rather always already past, and yet we are on the edge or under the threat, all formulations which would imply the future—that which is yet to come—if the disaster were not that which does not come, that which has put a stop to every arrival. To think the disaster (if this is possible, and it is not possible inasmuch as we suspect that the disaster is thought) is to have no longer any future in which to think it.[\(19\)](#)

“To have no longer any future in which to think it.” Is that not the heart of Beckett’s play? Why has Beckett done what he has done? Why has Beckett written a play like *Waiting for Godot*? Putting aside personal motivations (whether his or ours), can we not ask whether his play is not a reflection upon disaster (even, in a minimalist way, an enacting of that disaster) from which Europe (and especially French culture) has only recently emerged? Blanchot’s essay on “Literature and the Right to Death” in 1949 and his essay on “The Writing of the Disaster” in 1980 (from which the above quotation comes) would seem in many ways the theory of which Beckett’s play is the dramatization. What would it look like to act differently from the way in which Beckett’s characters act? And what are we to do in its wake?

Beckett does not offer us an answer. His goal as he perceives it is only to pose the relevant questions, a little more forcefully perhaps than others have done, and in ways that implicate us a bit more. On the other hand, there is in fact, on the horizon, a philosophic thinker who articulates some alternative conceptualizations. When asked about the subject of his current projects, in one of his last published interviews, Emmanuel Levinas is said to have described his project as “The deformalization of the notion of time.”[\(20\)](#) A time, that is to say, he further elaborated, in which past is modeled on creation, the present on revelation, and the future on redemption (and not the reverse). A time thus imagined in the manner of Franz Rosenzweig in *The Star of Redemption* (233). A time that gives up the notion of language as representation for a more radical understanding of language as diachrony, and of speaking in general as the said (or *le dit*) for a notion of speaking in general as the “to say” (or *le dire*).[\(21\)](#)

He might also have spoken—and others have certainly done so—of the time of trauma, of the black box which bequeaths to us, in defiance of all reason, an endless repetition of circumstances we experienced and yet to which in a very real way we were not witness. The religious or biblical dimensions of the shattering of the world that occurs in discussions of revelation about which Biblical studies scholar speak, the traumatic understandings of time of which psychoanalytic practitioners speak—these are alternative ways of thinking about time and temporality to our traditional Western modes of understanding. And they are not the only ones. And their very existence affirms that our customary temporal formulations are not universal or free of historicity and may one day seem to us in their claims for universality as quaint as yesterday’s news.

Beckett, in other words, may be doing what he is doing, among other reasons, in concert with the postwar context in which he writes. And if that is the case, then, for us to continue to utilize our conventional ideas, to deny their reliance upon pre-disastrous conditions, in short, to defer the disaster, is, ironically, to enact and reflect it. On the other hand, what if we began to think differently? To give up not

just (or not even) the idea of deferral but the entire schema on which it is based?

* * * * *

Eric Gans understands fully that in the world in which we live—in the shadow of the Shoah and the victimary discourse it inaugurated—our view of deferral must change. “That the Holocaust was carried out without deferral,” Eric Gans writes, “with no weapon or force held in reserve, and at the same time gratuitously, even to the detriment of the German war effort, defines it as the extreme point of human violence independently of any ‘objective’ measure of the violence that occurred before or since.”[\(22\)](#) Gans’s reflections on Judaism and anti-Semitism offer us, I would argue, a way of re-conceiving of his own project, of generative anthropology, in terms that address the questions that Beckett’s play raises.[\(23\)](#)

What Eric Gans has done, in other words, I suggest, is conceive of a specifically Jewish theory of cultural and linguistic origins, a theory of creation based upon the Sabbath, upon *shabbat*, upon stopping or resting or ceasing, upon the gesture, that in Judaism creates the world.

Thus were finished the heavens and the earth, with all of their array.

God had finished, on the seventh day, his work that he had made, and then he ceased, on the seventh day, from all his work that he had made.

God gave the seventh day his blessing, and he hallowed it, for on it he ceased from all his work, that by creating, God had made.

These are the begettings of the heavens and the earth: their being created (2:1-2:4).[\(24\)](#)

Stopping creates the world in Genesis. Stopping, ceasing, resting, is imagined by the Rabbis as the condition of possibility of creation (and it is for that reason that the Rabbis customarily celebrate the Sabbath as “the birthday of the world”). The world, the Rabbis say, is not created on the first day but on the seventh, on the day of rest, the day of not-doing or of withdrawing, on the day of the gesture by means of which the possibility of contemplating what has taken place is opened and made viable.

What Eric Gans has done in a sense is elaborate that insight anthropologically. He has built an extensive and detailed midrash that allows us to translate Biblical language into the language of anthropology. What would it look like to imagine the

genesis of the world, the genesis of culture or of language, on the basis of stopping? he asks in effect. And since the gesture of creation as conceived by the Rabbis is only an opening gesture—the process of creation is an ongoing one and we are partners with God, the Rabbis say, in that creative process—so the language of deferral is built into it. The process of creation has begun. The revelation of that process of creation is underway. And the completion of that process of the revelation of creation, which is to say, the moment of redemption, will take place strictly in the world to come.

Deferral in the work of Eric Gans, I would suggest, needs to be reconceived, not as a matter of conventional Aristotelian time, but as a matter of Rosenzweigian time, as a matter of the time of creation, revelation, and redemption. Or as a matter of Beckettian time. There is no future in which Godot will arrive and we will be saved, Beckett's play teaches us, and so long as we continue to believe that there is, we will remain like Vladimir and Estragon, speaking of going but never going, imagining the possibility of not being "tied" and of dropping Godot, but never enacting that possibility. Or, in the worst-case scenario, we will render ourselves (and as a consequence of the violence we will commit against ourselves and others) like Pozzo and Lucky, "Crazy" and "Lucky" by name, and dramatic and exotic and interesting in the first instance, but in reality finally blind, deaf, and mute.

* * * * *

Two different perspectives, difference and deference. On the one side, decision-making, distinctions, the general inheritance of Plato and Platonism, de-sacralization, demystification, iconoclasm, but also bickering, "differences" in the pugnacious sense, fighting, even violence. And on the other side, a less iconoclastic view, a respect for the sacred, for sacrificial thinking, for deferential behavior to authority, for commitment to not changing. Two distinct attitudes, two distinct approaches, both participating in the deferral that presumes traditional temporality—endorsement of the sacred as deference, and rebellion against the sacred as difference—these two remain our condition. Two attitudes regarding modernity, two attitudes reflecting modernity. Both deferrals of, rather than a deferring to, I would argue, finally, an ethical conceived as the foundation of responsibility rather than its consequence.

What Samuel Beckett's work stages for us finally, I would submit, is our failure, our inability to free ourselves from the endless repetitions in which we find ourselves, repetitions which have no doubt acted effectively as a smoke screen, as a protection (to put it in the most kindly fashion) against the violence in which we repeatedly find ourselves caught and by which we find ourselves condemned, as a screen against the smoke of the fires of the Holocaust in Europe or the bombings in

Hiroshima and Nagasaki (and not to mention other disasters of the recent past or an incipient future), but also as screens on which we readily construct our own egoistic images, images in which we obscure our utter vulnerability behind imagined scenes of virility and strength. What Beckett asks us to consider, is whether in repeating ourselves in this fashion we blind ourselves and make ourselves deaf and mute (not unlike like Pozzo and Lucky in Act Two of his play) to the consequences of such behavior, to the no-man's land in which we continue to live, to the state of post disaster in which no deferrals of any kind will serve us, and in which the only cogito worthy of consideration, the only creed capable of assuring us that we exist, is not "I think; therefore, I am" or even "I suffer; therefore, I am" (as Vladimir and Estragon seem respectively to maintain) but "I died; therefore, I am" ("Je suis mort; donc, je suis"). "Everything's dead but the tree," one of the two remarks, and Vladimir's observation appears to be Beckett's pronouncement upon this scene. The tree alone appears capable of new life.

And the means of doing so, of keeping ourselves trapped, would appear to be the notion of time itself, a notion that seems to have little relation to time of trauma or the time of religious fervor and revelatory sensibilities that might in fact free us, that might enable us to leave the theater in which we seem content (if not compelled) to remain. If the work of René Girard on the danger of the sacrificial structures in which we continue to live, or the work of Maurice Blanchot on our posthumous (as opposed to our postmodern) condition, or the work of Emmanuel Levinas on our infinite responsibilities for the other individual, or the work of Eric Gans on the importance of Judaism as a thought of stopping, or cessation, or the taking of a *shabbat* in the face of violence as a means of creating the world speak to us today more powerfully than ever, it is perhaps an available witness that the structures of compulsive repetition are capable of failure themselves, and that hopefulness, even the hopefulness that obtains in the face of utter devastation and destruction, remains a distinct possibility, one to which we might really effectively defer.

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Notes

1. Samuel Beckett. *Waiting for Godot. A Tragicomedy in Two Acts*. Translated from the original French text by the author (1954). [\(back\)](#)

2. Page 10a. In the Grove Press edition, pages on which the play is printed are numbered at the bottom of the left hand page only. Accordingly, I have numbered references on the left side of the page 10a and those on the right 10b. [\(back\)](#)

3. Cf. "Vladimir: We're waiting for Godot. Estragon: (*despairingly*). Ah! (*Pause.*) You're sure it was here? Vladimir: What? Estragon: That we were to wait. Vladimir: He said by the tree. (*They look at the tree.*) Do you see any others?" (10a). And then later: "Estragon: You're sure it was this evening? Vladimir: What? Estragon: That we were to wait. Vladimir: He said Saturday." [\(back\)](#)

4. Here is the song that open Act Two. "Vladimir: A dog came in the kitchen / And stole a crust of bread. / Then cook up with a ladle / And beat him till he was dead. / Then all the dogs came running / And dug the dog a tomb- / *He stops, broods, resumes:* / Then all the dogs came running / And dug the dog a tomb / And wrote upon the tombstone / For the eyes of dogs to come: / A dog came in the kitchen / And stole a crust of bread. / Then cook up with a ladle / And beat him till he was dead. / Then all the dogs came running / And dug the dog a tomb- / *He stops, broods, resumes:* / Then all the dogs came running / And dug the dog a tomb- / *He stops, broods. Softly.* And dug the dog a tomb . . ." [37a-b]. [\(back\)](#)

5. Franz Kafka, *The Complete Stories* (1995). [\(back\)](#)

6. The Sudbury production is cited on the internet. [\(back\)](#)

7. René Girard's *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel* (1976) originally appeared in France in 1961. For Hegel's work, see *The Phenomenology of Spirit* (1977) and especially the reading of chapter four by Alexander Kojève in his influential *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel* (1969), "In Place of an Introduction", 3-30. [\(back\)](#)

8. "Pozzo: But I must really be getting along, if I am to observe my schedule. Vladimir: Time has stopped [24b]." [\(back\)](#)

9. What is absurd for Blanchot is not the appearance of death in the face of life (which is in fact the guarantor of meaning) but its absence. "Death alone allows me to grasp what I want to attain", Blanchot writes. "[I]t exists in words as the only way they can have meaning. Without death, everything would sink into absurdity and nothingness." See "Literature and the Right to Death," 324. Cf. also Adorno's remark on "the annihilation of death": "In the camps, death has a novel horror;

since Auschwitz, fearing death means fearing worse than death.” See Theodor Adorno, *Negative Dialectics* (1987), 371. Adorno’s remark is cited by Fackenheim and others as the very foundation for “planet Auschwitz.” [\(back\)](#)

10. Estragon: And if we dropped him? (*Pause.*) If we dropped him? Vladimir: He’d punish us. (*Silence. He looks at the tree.*) Everything’s dead but the tree. Estragon: (*looking at the tree*). What is it? Vladimir: It’s the tree. Estragon: Yes, but what kind? Vladimir: I don’t know. A willow. (*Estragon draws Vladimir towards the tree. They stand motionless before it. Silence.*). [59b] [\(back\)](#)

11. The thinker is Emmanuel Levinas. And in fact, in Levinas’s terms even “full” is a misnomer. Our responsibility for the other individual for Levinas is unlimited or infinite, full being a reference to totality or the all, whose dangers it is one of the purposes of his thinking to expose. [\(back\)](#)

12. See for example McKenna 1992, Goldman 2012, and Gans, *Chronicles* 1995. [\(back\)](#)

13. I have alluded to these movements elsewhere. See my *Sacrificing Commentary* (1996). [\(back\)](#)

14. Jacques Derrida, *Positions*. Tr. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), 8-9. [\(back\)](#)

15. Derrida 1981, 9. [\(back\)](#)

16. Derrida 1981, 28-29. [\(back\)](#)

17. “Self Righteousness,” #30, Saturday, February 17, 1996. [\(back\)](#)

18. “Male Generation,” #33, Saturday March 9, 1996. [\(back\)](#)

19. Maurice Blanchot, *The Writing of the Disaster* (1980), 1. [\(back\)](#)

20. Emmanuel Levinas, *Entre Nous* (1998), 232. [\(back\)](#)

21. Levinas, “Diachrony and Representation,” in *Entre Nous*, 159-177. [\(back\)](#)

22. Eric Gans, “GA in the Public Sphere,” *Chronicles of Love and Resentment* #335, Saturday May 20, 2006. [\(back\)](#)

23. It is interesting to me that in his book project with Adam Katz (*The First Shall Be the Last: Rethinking Antisemitism*), Gans may be doing just that, reassessing his theory along specifically Jewish lines. [\(back\)](#)

24. Everett Fox, *The Five Books of Moses: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy*. The Schocken Bible, Volume 1 (2000), 17. [\(back\)](#)