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Trying to Understand *Waiting for Godot*: An Adornian Analysis of Beckett's Signature Work

Peter Zazzali

Department of Theatre, University of Kansas, Lawrence, USA

ABSTRACT

Adorno had such an affinity for Beckett that he dedicated his posthumously published work, *Aesthetic Theory*, to him. In 1961, he wrote a thoughtful—if dizzyingly complex—tribute to Beckett's play, *Endgame*, a work that models many aspects of Adorno's cultural criticism. My aim, accordingly, is to offer an Adornian reading of Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* by drawing upon his critiques of music, aesthetics, and the culture industry. My goal is twofold: to offer a refreshing analysis of one of the most significant dramatic achievements of the twentieth century, and, in doing so, to demonstrate Adorno's relevance to contemporary cultural studies by deploying multiple elements of his oeuvre.

> *Even the most extreme consciousness of doom threatens to degenerate into idle chatter. Cultural criticism finds itself faced with the final stage of the dialectic of culture and barbarism. To write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric.*
>
> —Theodor W. Adorno, *Prisms*

This well-known quote from Theodor Adorno's essay "Cultural Criticism and Society" suggests a dialectic partnership between aesthetics (culture) and human degradation (barbarism), which developed during a degenerative—and in some cases, diabolical—period of modern history. After the sheer horror of Auschwitz and the terror it continues to represent, humankind does seem to have entered "an open-air prison" of sorts with art and society bearing a reifying relationship by which they uphold the thick idleness of the status quo. A work of art rarely, if ever, challenges its beholders in a presentation that is as individual and unique in its form as it is daring and relevant in content. Such a work is brilliant in craft and transcendent in affect in prompting a beholder to simultaneously grapple and marvel at its distinct beauty. This powerful but rare response exceeds societal and aesthetic conventions because the unique beauty of the work is arrived at autonomously and in conjunction with its historical moment. And for Adorno this beauty can be identified and measured, thereby lending credence to the very praxis of cultural criticism.

While much of Adorno's cultural criticism applies to music, he had an abiding appreciation for and knowledge of drama. As such, he singles out Samuel Beckett as a literary magician whose work "obliterates the meaning that was culture" in favor of unchartered aesthetic

CONTACT Peter Zazzali pzazzali@ku.edu

terrain, much like Adorno's other exemplars braved and shaped the cultural landscape of modernity: Schönberg, Baudelaire, and Rimbaud, to name a few. Through abstractions of form and content, Beckett writes in the key of irrationality and meaninglessness. His works—as original in their lure as maddening in their incomprehensibility—defy scholarly interpretation. Adorno compares understanding Beckett to deciphering a riddle, with the author "refusing to deal with interpretation [and] shrugging his shoulders about the possibility of philosophy today, or theory in general."[1] His oeuvre can be read dialectically, with nonsense and incoherence serving as the backdrop to fleeting moments of emotional and sociological intelligibility. And it is in these moments, elusively penetrating the spectator's consciousness like shards of disparate glass, that meaning is brought to bear on Beckett's meaninglessness.

Adorno had such an affinity for Beckett that he dedicated his posthumously published book, *Aesthetic Theory*, to him. In 1961, he wrote a thoughtful—if dizzyingly complex—tribute to Beckett's play, *Endgame*, a work that models many elements of Adorno's cultural criticism. With this in mind, my goal in this article is to present an Adornian reading of Beckett's signature drama, *Waiting for Godot*, by drawing upon his critiques of music, aesthetics, and the culture industry. I will first, however, contextualize *Waiting for Godot* by offering a concise overview of its performance and critical history.

Putting *Waiting for Godot* in Context

Beckett wrote *Godot* between 1948 and 1949 while living in Paris, which became his home in 1937. Admitting that he wanted to depart "from the awful prose [he] was writing at that time," he penned a tragicomedy focusing on the listless lives of a pair of tramps ensnared in apocalyptic surroundings consisting of nothing more than "a country road" and a lone tree referred to as a "bush or a shrub."[2] The space is as spare as it is desolate, and the two wayfarers, Vladimir and Estragon, who familiarly self-identify as Didi and Gogo, interminably wait for the person/entity of Godot to appear. Presumably, their wait has lasted some fifty years or so, each evening commencing with Didi and Gogo arriving separately to wait and then ultimately depart once night falls, which in the case of the drama's two acts coincides with the exit of a Boy—apparently a messenger from Godot—and the rising of the moon. This daily cycle has been repeated for decades—perhaps longer—as the elusiveness of time is itself a key element in Beckett's world, with no end in sight. Indeed, it is the very "deadening" aspect of "habit" that is driving the dramatic tension between Didi and Gogo facilitated by their imprisoned circumstances that unfold as part of some cruel purgatorial fate.[3]

Trying to escape the maddening desolation of habit and the self-perceived meaninglessness of their lives, Didi and Gogo seek distractions in the form of word games, play acting, and anything else that can divert their attention from the onerous task of waiting. Midway through Act 1—and later in Act 2—they are visited by two clownish figures, a master and slave, going by the names of Pozzo and Lucky, with whom they share the better part of both evenings to "pass the time… rapidly." Despite these welcome diversions, the protagonists "suffer" and "struggle" in their Sisyphean plight to encounter Beckett's title character, a reality reinforced by one of the most famous stage directions in the history of drama:

Estragon: Well, shall we go?

Vladimir: Yes, let's go.

They do not move.[4]

This motif ends both Acts, thereby circumventing the play's content and form: Beckett wields a circular dramatic structure that finishes where it began, with both characters waiting for someone/thing that will never come. He laces the dialogue with carefully placed "silences" and "pauses," which create a distinctive rhythm and cadence that is jazz-like in its acoustic variance. Beckett, indeed, succeeded in transcending the "awful prose" of his writing prior to *Godot* in favor of a style replete with fluid dialogue, fragmented utterances, vivid imagery, repeated phrases, incomprehensible diatribes (Lucky's speech), distinct physical actions (e.g., Pozzo cracking his whip), and of course the precise placement of pauses and silences. *Waiting for Godot* possesses a unique soundscape that figuratively dances with the play's content to lure the audience into the perennial waiting game besetting Didi and Gogo.

The play premiered in 1953 under the direction of Roger Blin at the Théâtre de Babylone in Paris (with Blin in the role of Lucky). Beckett reportedly chose the director on the grounds that Blin's rendition of *The Ghost Sonata* in 1949 was faithful to Strindberg's text and "because the theater was near empty"; this being a peculiar yet important insight into Beckett's valuation of drama and theatre.[5] As I will show in greater detail in my discussion of Adorno's critique of the culture industry, Beckett deplored the commercialism and commodification of art, especially as it pertained to his own work. *Godot* garnered mixed reviews and according to Beckett scholar, Ruby Cohn, "laughter did not ring out through the little Théâtre de Babylone. … [instead] chuckles faded into smiles or frowns."[6]

There were literally thousands of productions of Beckett's play over the ensuing decades, with some generating impressive reviews and others not. In general, *Godot* both fascinated and perplexed spectators and critics alike. One notable production was the English-language premiere at the Arts Theatre in London in 1955 under the direction of Peter Hall, who greeted his cast by stating that he "hadn't really the foggiest idea what some of it [the play] meant," thereby ensuring *Godot*'s place in the pantheon of controversial dramas.[7] The first U.S. production of the play was incongruously performed at Florida's Coconut Grove Playhouse in 1956, which by all accounts proved to be a failure. Audiences infamously flocked to their cabs at the interval, presumably to return home or perhaps to seek out a stiff drink in escaping what the show's director, Alan Schneider, described as the most depressing experience of his theatrical career.[8] This unfortunate outcome no doubt had to do with Schneider's inability to understand the "meaning of Godot," as inferred by an exchange he had with Beckett: When Schneider asked, "Who or what does Godot mean," the latter cagily replied, "If I knew, I would have said so in the play."[9] In 1971 Schneider rebounded from his Floridian failure and staged a far more successful production in New York, thereafter becoming a renowned director of Beckett's plays. Nonetheless, the fact that his initial foray into *Godot* was so perplexing to him, his cast, and their audience points to the play's inherent challenges.

Much has been written about *Godot* and the play continues to attract theatre artists—if not audiences. Literary and performance scholars from Martin Esslin and Ruby Cohn to Richard Schechner and Eric Bentley have penned essays, articles, and books to explain Beckett's seemingly unexplainable masterpiece.[10] Its production history in western theatre is as lengthy as it is varied, with significant versions existing from the West End and Broadway to a landmark production at the San Quentin state penitentiary in 1957, where the San Francisco Actors Workshop electrified a prison cafeteria filled with hardened criminals, nearly all of whom "grasped" the meaning of the interminable waiting dramatized in the play. Their response showed that these inmates viscerally identified with Didi and

Gogo's disempowerment in ways that sophisticated audiences could not.[11] While trapped in a theatrical prison, Beckett's wayward tramps echo humankind's search for purpose and fulfillment. The play would come to be seen as part of the Theatre of the Absurd, closely associated with the growing popularity of existentialist philosophy in the decades following WWII. Its existentialist content and unique dramatic form seems to have captured the postwar zeitgeist making *Godot* and by extension Beckett, contemporaneous with Adorno's critique of the relationship between art and society.

The Sociology of *Waiting for Godot* and the Repudiation of Positivism

Adorno introduces the concept of *negative dialectics* as a means of "achieving something positive by means of negation," a concept that in keeping with the spirit of negation, he simultaneously contradicts.[12] Drawing on Hegel, he explains dialectical thinking as a theoretical paradigm that disrupts a positivist critique of an object of study, and by extension, the ways in which we relate that object to human experience. Thus, dualistic studies of the natural and spiritual worlds, the juxtaposition of subjectivity and objectivity, and most significantly, the tension between the individual and society are central themes throughout Adornian philosophy. Adorno's use of negative dialectics can be illustrated by his materialist analysis of the relationship between labor and desire, where he argues the former negates the latter in the framework of capitalist inspired hegemony:

> Labor in the full sense is in fact tied to desire, which it in turn negates: it satisfies the needs of human beings on all levels, helps them in their difficulties, reproduces human life, and demands sacrifices of them in return.[13]

The sacrifices Adorno alludes to are the daily struggles laborers endure in a political economy that exploits their exchange value. In order to have "pleasure" in one's life, one must abide by the system's rules—the very rules that exploit the individual and create a hegemonic social order operating as a dialectic paradigm. The system is inherently contradictory, and according to Adorno, must be examined as such.

In contrast to Enlightenment and Kantian dualism, especially as the latter pertains to the theorization of the subject and object, Hegel argued against assignations of fixed truths. Since "truth was not a minted coin that [could] be given and pocketed ready-made," Hegel proposed dialectical thinking to negate positivism and present a theoretical paradigm with significant ramifications for modern society.[14] In his "antagonistic totality," idealism and notions of "truth" were disrupted through engagement with contradictions, as, for example, the contradiction between labor and pleasure in the context of capitalism. Hegel's philosophy inspired future philosophers, cultural critics, and historians to challenge and problematize widely held conceptions of truth. It is within this broader philosophical and historical context that Adorno arrived at his own theories of the interrelationship between art and society. While embracing Hegelian dialectics, he recognized the sheer elusiveness of thought and its role in understanding modernity, humankind, and the universe at large. Just as Beckett's tramps continually remind themselves that "nothing is certain," Adorno, following Hegel, parries any assertion of fact in explaining the merits of negativism: "Dialectics is the consistent sense of non-identity. It does not begin by taking a standpoint. My thought is driven to it by its own inevitable insufficiency."[15] Similarly, Didi and Gogo lament their ability "to think" given thought's tortuous ramifications:

Vladimir: We're in no danger of ever thinking any more.

Estragon: Then what are we complaining about.

Vladimir: Thinking is not the worst. … what is terrible is to have thought.[16]

Realizing that their thinking causes them to agonize over the perceived emptiness and meaninglessness of their situation, the Sophist of Beckett's pair, Vladimir, hints at a dialectic engagement with thinking and reasoning, a personality trait that he carries like "his little cross" throughout the play as "the essential doesn't change": Gogo and he are stuck waiting for someone/thing that will never come.[17]

The difference, however, between Adorno and Beckett's antiheroes is one of resignation and certainty. Whereas Adorno is resigned to apply dialectical reasoning to negate the logic of fixed conclusions, Didi and Gogo stoutly "wait" for their Godot to provide them with absolute answers on the meaning of existence. Theirs is a futile journey into interminable restlessness, a by-product of their self-perceived purposelessness, which echoes the western existentialist crisis following the atrocities of the War. Thus Beckett captures in both form and content a world in which it would indeed be barbaric to write poetry.

When Beckett wrote *Godot* the world was reeling from the moral degradation occasioned by WWII—from the horrors of Nazism to the dropping of the atomic bomb—humans had never before inflicted such violence upon one another on such a large scale. By 1948, the year Beckett penned his signature work, the Cold War had deepened that sense of emptiness with new threats to the very survival of the human race. The play's exploration of the potential for evil is most evident in the owner-slave relationship between Pozzo and Lucky, with Pozzo brandishing his whip and assaulting his lackey with carnivalesque flair in a brutal attempt to sustain his newfound "society" with Didi and Gogo. Pozzo's cruelty is on full display from the moment he enters cracking his whip and putting his tortured slave through a compulsory drill that includes randomly "stopping," moving "on," "turning," and setting and resetting Pozzo's "stool," his symbolic throne. Left with nothing to eat but the morsels from Pozzo's devoured chicken bones and denied the opportunity to rest, Lucky's forsaken fate metaphorically evokes Hitler's death marches, Mussolini's ironclad oppression of opponents, and Stalin's hideous scourge against artists. In an attempt to divert Didi and Gogo "from the dull time they are having," Pozzo orders Lucky—who "used to think very prettily once"— "to dance" and "to think.'" Lucky then unleashes a linguistically deconstructed rant of broken and repeated phrases roughly spanning five minutes.[18] Pozzo and his erstwhile audience (Didi and Gogo) scramble to shut Lucky up, a feat only accomplished by removing the slave's hat. It is a scene that is as mad in form as it is harrowing in its metaphorical content. Once his hat is removed, Lucky never speaks again—Beckett renders him "dumb."

For their part, Didi and Gogo find themselves trapped in a wasteland devoid of flora or fauna with the exception of a lonely tree that is bare in the first act and spare of leaves in the second. Beckett's carefully orchestrated silences and pauses—and there is a difference between the two—function as rests within a haunting soundscape of repeated words and phrases. His verbal rhythms are a blend of jazz-like eloquence and Schönbergian atonality. Yet there is nevertheless some measure of hope and liveliness in Didi and Gogo's otherwise "dull" and purposeless existence. In continually seeking ways to amuse themselves so as to escape the "void" that consumes their existence, they gamely—and humorously—invent ways to entertain each other. It is during such instances that Beckett can be especially read

through the lens of Adornian dialectics: *Godot* is as destitute as it can be funny, an impossible mix of hope and despair, of meaning and meaninglessness, of existence and nonexistence—all of which are played out, ironically, in the dramaturgical key of tragicomedy.

Throughout their circular journey, Didi and Gogo are of course waiting for Godot to determine their fate and "save" them from their life upon "this bitch of an earth."[19] Though Beckett confessed that he himself had no idea who or what Godot is or represents, the titular figure clearly resonates as a deity of sorts, which positions the play as a tacit critique of positivism. As long as the two tramps return to the same spot each day at the same time for the same purpose (to meet Godot), they are surrendering their autonomy in chasing a false belief. Adorno too criticizes positivism and the concurrent erasure of individualism in modern society, which renders the individual "impotent" and "insignificant" in the face of capitalist [and fascist] determinism, and decries the denial of free and dialectical thinking. The emergence of mass culture in a world bent on material production and consumption, he argues, has debased humanity to the point of near annihilation. Thus, Adorno's critique of the "cult of production" can be aligned with his repudiation of positivism, insofar as the paralysis of the individual is the direct result of authoritarian shibboleths masquerading as truisms.[20]

Looking at *Godot* through the Lens of the Culture Industry

Adorno condemns the culture industry as capitalism's degeneration of art through the mass production and consumption of cultural goods. An artwork's exchange value determines its worth at the expense of its beauty, uniqueness, imagination, and sublimity, criteria that are the measures of aesthetic excellence. Trapped in the "schema of advertising," or what Guy Debord theorizes as sheer "spectacle," modernity marks an unprecedented commodification of culture.[21] Pedestrian and predictable approaches to artistic form resulted in the "perpetual sameness" of artworks that negates creative risk-taking and artistic autonomy. Thus, if art is produced and consumed *en masse* it is worthwhile; if, conversely, art does not meet this standard it will perish and "disappear."[22]

Most of Adorno's cultural criticism pertained to music. An accomplished musician and composer in his own right, he made significant discoveries in his study of the interdependence of music and society. In a series of lectures delivered at Frankfurt University in 1961–62, he criticized the subjective valuations of music, arguing that the public lacked "a full understanding of music itself, and all its implications."[23] He traced the commodification of opera and operetta to the emergence of jazz, musical comedy, and the ubiquitous pop song, all subgenres he dismissed for their popularity and for causing a "regression" of listening and critical reflection among the body politic.[24] He condemned the process whereby songs and performers along with conductors and composers became fetishized fodder for the "entertainment" industry in the name of exchange value. Wagnerian opera, for example, appeared to him as a "phantasmagoric illusion" that privileged grandeur over imagination and ingenuity. Wagner's integration of music and drama—his much-ballyhooed *Gesamtkunstwerk*—he argued, was a "musical fairyland" that deprived listeners of the opportunity to critically discern the form's constituent parts. Lost in a sensory overload of grandiose narratives with swelling leitmotifs and theatrical illusion, Wagnerian opera thrilled listeners into a mind-numbingly intoxicated state, thereby eradicating critical reflection in favor of commodification:

> The consumer goods on display turn their phenomenal side seductively towards the mass of customers while diverting attention from their merely phenomenal character. … in the phantasmagoria, Wagner's operas tend to become commodities.[25]

Drawing on Marx, Adorno describes this process as a fetishisization of music that leads to the devaluation of artistic form: "all musical life is dominated by the commodity form," the consumers are like "temple slaves" whose tastes are determined by what is fashionable, hip, or popular.[26] Elsewhere, he describes the loss of the art of "listening" by citing several types of listeners: "Entertainment listeners," for example, are motivated by their pedestrian craving for amusement and plagued by uniform tastes to accompany their dearth of aesthetic curiosity.[27] Similarly, the so-called "cultural listener" (e.g., the opera buff) is driven by a highbrow impulse to be distinguished from lower social strata, and the "emotional listener" craves to be "moved to tears" every bit as much as the "resentful listener" self-identifies as a "bold avant-gardist" with a penchant for the cultural cutting edge. Ultimately, Adorno dismisses all four types as fodder for the capitalist marketplace.[28]

A crucial by-product of these modes of listening is the erasure of autonomy and the privileging of conformity, a degenerative dynamic with significant implications for art and society. As people relinquish their critical autonomy and succumb to the mass distribution and consumption of artistic goods, they reinforce and perpetuate the culture industry's determinative reach. Individualism is thus lost on both social and aesthetic planes, with the popular forming the grist that turns the wheel of cultural production.

Beckett of course was not interested in appealing to popular culture. Alan Schneider described him as "the most uncompromised of men" who "writes—and lives—and not as the world—and the world's critics—want him to."[29] Indeed, a passing glance at the production history and critical response to *Waiting for Godot* suggests as much. In addition to the notorious flop that premiered in 1956 in the US, with one critic commenting on Gogo's thoughts on hanging himself as a "good suggestion unhappily discarded," the play has been lampooned, ridiculed, and dismissed since its inception.[30] These responses did not appear to faze Beckett, who reportedly selected Roger Blin to direct the original Paris production knowing he would honor the text and "insure that the place would be empty."[31]

Other commercial productions of *Godot* likewise demonstrate its resistance to commodification. Perhaps the most famous of these endeavors was the "sometimes entertaining" Broadway production in 1988 starring Steve Martin and Robin Williams under the direction of Academy Award winning director, Mike Nichols.[32] Despite its star power, the production closed prematurely to negative reviews and limited audiences. One critic was savvy enough to acknowledge that casting celebrities backfired and did a disservice to Beckett's play: "Take Robin Williams and Steve Martin and put them in *Waiting for Godot* under Mike Nichol's direction and you can pretty much forget about Samuel Beckett, who only wrote the play."[33] The same reviewer dismissed the production as a "show business event" failing to account for the text. There was a pair of more successful Broadway productions of *Godot* in 2009 and 2013, featuring Nathan Lane/Bill Irwin in the former and Patrick Stewart/Ian McKellen in the later version. Despite their relative success, both productions had limited runs and barely recouped their producer's investments. Beckett, we may assume, would have cared less given his opposition to commercialism. Indeed, Adorno's championing of Beckett as a master artist capable of "obliterating culture" and all "its rudiments" suggests as much.[34]

Beckett's refusal to partake in the culture industry is commensurate with the uniqueness of his oeuvre, especially as it pertains to *Godot*. Without being didactic or given to spectacle

and formulaic gurgitations of conventional entertainment, his play deploys a range of ingenious techniques that—whether intentionally or not—echo the socio-politics of the postwar era. It uses philosophy without being philosophical. It evokes humor without being overtly comical. The musicality of its language transcends poetry. It is as timely and relevant as it is universal and absurd. *Godot*, as Adorno describes *Endgame*, is a "riddle" that achieves "differentiation" in its aesthetic uniqueness.[35] Beckett's oeuvre notwithstanding, there really is nothing quite like it.

The Aesthetics of *Godot*: An Adornian Perspective

Adorno endorsed musical forms that defied classicism and provided a unique "experience" for listeners. Defining such works with the elusive term "avant-garde," he championed the likes of Webern, Berg, and most especially Schönberg for their repudiation of convention in favor of innovation. Schönberg's experimentation with a twelve-tone scale, for instance, invited listeners to shift their paradigm for identifying and appreciating music. The same could be said of those whom Schönberg inspired and their respective aesthetics: John Cage and David Tudor's atonal palate or minimalists such as Phillip Glass and Stephen Reich. These artists were not driven by commerce and the exchange value of their work, or as Adorno says, by the "utility of customer service," but by an abiding desire to brave new ground in musical composition.[36] And the same may be argued about the dramaturgy of Samuel Beckett.

According to Adorno, unique artworks transcend commodification and the trappings of the capitalist superstructure. As such, he privileges the "art of ugliness" for shunning convention and commercialism in favor of dissonance and the grotesque. Claiming that an "ugly" artwork reconstitutes the world "in its own image" by distorting and disrupting traditional and conventional modes of conception, he argues that its "autonomy" is contingent on aesthetic "cruelty."[37] His paradigm can therefore be compared to the performance theory of Antonin Artaud, whose so-called "theatre of cruelty" eschewed "masterpieces" and literal modes of theatrical expression. While he never mentions him by name, vestiges of Artaud can be seen in Adorno's criticism of "literal" artworks that seek to represent "natural beauty," which he discards to the dustbin of Kantian and Enlightenment aesthetics[38] Just as Artaud espoused a ritualistic aesthetic, Adorno identifies the spiritual core of an artwork with its affective resonance. The aesthetic result, he explains, is the outcome of the dialectic process by which the "thing-like" properties of a work of art (e.g., the musical notes on a page; a singer's vocal instrument; a play's deployment of dialogue) produce its affect: the sounds of a sonata; the splendor of an aria; the theatrical realization of a drama. According to Adorno an encounter is shared between the spectator/listener and an artwork, with the work's material components transcending into a spiritual essence causing a tangible affect upon the beholder. To be mesmerized by a painting, allured by an actor's performance, or emotionally transported by a musical composition are three examples. And such an aesthetic experience transcends the trappings and machinations of the culture industry while accessing the realm of sublimity, thereby underscoring Adorno's prevailing ethos regarding art and society.[39]

Since Adorno dedicated *Aesthetic Theory* to Beckett, it stands to reason that he associated his own theoretical approach with Beckett's oeuvre. Rejecting "natural beauty" as the aim of art, Adorno saw tension and dissonance as the defining characteristics of a

work's uniqueness. He thus juxtaposed Ibsenian realism, the attempt to reproduce "empirical reality," with Beckett's work. Whereas Ibsen's social dramas of the middle period were positivist attempts to capture everyday life on stage (e.g., *A Doll's House*), Beckett's dramas transcend empirical reality, and in certain cases, attain the aesthetic realm of the sublime. His anti-realistic negotiation of mimesis creates an absurd world devoid of meaning and order, thereby exemplifying Adorno's ethos of an "art of ugliness." In *Endgame*, for example, Adorno argues that Beckett expressed the emptiness and meaninglessness of existence through a circular dramatic structure replete with eloquent—if nonsensical—prose that "obliterates" any rational depiction of society and the concurrent impulse to explain and understand the nature of existence.[40] A similar case, I suggest, can be made for *Godot*.

Written in the aftermath of WWII, *Godot* can be seen as an echo of a time when human destruction was at its historical worst. As Adorno said, it truly would be "barbaric" to attempt poetry after Auschwitz, a lasting symbol of the horrors of the age.[41] Beckett's genius lies in his ability to seamlessly coordinate dramaturgical elements into a work that speaks to and transcends its historical moment. While he does not directly refer to contemporaneous events, the themes, coded meanings, and overarching tone of *Godot* present the human condition mired in suffering and doubt. In the context of interminable waiting, he dialectically demonstrates the liminality of existence as the play's four signature characters attempt to survive their miserable lives by playing games, engaging in makeshift entertainments, and clinging to the hope that tomorrow will be a better day.[42] They are collectively stuck in a surreal wasteland where "habit is a great deadener" and "the air full of [their] cries," as Vladimir eloquently exclaims in the play's penultimate moments.[43] Emblematic of existentialism's signature trope: they quest for purpose while terrified that their lives are empty and meaningless.

Despite *Godot*'s motifs of emptiness and destitution, Beckett infuses the play with humor to serve up its tragicomic essence (it would indeed be misguided to stage the work without attending to its inherent laughter, charm, and goodwill). When brought to life onstage the play has the potential to transcend empirical reality while paradoxically dramatizing the trinity of human existence: we expect; we wait; we die. While no one dies in Beckett's play, the theme of mortality is omnipresent. The "unhappy" lives of the four characters are defined by the dissonance of existence and nonexistence. Whereas Didi painstakingly tries to overcome the fact that "nothing can be done" about his meaningless life and uncertain future, Gogo constantly challenges the notion that Godot will "come" and "save them."[44] Together they represent the existential tension at the core of the drama.

Like Schönberg's atonality or Artaud's "cruelty," Beckett's *Godot* opened up new dramaturgical possibilities by defying an audience's appetite for mere entertainment, producing instead a transcendent experience that is commensurate with Adorno's notion of aesthetic spiritualization. Whether it is a phrase of lyrical dialogue punctuated with carefully placed silences or his deliberate stage directions, the "thing-like" properties of Beckett's plays cause the audience to transcend their pedestrian (Adorno might call it "empirical") existence. Yet it is the spectators' everyday perceptions of reality that are the basis for their spiritual encounter with an artwork. *Godot* consists of multidimensional characters, for example, whose needs and correspondent actions are lifelike. Didi and Gogo share a long-term relationship that is unmistakably mimetic in its codependence. In fact, they remind us of ourselves insofar as we grapple with fundamental questions on the purpose of life, the meaning of existence, and the prospect of eternity. It is Beckett's uncanny aestheticism, rendered with "Adornian

ugliness," that filters *Godot*'s verisimilitudinous foundation through a dialectic blend of grotesqueness and lyricism. The play defies sentimentality, yet causes us to self-reflect. It is as poignant as it can be silly. It elicits tones and signifies meanings that are jointly ethereal and earthbound. As Adorno aptly comments on *Endgame*, *Godot* harbors an "autonomous subjectivity… which challenges [and rethinks] the very possibility of aesthetic production."[45] Thus, *Godot* is an exemplar of Adorno's aesthetic theory, and by extension, of his high hopes for art's role in society. It therefore underscores Adorno's enduring relevance to cultural criticism and drama studies.

Notes

1. Theordor W. Adorno, "Trying to Understand *Endgame*," *New German Critique* 26 (Spring-Summer 1982): 321, 323.
2. Anonymous, *A Discussion Guide for the Play* Waiting for Godot *by Samuel Beckett*, (New York: Grove Press, 1977), 9; Samuel Beckett, *Waiting for Godot* (New York: Grove Press, 1954), 6.
3. Beckett, *Waiting for Godot*, 59.
4. Ibid., 32, 36.
5. John Fletcher, "The First Director: Roger Blin at Work," in *Casebook on* Waiting for Godot, ed. Ruby Cohn (New York: Grove Press, 1967), 21.
6. Ruby Cohn, "Waiting," in *Modern Critical Interpretations: Samuel Beckett's* Waiting for Godot, ed. Harold Bloom (New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1987), 41.
7. Quoted from Alvin Klein, "Decades Later, the Quest for Meaning Goes On," *New York Times*, 2 November 1997.
8. Alan Schneider, "Waiting for Beckett: A Personal Chronicle," in *Casebook on* Waiting for Godot, 51–57.
9. Ibid.
10. For a sample of impressive analyses conducted by leading literary and theatre scholars, see *Modern Critical Interpretations: Samuel Beckett's* Waiting for Godot, ed. Harold Bloom.
11. Martin Esslin, "Godot at San Quentin," in *Casebook on* Waiting for Godot, 30.
12. Theordor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics* (New York: Continuum, 2007), xiv.
13. Theodor W. Adorno, *Hegel: Three Studies* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press 1993), 22.
14. Ibid., 38.
15. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 5.
16. Beckett, *Waiting for Godot*, 42.
17. Ibid., 40,15.
18. Ibid., 26, 27–30.
19. Ibid., 26.
20. Theodor W. Adorno, *The Culture Industry: Selected Essays on Mass Culture*, ed. J. M. Bernstein (New York: Routledge, 1991), 24, 88.
21. Ibid., 63; Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle* (Detroit, MI: Black & Red, 1983).
22. Adorno, *The Culture Industry*, 93, 61.
23. Theodor W. Adorno, *Introduction to the Sociology of Music* (New York: Continuum, 1988), xii.
24. Adorno, *The Culture Industry*, 65.
25. Theodor W. Adorno, *In Search of Wagner* (London: Verso, 2009), 85, 86, 90.
26. Adorno, *The Culture Industry*, 37.
27. Adorno, *Introduction to the Sociology of Music*, 14.
28. Ibid., 10–15.
29. Schneider, "Waiting for Beckett: A Personal Chronicle," 51.
30. Marya Mannes, "Two Tramps," in the *Casebook on* Waiting for Godot, 30. For more on the critical reception of the play, see 11–88.
31. Ibid., 24.

32. Frank Rich, "Godot: The Timeless Relationship of Two Interdependent Souls," *New York Times*, 7 November 1988.
33. William B. Collins, "'Godot' Overshadowed by Martin and Williams," *Philadelphia Inquirer*, 7 November 1988.
34. Adorno, "Trying to Understand *Endgame*," 321.
35. Ibid., 327.
36. Adorno, *Introduction to the Sociology of Music*, 192.
37. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 50,
38. Ibid, 61–62.
39. Ibid., 91–94.
40. Adorno, "Trying to Understand *Endgame*," 321.
41. Adorno, *Prisms*, 34.
42. Though an important figure, the Boy is more or less a dramatic device to support Didi and Gogo's narrative by serving as Godot's messenger, and thus bringing each Act to a close.
43. Beckett, *Waiting for Godot*, 59.
44. Beckett, *Waiting for Godot*, 61.
45. Adorno, "Trying to Understand *Endgame*," 319.