

# Deferral, Discipline, and the Esthetics of Failure: Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*

Ken Mayers

World Languages Department  
Bergen County Academies  
200 Hackensack Avenue  
Hackensack, NJ 07601  
[kenmay@bergen.org](mailto:kenmay@bergen.org)

The most profound irony of postmodernity is the paradox inherent in the historical movement beyond the new. But the experiential realization of such paradoxes is precisely what we have called the esthetic. The postmodern transcendence of modern panestheticism is the estheticization of our very experience of time.  
Eric Gans (1993, 206).

I would like to consider Samuel Beckett's play, *Waiting for Godot*, in light of the 2014 GASC's themes of deferral, discipline, and knowledge. I think it will be interesting to explore waiting as a mode of deferral which involves particular forms of discipline. As a guiding framework for this discussion, I am going to revisit Eric Gans' paper, "Beckett and the Problem of Modern Culture." There, Gans considers (among many other things) Beckett's "esthetics of failure." He makes it clear in the paper that Beckett's esthetics was not only pertinent to the post-war epoch, but also continued to be so in 1981. In revisiting Gans's analysis, I would like to re-examine the play and its esthetics (considered as a form of knowledge) in order to begin to re-situate the discussion within a contemporary cultural, historical, and of course theoretical context.

The classic point of departure for discussions of the play is the title, "En attendant Godot," or *Waiting for Godot*. Like most attentive and literate hermeneuts, Gans brings us back to the French title, emphasizing that "En attendant Godot" is "not so much 'waiting for Godot' as 'while waiting for Godot.'" The 'action', such as it is, [Gans points out here], takes place in an interval of waiting for something else. The

primary dramatic action is thus the waiting itself.” (1982, 4).

I would like to pause here and consider a few things. Gans has begun to lay out the unusual situation presented by the play. There are a few more elements for us to attend to, but I would first like to note that either one of the twin titles constitutes a remarkable announcement that, already, before the play, sets up a particular form of dramatic irony that we might call postmodern. There is a hint of this in the fact that the audience can know, before the play begins, that its primary action will be the waiting itself. This dramatic irony is something for us to get back to.

I also think that the twin titles themselves bear a little further reflection. Furthermore, I would say that reading this play seriously, especially in the context of this discussion, will require us to take both the French and the English texts carefully into account. That said, I do agree with Gans that the French text has a certain priority, and this is not just chronological. The intercultural and intertextual dynamics of the two plays, with their slight permutations and subtle nuances of tone, are especially interesting given the post-nationalist angle of Beckett’s early form of postmodern drama.

Gans takes his initial framework for approaching the play from a theoretical justification for Beckett’s “lucidly paradoxical refusal of greatness.” (1982, 3) I say “a theoretical justification” because the conclusion of Gans’ article makes it clear that Beckett’s play represents a step further beyond the paradox; this implies that the esthetics of the play cannot be fully accounted for by the conceptualization that may have guided Beckett as a point of departure. At the outset, Gans argues that “we must take seriously [Beckett’s] description of Bram Van Velde as an exemplary modern artist: ‘Van Velde . . . is the first to admit that to be an artist is to fail, as no other dare fail, that failure is his world and the shrink from it desertion, art and craft, good housekeeping’” (1982, 3). Failure thus constitutes “a new criterion of authenticity,” even (paradoxically) a “new form of success.” For the serious artist, this new status of failure is not just an option: “the artist’s failure to express, as an expressive act, even if only of itself, of its impossibility” is also an *obligation* (1982, 3).

Given both the paradox and its obligation, Gans discerns a two-level structure in the play. On the one hand, he notes, “we should avoid approaching this play in the first place as a success in doing what it does . . . what should interest us is what does not happen, what fails to happen . . . because the author . . . fails to make it happen” (1982, 4). This is the level on which Beckett “fails to express.” This is the problem that the artist cannot solve, in part because he must also take on the “‘meta-problem’ that he solves as a result of failing on the first level—the meta-problem, that is, of expressing his failure to express” (1982, 4).

In the play, the first level is the primary action of the waiting itself. Gans argues that this waiting “fails to express itself in the concrete action of the play.” In other words, what the characters actually do “is not waiting but something else” (1982, 4). Gans sums up this situation: “the very choice of ‘waiting’ as dramatic action condemns the author to failure” at the first level. However, it also sets up the solution to the meta-problem: “this is a failure that can be perfectly well expressed in its own right, since everything that happens, or can possibly happen, expresses it” (1982, 4).

Gans will already have indicated at this point in the paper that, if level one is announced in the title by its [present participle] of “waiting,” level two is also already opened up by the name of Godot. The dramatic irony, in other words, also involves the level of the meta-problem. Before the play, the audience knows that Godot will not arrive since, as Gans puts it: “his absence is the *sine qua non* of successful waiting” (1982, 4). As Gans unpacks the structure that will enable this success, he also makes it clear that the audience can not only be aware of the waiting and of Godot’s role before the play, but they can also anticipate this particular form of success (the author’s expressing his failure to express)—unlike the characters in the play, but like the author (and the actors). This postmodern dramatic irony plays out in contrast to models of popular culture, which succeed at a different, and less significant level. As Gans puts it: “in these works, of course, Godot always arrives” (1982, 4).

Instead, in this play, the absent Godot “plays a transcendent role with respect to the scene” (1982, 6). Gans asserts that “this is precisely the role of the sacred in Judaeo-Christian society: God never makes himself present, but belief in his presence offstage allows for worldly activity to go on while waiting for his return” (1982, 6). I do not agree that the roles are *precisely* the same, but before explaining why, I would first like to lay out Gans’s analysis of Godot’s place within the dramatic structure of the play.

Gans compares this structure to the structure found in tragedies or comedies where the author presents us with characters on stage who effectively imitate actions. These characters are the presumed or potential masters of their situation; “whether kings or commoners,” Gans writes, “they seek to dominate their universe”—and, I would add, they seek to do this by *acting*. Their failure, in the case of tragedy, Gans explains, “is the sign of a higher mastery of their world from without, a mastery with which the hidden author is identified” (1982, 5). Gans makes the interesting observation that the spectators’ primary identification is with the author (and not the hero), and it is the dual identification with both the hero and the author that actually enables catharsis in the Aristotelian sense. He spells this out in the paper: “The spectators are said to identify with the hero in his tragic or comic fall, but their

primary identification is with the author, who, like them, witnesses and judges the hero's actions from offstage. The identification with the hero is what is, in Aristotle's term, 'purged'; but this is only possible because the spectators identify not only with the hero but with the author as agent of purgation. It is in Sophocles', not Oedipus', hands that we place ourselves in our search for esthetic *catharsis*" (1982, 5).

Here I would like to point out the importance of dramatic irony, both in the tragic situation described by Gans, as well as in the very different, if somewhat analogous situation we find in *Waiting for Godot*. On the one hand, as Gans points out, "The end . . . is only a matter of time." In both cases, this is something "the spectator well knows, whose evening in the theater is sandwiched between other worldly activities like eating dinner and undressing for bed. Whatever the nature of the action on stage, its ultimate effect is to take up the time required to bring about a conclusion determined in advance by the dramatist" (1982, 5). The situation in Beckett's play shows, Gans writes, that "this extra-dramatic conclusion is in effect always of a higher level of necessity than any dramatic activity," that "the dramatist's apparently superior understanding . . . really only reflects an *a priori* structural necessity" (1982, 5).

Gans further emphasizes the contrast between the dramatic action in a tragedy or a comedy and *Waiting for Godot*: "even if the dramatic hero may be said to 'await' his fate, surely there is a difference between his awaiting something that will of necessity take place and Beckett's heroes' awaiting a character who never arrives. Precisely. The 'fate' of the hero within the play is in reality decided outside the play by the dramatist. . . . Godot personifies this process" (1982, 6).

This phrase, "Godot personifies this process" merits some unpacking. Unlike, for example, the god Apollo, the presumption of whose presence offstage would effectively guarantee and determine the action onstage, and provide a transcendental grounding for the author's mastery of the significance of the drama, Godot personifies a process in which Beckett's more humble yet realistic characters cannot act, but must be content to wait—and, as Gans puts it, "they ensure in effect that Godot will never come." From this perspective there is a certain felicity built into the English title, "Waiting for Godot." In a manner somewhat analogous to the ambiguity of subjective and objective genitives, the preposition "for" articulates two slightly different situations. Primarily, one understands "Waiting for Godot" to be a matter of remaining in the place designated by Godot until such time as he arrives. However, there is also a slight hint, as Gans has just indicated, that this can also be understood to mean waiting in Godot's place, to do his waiting for him. Unlike a transcendental signifier that enables a structure of presence, intentionality, and action, Godot is a spectral signifier personifying a process where he not only does

not fully serve as a transcendental ground for presence, but whose very absence is not a simply independent function. Furthermore, all of this is already implied for the spectators in the dramatic irony announced by the title before the play.

Gans follows Beckett's cue in establishing the literary context for the play in terms of an anti-modernist response to high modernism as exemplified by the works of Joyce, Proust, and Mallarmé. "Beckett has qualified [the] enterprise of [high culture], with especial reference to James Joyce, as that of 'mastery.' Joyce was a master, he has said; I no longer claim to be one" (1982, 5). Later in the paper, Gans identifies some historical justifications for criticizing a modernist culture of mastery. Looking at the recent past, Gans writes: "modernity exhibits the most arrogantly determined efforts at mastery of man's material and social, not to say psychological limitations" (1982, 9). Turning to an apocalyptic perspective on the future, Gans adds: "Only in a 'hyper-modern' era—defined by the possibility of human self-annihilation that seems to be figured in the later plays "Endgame" and "Happy Days"—is a resolutely anti-modern culture possible" (1982, 10). In between these two glimpses of the historical context, Gans will have concluded: "What Beckett's esthetic denounces in the past is in fact nothing but its 'modernity,' its faith in historical solutions" (1982, 10).

This is an important distinction. Where, as someone like Hannah Arendt might point out, the movement of modern art is generally motivated by the rebellion of the artist against society (and its philistine culture), Beckett is taking this a step further, contesting the culture of mastery itself at a more fundamental level. In other words, Beckett's artistic revolt is more along the lines of what Camus would call a "metaphysical revolt." It will be important to bear in mind that there may be distinctions to be made between Beckett's dogmatic formulation of an esthetics of failure and the esthetics we actually find operating in *Waiting for Godot*. Nevertheless, since artistic mastery or literary mastery is, at least according to Gans, "the supreme value of 'culture,' we have now come face to face with the central problem of modern culture" (1982, 10). This problem, and its wider context, is developed to a remarkable extent by the interactions of the characters on stage in *Waiting for Godot*. Before turning to Gans' analysis of what occurs in the play, however, I would like, for a moment, to re-consider the literary context from a theatrical perspective.

In other words, rather than contrast Beckett's projects with those of a novelist like Joyce, let us situate the play with respect to the more or less contemporary dramatic works of authors like Anouilh, Sartre, and Ionesco. Here, too, we have artists staging critical perspectives on their society. Considering these works in an admittedly cursory fashion, they appear to fall into two groups. On the one hand, plays like "No Exit" by Sartre or "Antigone" by Anouilh appear to be modernist

works characterized by an esthetics of artistic mastery, albeit ironic. Anouilh's "Antigone," although it is reshaped by the author's adaptation of the play, as well as the social context of its original performance, nevertheless offers clear parallels to Greek tragedies and strong contrasts to the structure which would preclude tragic action in *Waiting for Godot* as we have analyzed it. The action in "No Exit" may be relatively trivial and perhaps inconclusive; it nevertheless proceeds according to a structure which is still determined, again even if ironically, by the mechanisms of the author's culture of dramatic mastery.

On the other hand, if the structure of Ionesco's "Rhinoceros" could also be described in similar terms, "The Bald Soprano" seems to follow, rather neatly, Beckett's esthetics of failure, and at both levels. The absurd circularity of insignificant dialogue and inconsequential activities corresponds to a failure to express. The author's expression of failure in this play operates less at the level of the framework for the impossibility of action and more at the level of the framework for the language itself. One might argue, in fact, that "The Bald Soprano" could be taken as a purer manifestation of Beckett's esthetics of failure, if more ironic, less paradoxical, and also without the touch of pathos to be found in *Waiting for Godot*. Unlike the spectral signifier, Godot, the transcendental signifier that would enable Ionesco to generate the dialogue of the play and motivate the minimal significations of its absurdity seems utterly indifferent. Ionesco's purer implementation of an aesthetics of failure involves a more radical failure to communicate, and a more ironic expression of this failure.

This contrast not only helps, I think, to highlight Beckett's distinctive aesthetics of failure, but also points beyond the perhaps sterile dialectic of this esthetics to something we might call a distinctive theatre of resistance.

Gans contrasts the social models represented by the two couples in the play, Vladimir and Estragon, who are waiting, and Pozzo and Lucky, who are effectively non-participants. Vladimir and Estragon rarely leave the stage during the play; Pozzo and Lucky are also often on stage (over 47% of the total play, and a full 58% of the first act, based on Gans' page count). Where Vladimir and Estragon represent an "essentially egalitarian society united in their orientation to other-worldly values" (e.g., waiting for Godot), Pozzo and Lucky represent—"rather pointedly, [Gans notes, and I think we can agree]—Hegel's master and slave" (1982, 8). Gans adds that Pozzo and Lucky's Hegelian master-slave relationship "incarnates a trivialized model of society as history." They thus comprise interesting characters, both for Vladimir and Estragon as well as the audience, because they "'express' the fundamental worldly desire of domination," (1982, 8) and the postures and interactions that go along with that desire. Pozzo claims to be the proprietor of the land, and he waits for no one; "his movement across the stage is self-initiated and

his sojourn there is only an interlude" (1982, 8). The episodes of Pozzo and Lucky are, Gans shows us, "a play within a play" which represents the society which "created the theatre of mastery as a mirror of itself" (1982, 9). Pozzo and Lucky arouse 'pity and terror' (both in Vladimir and Estragon as well as the audience) "because we all desire to be like Pozzo and fear to be like Lucky" (1982, 11).

In contrast, Vladimir and Estragon, in their essentially egalitarian relationship, comprise what Gans calls an anthropological culture, as opposed to an historical one. He also characterizes this anthropological culture as a modern culture, as opposed to a traditional one. Here, I would make a distinction between what one might call "modern anthropology" and "postmodern anthropology." The development of anthropology, following the development of the science of biology with Darwin's theory of evolution, is clearly a modern phenomenon, and is based on premises which are fundamentally different from traditional views with respect to many elements of culture, and in particular with respect to traditional conceptions of language. However, anthropologists such as Claude Lévi-Strauss and critics of orientalism and colonialism such as Edward Said have shown that the science of anthropology has long been denatured, and sometimes manipulated, co-opted, and corrupted by the modern culture of mastery within which it emerged. The critics' case has often been overstated; I think it is important to recognize that the tension between the science of anthropology and the modern culture of mastery was there from its inception and that this was felt to some extent (and resisted) even by some of its earliest pioneers. Nevertheless, especially since World War II, in a post-colonial context, a more intercultural approach to anthropology has since worked to transform the science and further detach it from the culture of mastery. I think, within the context of Beckett's play, that this perspective would be more accurately termed "postmodern anthropology."

Getting back to Gans and the play within the play, if we consider the society represented by Pozzo and Lucky, and we also keep in mind that this society "created the theatre of mastery as a mirror of itself," (1982, 9), then it is interesting to observe with Gans that "inserted into the broader 'anthropological' context of Beckett's play, this theatre appears as inauthentic posturing, a self-contradictory effort to demonstrate to the spectator that it exists independently of his presence" (1982, 9).

Vladimir and Estragon establish a (postmodern) "anthropological" context by forming a model of a minimal human society. Gans suggests that the audience relates to them differently, without identifying with them as heroes. "We are neither to imitate them nor to avoid imitating them" (1982, 7). They do not represent anyone, but "they have solved . . . the problem of living in society" (1982, 7). Their dialogues maintain an ongoing and "delicate equilibrium . . . [they] are just different

enough from each other not to be mirror images, but not different enough to allow for the development of asymmetric relations of any kind. Vladimir knows Godot, and Estragon doesn't, but Estragon trusts his friend enough to make leaving unthinkable" (1982, 8).[\(1\)](#)

Although Gans contrasts the anthropological boredom of Vladimir and Estragon (where nothing really happens) with the historical fascination of Pozzo and Lucky, he also reminds us that the anthropological perspective is fundamental, and asserts that the "theatrical test of these propositions comes in the second act" (1982, 9). Gans reminds us that when Pozzo and Lucky again cross the stage, Pozzo is blind and Lucky is mute. Gans notes that "Pozzo's blindness is a caricature of Oedipus'; he is the master humbled, the victim of hubris" (1982, 9). Unlike Oedipus, we might add, Pozzo is childless. Gans argues that the "dramatic function of the division of the play into two acts" (otherwise a somewhat enigmatic structure, given the lack of action) "is to mark the different effect of time on the two couples." (1982, 9) Gans calls our attention to the fact that, although Vladimir and Estragon recall their previous meeting, Pozzo has lost all memory of the past; "the blind as he says, have no notion of time" (1982, 9). Gans notes the difference here between Pozzo and Oedipus, and explains that Pozzo's amnesia stems from the fact that "the world of the stage is no longer a locus of significant experience" (1982, 9). Gans further explains that, although "Pozzo has been humbled by fate, [he] cannot understand the past because his fate has not been determined *in* time but *by* time" (1982, 9). Gans takes this a step further when he asserts that Pozzo's illusion of mastery "has not been shattered by the ironies of experience, but by the essential disequilibrium of historical existence" (1982, 9). Here I think Gans may have gone just a bit too far. I would have to agree with him, if we were talking about characters in "The Bald Soprano." In this play, however, Vladimir and Estragon remember, and I think that fact is very important.

It would appear, if we follow Gans' analysis all the way here, that Beckett's rejection of the modern culture of mastery is also a complete rejection of all history. I think that Beckett's stance is more nuanced. Earlier, I noted that Beckett approached this early form of postmodern drama from a post-nationalist perspective. As Gans reminds us in his analysis, the modern culture of mastery is based on a conception of history. In the modern context, then, this is a history based on nationalist narratives. In rejecting the modern culture of mastery, in particular as he does this from a post-nationalist perspective, Beckett is, indeed, also rejecting the nationalist conceptions of history. That does not necessarily imply that his postmodern perspective is completely ahistorical. In any confrontation with a different culture, there are three possible outcomes: rejection, assimilation, or a cosmopolitan acceptance. As an Irish writer choosing to write this masterpiece first in French, and, furthermore, choosing to translate it brilliantly into an English masterpiece,

Beckett has succeeded in adapting a cosmopolitan perspective. We will return to these choices, and to the historical significance of Beckett's stance, a little later.

Meanwhile, let us consider the significance of Vladimir and Estragon's memory. This brings us back to Godot. We noted earlier, following Gans, that there is no waiting for Godot unless he remains absent. There is also no waiting for Godot if Vladimir and Estragon completely forget about him! At the same time, given Godot's role as a spectral signifier, he cannot guarantee memory the way a transcendental signifier presumably would. With this in mind, let us consider the odd role of the messengers in the play.

Although they do serve as a reminder that Vladimir and Estragon are waiting for Godot, the messenger(s) in this play barely seem capable of remembering their messages, much less the past. This stands in stark contrast to the messengers in *Oedipus the King*, for example, who connect the action on stage to its grounding in the past (and future) as determined by gods like Apollo. In short, history is not grounded in this play the way it would be in a play produced by a culture of mastery, yet Vladimir and Estragon nevertheless remember most things faithfully.

Some of their memories may also connect the play to what, at the time of its early performances, was then recent history, at least for the French spectators. Hugh Kenner was one of the first to point out that the play "resembles France occupied by the Germans" and that Vladimir and Estragon's situation resembles situations faced by members of the resistance like Beckett himself. Kenner suggested that presenting the structure of this situation may even have been "the playwright's most remarkable feat." Kenner explains: "There existed, throughout a whole country for five years, a literal situation that corresponded point by point with the situation in the play . . . that millions of lives were saturated in its desperate reagents" (2005, 10).

Marjorie Perloff notes that, in the French version of the play, Estragon alludes specifically to l'Ariège in the Pyrenees, a point along what was known as the "'Chemin de la Liberté'—the chief World War II escape route from France to Spain" (2005, 2). She recounts Beckett's clandestine stay in Roussillon, a village about 40 kilometers from Avignon, where he worked for a farmer named Aude and picked grapes for another farmer named Bonnelly, "who is mentioned by name in '*En attendant Godot*' :

VLADIMIR : Pourtant nous avons été ensemble dans la Vaucluse, j'en mettrais ma main au feu. Nous avons fait les vendanges, tiens, chez un nommé Bonnelly, à Roussillon (2005, 7).

Beckett's experience of World War II was different from that of many of his

contemporaries, including Anouilh, Ionesco, and Sartre. He and his wife both played active roles in the French resistance, even risking their lives. Given his Irish identity (he apparently spoke French with a recognizable accent), his experiences of risk and solidarity were inevitably infused with cosmopolitan nuances. Our perspective on the significance of this experience can be further informed by comparing the English version with the French version. Instead of what might be an obscure reference to l'Ariège for an English-speaking audience, Estragon instead suggests that "we'll go to the Pyrenees" (2005, 1). Perloff also notes that "the specific references to the Vaucluse and Bonnelly have been excised [by Beckett from the English version], Vladimir's lines reading":

VLADIMIR : But we were there, together, I could swear to it! Picking grapes for a man called... (he snaps his fingers)... can't think of the name of the man, at a place called... (snaps his fingers)... can't think of the place, do you not remember (2005, 7)?

In the English version, Vladimir's memories are becoming as uncertain as some of Estragon's, making it more difficult for him to remind his partner of the event. This is not total amnesia, however; although it is a function of a different kind of history, it is not a sign of the absence or utter insignificance of history. Perloff cites the narrator of one of Beckett's short stories, who says: "Memories are killing. So you must not think of certain things, of those that are dear to you, or rather you must think of them, for if you don't there is the danger of finding them, in your mind, little by little" (2005, 2). If we consider both versions of the play and the scenes which they set up for the audiences, there are clearly a number of challenges for the playwright. Foremost among them, I think, if we consider this particular scene of trying to remember together things which combine trivial, everyday matters of a personal relationship and a broad, even global context, there is the challenge of both remembering and resisting the culture of mastery.

Perloff makes it clear that Beckett's experience of the resistance profoundly informed his postwar outlook, and I would argue that it played a key role in the formation of his distinctive postmodern stance. This is hinted at in the combination of esthetics and ethics in his formulation of the esthetics of failure. This positive thrust of his cosmopolitan experience of resistance is more fully articulated in the play, in both the French and the English versions. In short, I think that the waiting in Godot, shared by the audience of the play just as it was by so many people, and not just French people, in occupied France (and elsewhere during the war), is less an expression of failure than it is of resistance. Beckett takes a firm anti-modernist position in creating *Waiting for Godot*, but there is a humanist impulse that needs to be further attended to.

With this in mind, let us now turn to Gans' wider analysis of the problem of culture in the article. Gans opens this wider analysis by re-examining the notion of mastery: "the very word 'culture' suggests a more culturally relevant definition of mastery. Agriculture, from which this originally metaphoric term derives, exemplifies man's domination of nature" (1982, 11). When the word culture is applied to people (originally to children), it involves "the conquest of the natural—and socially unacceptable—'disorder' within man himself" (1982, 11). The real meaning of this cultural mastery "is thus mastery over human emotions" (1982, 11). From this perspective, in the context of a culture of mastery, "literature may be seen to consist of subject-matter related to domination or 'mastery' and capable of arousing our desire and fear of same" (1982, 11). Gans has already called our attention to this in the case of Pozzo and Lucky. He explains that "this desire and fear . . . may be identified with the desire that Nietzsche called *ressentiment*" (1982, 11).

Gans contrasts this situation with one found in primitive egalitarian societies, where significant *ressentiment* is not generated because they do not involve significant social differences. He cites Vladimir and Estragon as a model of such a society. He notes, however, that "this lack of social difference does not mean automatic harmony; on the contrary, it is in such societies that the force of the sacred is greatest. The harmony of these societies is founded on the incarnation of social values in external gods or 'ancestors' like Godot" (1982, 12). I have already mentioned that I would not quite agree with this characterization of Godot. Let us continue with Gans's analysis for a moment, however.

Gans turns at this point to the Greeks as an early example of a society in which secular culture has reached a high level. Comparing Sophocles' Athens to Racine's Paris, he explains that "both are characterized by a strong degree of hierarchization limited by certain 'countervailing powers' expressed in law and custom, and above all, permitting considerable room for personal initiative in the upper-middle strata. These are the strata that support 'culture' and whose *ressentiment* culture both expresses and subjects to the control of *catharsis*" (1982, 12). I think Gans' comparison may be generally valid; however, there is something else going on in Greek culture that is also pertinent to our discussion. Greek culture cannot be fully comprehended, in my opinion, in terms of an agricultural civilization. Instead, I think it is important to consider its relatively unique status as a commercial civilization. There have been other commercial civilizations, of course, and the Greeks were aware of examples such as the Phoenicians. The Greeks were fortunate not only to be able to trade and learn from the Egyptians and the Persians but also to enjoy a geographical position which enabled both trade and relatively long-standing independence. Hence the elaborate development of their civilization and its culture. In contrast to those whose experience was shaped only by a single agricultural civilization, the Greeks could be both familiar with and able to view other cultures

from a unique critical perspective.

Gans characterizes modern society as one in which well-defined social hierarchies are broken down and opportunities for social advancement are expanded. In such a context, *ressentiment* operates quite differently. “*Ressentiment* against necessary and insuperable domination—mastery—is one thing; *ressentiment* against the contingent, and often temporary, superiority of others is another” (1982, 12). I would argue that the social context of “necessary and insuperable domination” corresponds much better to an agricultural civilization than it does to a commercial one. More important for the context of this discussion, I think, would be the modern examples of totalitarian societies that were such a prominent feature of the mid-20th century. Fortunately, the figures of Vladimir and Estragon may point, not so much to a golden age of primitive egalitarianism, but, perhaps too modestly, to a situation where *ressentiment* continues to operate, but in a context of contingent, and often temporary, superiority of others—and in a context of resistance to the threats posed by cultures of mastery. Vladimir and Estragon’s situation, in other words, is not one in which *ressentiment* is absent; instead it may be transformative.

Madelaine Hron has described the transformative possibilities of *ressentiment*:

“As Gans cautions, however, the value of *ressentiment* does not merely lie in its consciousness-raising potential, but, rather, it rests in its transformative possibilities—in its creative attempts to transcend the victim status. To be a ‘real instrument of culture,’ a creative act of *ressentiment* entails a continuous process of transformation, and of overcoming, those elements within the social order that are deemed non-significant. Such transformation can only be achieved if the subject is no longer dependent on the Other for definition, or operating in response to the Other, to take up Nietzsche’s main criticism of *ressentiment* as a reaction” (2009, 56).

The relationship of Vladimir and Estragon to the figure of Godot differs in subtle, but important ways from the situation captured by Nietzsche’s criticism of *ressentiment* as a reaction. They depend on Godot, but not precisely for definition, and he can also be said to depend on them. They wait in response to Godot, but their response is based on an obligation that depends on some sort of reciprocity and maintains an open quality. It maintains an open relationship, both with each other and with respect to the figure of Godot.

In her essay on the crisis of culture, Hannah Arendt mentions that “it is of some importance that the last individual left in mass society seems to be the artist” (2006, 161). This individuality enables the artist to continue to be the authentic producer of cultural objects. Arendt defined these objects as things that have “the

faculty of arresting our attention and moving us" (2006, 163). Like Arendt, Beckett also considered the role of the artist to be important and was particularly concerned about its authenticity. Thanks to Eric Gans' analysis of Beckett's aesthetics, I think we can better understand the role of the artist in shaping postmodern culture.

When I first read this article back in the early 1980s, I was struck by the remarkable complicity that occurs in the play between the spectators, the actors, and at least two of the characters. When *Waiting for Godot* is performed, thanks to the masterpiece constructed by the author, they all participate in this waiting. I have now come to recognize the element of transformative solidarity implicit in this shared experience.

To wrap things up, I would like to recall Gans' explication of culture in the context of agriculture, and its relevance to raising and educating children. Perhaps I have spent too much time in high school French classrooms, but this also reminds me of the scene in *The Little Prince* where the fox teaches the little prince in a playful and imaginative way about deferral and discipline, about culture and waiting. Saint-Exupéry, writing during World War II, frames this discussion in terms of *apprivoisement* or domestication, and explains that it is fundamentally a process of building relationships (*créer des liens*).

Although Beckett took a stance against modernism, there is a humanist impulse at work in *Waiting for Godot*. As they wait, Vladimir and Estragon also show us how to finesse *ressentiment* in the play of relationships, something, I think, that is at the heart of growing as an individual in society and yet continuing to resist mastery.

\* \* \*

1. The differences between the social dynamics of the two couples are also indicated by the pronouns they use to address each other. As one would expect, both Vladimir and Estragon use "tu," the pronoun of solidarity according to Brown and Gilman (1960, 265-266). In contrast, the asymmetric power relations between Pozzo and Lucky are signaled by Pozzo's commands and his use of "tu" to address Lucky. Although Lucky makes a speech in the first act (before becoming apparently mute in the second act), he does not address anyone directly; his attitude toward others, by turns aggressive, submissive, and detached, is never clearly formalized by his speaking parts. Vladimir and Estragon consistently address both Pozzo and Lucky with "vous," and Pozzo reciprocates. As Gans points out, Pozzo is thankful for his interlude with Vladimir and Estragon because "like Hegel's master, he needs contact with persons other than his slave, whose status precludes 'free' recognition" (1982, 8). The need for this contact seems to be further illustrated by this reciprocal use of "vous" in the play, although one might say that the status of

the recognition is undercut to some extent by Vladimir and Estragon's use of "vous" to also address Lucky. I bring this up because I think the social dynamics of dialogues merits further research from a generative anthropological perspective, and the historical development of various pronouns of power and solidarity (as outlined in Brown and Gilman's pioneering article) might be a productive point of departure. [\(back\)](#)

## References

Arendt, Hannah. 2006. *Between Past and Future: Eight Exercises in Political Thought*. New York: Penguin Books.

Beckett, Samuel, and Duthuit, Georges. 1949. *Three dialogues: Tal coat – Masson – Bram van Velde*. Paris: Transition Press.

Beckett, Samuel. 1952. *En attendant Godot*. Paris: Editions de Minuit.

Beckett, Samuel. 1954. *Waiting for Godot*. New York: Grove Press.

Brown, Roger, and Gilman, Albert. 1960. "The Pronouns of Power and Solidarity." in Sebeok, T.A. (ed), *Style in Language*. Cambridge, MA. MIT Press

Gans, Eric. 1982. "Beckett and the Problem of Modern Culture." in *Sub-Stance*, No. 35. Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press.

Gans, Eric. 1993. *Originary Thinking: Elements of Generative Anthropology*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

Hron, Madelaine. 2009. *Translating pain: immigrant suffering in literature and culture*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.

Perloff, Marjorie. 2005. "'In Love with Hiding': Samuel Beckett's War." in *The Iowa Review*, 35, no. 2. Iowa City: University of Iowa Press.

Saint-Exupéry, Antoine de. 1946. *Le petit prince*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company.