

# WAITING- SAMUEL BECKETT`S ENIGMATIC SIGN OF LIFE

ANTOANETA DONTCHEVA

PLOVDIV UNIVERSITY "P. CHILENDARSKY", BULGARIA [AN.LOSEV@GMAIL.COM](mailto:AN.LOSEV@GMAIL.COM)

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**ABSTRACT:** The paper discusses Samuel Beckett's "Waiting for Godot" as The Phenomena, that erases all signs of Waiting like temporal and psychological concept. The basic constellation of the Beckett's play is the meeting between the Subject and the Other, where the Other is complex Sign- Self, Another, God, that happened in the marginal time-space of Waiting. In Beckett's Waiting time has turned into space, the Subject is timeless, the space is frozen. The Other fails in its effort to mediate any Meaning of Life.

The waiting is a kind of non-activity, which is self-erasing. Beckett means "self-erasing" in the sense of decentering the subject, exchanging one conventional identity for another in an endless series. But this non-activity also can empty out or erase the contents of the mind more radically, thereby promoting a non-active state of awareness altogether beyond social identity. Beckett's non-activity reflects and also induces a tendency toward pure consciousness.

The main point is what happens in the process of Waiting. May be it is the Life itself.

**KEY WORDS:** Samuel Beckett, Waiting, time

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## I. The Problem of Time in Beckett's works (brief overview)

A major *topos* in Beckett is the experience of time, a topic that intrigued philosophers from Plato and Augustine to Henri Bergson, Martin Heidegger, famous writers such as Proust, Joyce and many others. Time as an important theme in literature of 20<sup>th</sup> century. It is generally presented as a problematic problem with which man must cope. Samuel Beckett's dramas and novels describe the disillusionment in European worldview that was culminating after the events in the first half of 20<sup>th</sup> century. According to Lyotard the end of modernism causes three kinds of social disorder or cultural vacuum: loss of community bonds, loss of personal identity and loss of sense of the reality. Antirealist

modernism is (Lukacs, *The Ideology of Modernism*) essentially nihilist, because it is a reactionary form of “religious atheism” in which one transcendental signified has simply been substituted for another-nothingness having replaced God as the object of all hope for salvation from a history that has twisted the human out of shape. It is a form of religious atheism- wrote Lukacs, focusing of all hope upon a transcendence conceived as a pure absence. Lacking the support of God, the human being finds himself isolated and helpless in a universe which has lost all purpose and order.

In 1961 Tom Driver quizzed Samuel Beckett about the confusion he found in his writing.

Beckett answered: *"The confusion is not my invention ...It is all around us and our only chance now is to let it in. The only chance of renovation is to open our eyes and see the mess. It is not a mess you can make sense of {...} When Heidegger and Sartre speak of a contrast between being and existence, they may be right. I don't know, but their language is too philosophical for me. I am not a philosopher. One can only speak of what is in front of him, and that now is simply the mess."*<sup>1</sup>

The plays and novels of Samuel Beckett are the illustrations of the crisis of modern man and his being in time, of his confusion and his anguish. Beckett's personage finds himself in a world, which lacks an acceptable metaphysical solution, an acceptable goal for his efforts to find meaning in life. The world is empty, scarred by the absence of God, which leaves a void, *"the obliteration of an unbearable presence."*<sup>2</sup> Beckett makes time a major theme and structural element of his work. The essay on Proust (1930) reveals that he is interested in major Proustian theme. In the essay Beckett describes time as monstrous and ambivalent, *„... that double-headed monster of damnation and salvation ..., a superior and hostile force in relation to man."*<sup>3</sup> All Beckett's characters live in the anguished world of their minds, wherein time is empty, repetitive and vacuous, *:" I say I used to say, Winnie, you are changeless, there is never any difference between one fraction of a second and the next."*<sup>4</sup> The essential experience of modern man is to feel “time as cancer” (Beckett),

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<sup>1</sup> Samuel Beckett to Tom Driver (Summer 1961), reprinted in Lawrence Graver and Raymond Federman eds., *Samuel Beckett: The Critical*

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Heritage (Routledge and Kegan Ltd., London: 1997), p.219.

<sup>2</sup> Martin Esslin, *Samuel Beckett: A Collection of Critical Essays* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall Inc., 1965), p. 18.

<sup>3</sup> Samuel Beckett *Proust*, Grove Press .1957.. p. 1

<sup>4</sup> Samuel Beckett .*Happy Days:A Play in Two Acts*. Grove Press. New York. 1961. P. 60

as an acute sense of the discontinuity of duration and total dependence upon a creation continually repeated. These results a very close to non-existence and an endless undefinable anguish, the void of the present.

*"There is no escape from the hours and the days. Neither from tomorrow nor from yesterday. There is no escape from yesterday because yesterday has deformed us, or been deformed by us ... Deformation has taken place. Yesterday is not a milestone that has passed, but a daystone on the beaten track of the years, and irremediably part of us, within us, heavy and dangerous. We are not merely more weary because of yesterday, we are other no longer what we were before - the calamity of yesterday {...} we are in the position of Tantalus, with this difference, that we allow ourselves to be tantalized ".<sup>5</sup>*

For Beckett life in time is suffering for being born forever: we have been thrown out of eternity and we must really go through time painfully, minute by minute. Timelessness deconstructs or even made impossible the Self and the transcendental signified through the continual annulment of time. Timelessness in Beckett's works conveys the impossibility of reaching the essence (Sartre) and splits up the linear time of history and Self, that which is outside time: presence is always overshadowed by the impossibility of making any presence real and at the same time the past is forgotten (or almost), because the lack of memory is typical characteristic of Beckett personage.

*"The question may be asked, off the record, why time doesn't pass, doesn't pass from you, why it piles up all about you, instant on instant, on all sides, deeper and deeper, thicker and thicker, your time, others' time, the time of the ancient dead and the dead yet unborn, why it buries you grain by grain neither dead or alive, with no memory of anything, no knowledge, no history and no prospects, buried under the seconds, saying any old thing, your mouth full of sand, oh I know it's immaterial, time is one thing, I another, but the question may be asked, why time doesn't pass, just like that, off the record, en passant, to pass the time ".<sup>6</sup>*

This sense of time annihilation expresses the infinite deferral of signified to itself. Meaning presents itself as the presence of absence. Time, that Beckett's personage experiences, could be described with M. Blanchot's words: "it is a time in which time and all

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid 3

<sup>6</sup> Samuel Beckett. Three Novels: Molloy, Malone Dies, The Unnamable. New York: Grove, 1965., 541-542

*that it contains (for example, the I of experience) is dispossessed of any future ....hollowing out of the present, a hollowing indefinitely distended, as of a present to which we are no longer present". And there is nothing like a release, as if we have transcended time, not an epiphany that transports us to the timeless, rather "we are delivered over to another time-to time as Other, as Absence and neutrality...A time without event, without project, without possibility."*<sup>7</sup>

## **II. Beckett's Waiting a double-headed monster of damnation and salvation**

According to Paul Ricoeur there is an "intractable reality" (Time and Narrative, vol.1) to time, which resists all attempts to reduce or internalize it to consciousness. But those aporias find a kind of poetic resolution in narrative. He argued that narrative responds to problems of time, which philosophy of itself cannot resolve, are different and in some respects more fruitful. Waiting (for Godot) represents in a most explicit way this intractable reality with the central theme, that is the subject of my article: the Phenomenon of Waiting as a sign of damnation and salvation.<sup>8</sup>

Beckett's Waiting is investigated mostly like damnation. I would stress on Waiting like a Sign of Life and Salvation in the most famous drama of Nobel prize winner.

"Waiting for Godot" represents the world of Vladimir and Estragon as one of chaos, devoid of any meaningful structure or pattern. Time cannot be applied in this world where a day can end without notice and where the characters cannot remember their actions from the previous day. Time (and space) is essentially meaningless, as it is only experienced by the terminal repetition of waiting with no end. For Beckett Waiting is not a destruction, but it is the liberation from fear, desire, personality, attachment: It is not only the Void, that engulfed the protagonist. It is the only sign of Life itself.

This statement sounds like a paradox, but I will try to explain the power of this paradox.

## **III. Waiting as the Spiral of the Long Shifting Threshold**

*We are waiting for nothing. Yet, since we are unable to leave, and since we are waiting, there must be someone or something, that makes us wait".*

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<sup>7</sup> Maurice Blanchot: *The Refusal of Philosophy* By Gerald L. Bruns. The Johns Hopkins Univeristy Press, Baltimore.2005. p..210

<sup>8</sup> Genevieve Lloyd. *Being in Time: Selves and Narrators in Philosophy and Literature*, p. 7

Samuel Beckett, *Waiting for*

*Godot*

Waiting is the fundamental project of meaning in Vladimir and Estragon lives. Another attribute of what Beckett calls the “*Time cancer*”, besides habit, is memory or precisely the lack of it. Vladimir often remind to Estragon that they are in fact waiting for Godot even then Estragon is very much uncertain about Godot's identity. They both have some doubts about the fact that they are waiting: the waiting is quite certain, whereas Godot as the object of waiting is quite uncertain. With the displacement of main coordinates personages spinning out of orbit and entered the spiral movement of an endless waiting, that assembles and disperses all structures of drama.

*“The themes of waiting and forgetting, taken together, embody the oscillating structure of the trace, and function to negate determinacy, and suspend thought in an incessant search for presence. At the level of syntax, language undergoes a “neutralisation” [...] Forgetting, waiting. Waiting that assembles, disperses; forgetting that disperses, assembles. Waiting, forgetting (AwO 32).”*<sup>9</sup>

Waiting (for Godot) could be described as the Spiral of never ending movement, characterized by no deictic words and the lack of signification: *a wrought movement of desultory purposelessness, characterized by the paradoxical play of signifiers voiding themselves of meaning, already always on the way to nothing, but always by way of something.*<sup>10</sup>

Some consider the spiral as the symbol of the spiritual journey. It is also considered to represent the evolutionary process of learning and growing. It seems that life doesn't proceed in a straight line. The path of life more closely resembles a spiral. We seem to pass the same point over and over again but from a different perspective each time. To walk and then stand in the centre of a spiral or labyrinth has been a psycho-spiritual exercise for centring the consciousness. But this spiral movement is not meant to evoke the progression. The rhythm it sets is not that of an moving up, it is rather moving up and down without an exit – build-up of entropy, where morbid motion gives the impression of being alive.

Beckett's *Waiting* eschews every point of and origin and an end, putting the personages in the repetition of gestures, conversation, games and failure. When time and space are

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<sup>9</sup> <http://arts.monash.edu.au/ecps/colloquy/journal/issue010/khatab.pdf>

<sup>10</sup> <http://www.arts.monash.edu.au/ecps/colloquy/journal/issue010/willits.pdf>

deemphasized, the conceptual (i.e. abstraction) is foregrounded. In “Waiting for Godot” like in the myth the main point is the recurrence (time and place are without any important significance) of the same or similar concepts. Myth tends to recycle the same elements ad infinitum, just like Beckett’s tramps waited for ever again and again. Recurrence itself is linked with cycle of life and death. Blanchot wrote in “Awaiting Oblivion” (*L’Attente l’oubli*, 1962) that waiting appears as a temporal paradox: the temporality of waiting involves both the deprivation of time and the gift of time, a lack and a surplus and instils a fundamental temporal alienation from one’s self - *an image of non-being into being-present* (someone putted in situation of Waiting is distanced from the present time and place). On other side Waiting is the threshold, the image of life into all death imagine in Beckett’s plays and novels: a threshold between time and timelessness, space and not-space, I and Not-I, Life and Not-life. Death, at the same time, is ineluctable and impossible. Because he is already dead, man will never die. As Beckett puts it in one of his poems, peace will come when the treading of the thresholds will stop, and the protagonists will be able to “*cease from those long shifting thresholds and live the space of a door / that opens and shuts*”. (Beckett)<sup>11</sup>

Waiting is a hiatus – a black hole in the linear time: it is a margin between present and future. A threshold is used to describe the atemporal, but the people (in situation of Waiting) are still desperately temporal (that is the real connection with life) even though they are drawing ever closer to atemporality. In the second act Gogo and Didi at first mistaked Pozzo and Lucky for Godot. Therefore, we are able to see the changes that his coming would have initiated for them:

*“Vladimir: We are no longer alone, waiting for the night, waiting for Godot, waiting for waiting. Now it's over, it ts already tomorrow...”*

*Time flows again already. The sun will set, the moon rise, and we away from here.”<sup>12</sup>*

### III. Waiting as The Sign of Life. Hope and Laugh...with no End

*Vladimir: Say, I am happy.*

*Estragon: I am happy.*

*Vladimir: So am I.*

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<sup>11</sup> <http://mural.uv.es/sagrau/textos/poems.html>

<sup>12</sup> [http://samuel-beckett.net/Waiting\\_for\\_Godot\\_Part2.html](http://samuel-beckett.net/Waiting_for_Godot_Part2.html)

Estragon: So am I.

Vladimir: We are happy.

Estragon. We are happy. (Silence). What do we do, now that we are happy?

Once I presented a paper, in that I made a comparison between Beckett waiting and Dante`s purgatory. Then I revised my opinion. Now I think Beckett`s Waiting has another much powerful side, after I was challenged to find an answer to the question, posed by M. Blanchot in his essay “Where now. Who now”

*“Who is speaking in the books of Beckett? What is this tireless “I” that seemingly always says the same thing? Where does it hope to come? What does the author, who must be somewhere, hope for? What do we hope for, when we read? Or perhaps he has entered a circle where he turns obscurely, led on by a wandering speech, one that is not deprived of meaning, but deprived of center, that does not begin, does not end...”*<sup>13</sup>

It is well known that the true despair is only possible if there is hope. Waiting (for Godot) is the brilliant Sign of Hope:(If Godot arrive, we will be saved.)

Where does it hope to come!? May be it is in the “conclusion” made by Vladimir in act 2 :

*“What are we doing here, that is the question. And we are blessed in this, that we happen to know the answer. Yes, in this immense confusion one thing alone is clear. We are waiting for Godot to come.”*<sup>14</sup>

In Beckett's world the loss and recovery of Self, life and death, joy and sadness is replaced by the *risus purus*, because *Nothingness lies coiled in the heart of Being* (Sartre). This margin place, this black hole in time, full of intensity creates the Haven of Hope, wick Adorno identifies as the “*slightest difference*” (kleinste Differenz) within the negative, between nothingness and coming to rest. The genius of Beckett fulfils this *in-between- place* with humour, but not with laughter itself. The most critics neglected the role of Beckett`s humour, including such famous like Blanchot and Adorno or have compared his irony with the idea of *Eternal Return*. Nietzsche`s laughter is the laughter of affirmation and ecstasy, whereas Beckett`s laughter is the sardonic laughter of derision, which is actually much more tragic. It is the *risis purus*, that is the true resistance to nihilism and falling in the Darkness. According to Simon Critchley(in his

<sup>13</sup> Maurice Blanchot. *The Book to Come* p.210

<sup>14</sup> [http://samuel-beckett.net/Waiting\\_for\\_Godot\\_Part2.html](http://samuel-beckett.net/Waiting_for_Godot_Part2.html)

book *On Humour*)<sup>15</sup> the *risus purus* is the smile combining the pleasure and the pain, the sublimity and suffering of the human situation - that is the essence of humour. This is the *risus purus*, the highest laugh, the laugh that laughs at the laugh, that laughs at that which is unhappy, the mirthless laugh.

As usual, Beckett's audience is confronted with a paradox: Instead of leaving the spectator or reader vulnerable and depressed his agonising vision often provokes quite the opposite effect. The clownish miserable tramps are magically placed within a protective circle. The feeling of extreme despair equals the one of extreme hope.

*"Nothing is funnier than unhappiness, I grant you that—and his lightning traces of wit illuminate a moonless, starless night; but those traces also allow us to see the night as such."*<sup>16</sup>

We pass the time, Beckett tells us, waiting for a meaning that will save us - save us from the pain, ugliness, emptiness of existence. Perhaps the meaning is God, but we do not know Him. He is always promised us but he never recognisably appears. Our life is thus a constant waiting, always essentially the same, till time itself ceases to have significance or substance. The only answer given - apart from suicide, which is reticently hinted at - **is to wait**.

Waiting is the metaphor of being alive, the unanxious peering into the depths of abyss - that Beckett called Nothingness. It postpones the painful revelation that life has no meaning (according to Beckett). To mask the Void, where his personages are falling endlessly, to postpone this empty time, which is the infinite time of death, Beckett force them to speak incessantly and to play games whatever the cost. The brilliance of grotesque humour detaches the characters of the anguish of this meaningless being in order to reattach them to the ordinary time of a story or a game. All this is possible during the time of Waiting, because it masks the hopelessness and Void. It is the white colour nuance the writer daubed over the black coloured existence of being.

There is a delicate relationship between comedy and tragedy, between pathos and irony, negation and affirmation, despair and liveliness. Often comedy is much more tragic than tragedy and much more about death. Tragedy is about

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<sup>15</sup> *Simon Critchley On Humour*. Routledge, 2002

<sup>16</sup> *Simon Critchley. Very Little-- Almost Nothing: Death, Philosophy, Literature*. Routledge. London. 1997. P.: 158

making death meaningful. The public experience catharsis and we all go away with a light heart. Comedy is about the inability to achieve that catharsis. So either you can't die in comedy, which is why "Waiting for Godot" is a tragicomedy: nobody can't hang themselves and it's funny. Now what's the more tragic thought: life coming to an end or life going on forever? The worst thing would be not death but life carrying on forever and Beckett's comedy is about that. Placed in the perspective of an eternal waiting, in the shadows of darkness and lack of meaning, Beckett's tramps are ridiculously funny- Estragon's lament over his aching feet, Vladimir's complains of his friend's sweaty socks, games of swapping hats and boots, suicide debates and attempts. *"Beckett's humour at its most powerful—and perhaps verbal humour as such, one thinks of the genius of Groucho Marx—is a paradoxical form of speech that defeats our expectations, producing laughter with its unexpected verbal inversions, contortions and explosions, a refusal of everyday speech that lights up the everyday: estranged, indigent and distorted, 'as it will appear one day in the messianic light.'"*<sup>17</sup>

I do not believe, that there are funniest scenes of suicide in the world literature and theatre, then this one in "Waiting for Godot". In Act 1 the suicide is contemplated as a distraction, which could result in *"an erection...and all that follows."* This is followed by banter about who should be hanged first—who is lighter or heavier—but the tramps decide to do nothing (*"It's safer"*). In Act 2, at the end of the play, the topic of hanging themselves reemerges. This time they engage in a sort of vaudevillian routine in which they try to use Estragon's trouser-cord as a rope, but Estragon's pants fall down and the rope breaks. A poignant dialogue ensues:

*Vladimir: Not worth a curse.*

*Estragon: You say we have to come back tomorrow?*

*Vladimir: Yes.*

*Estragon: Then we can bring a good bit of rope.*

*Vladimir: Yes.*

*Estragon: Didi.*

*Vladimir: Yes.*

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<sup>17</sup> Simon Critchley. *Very Little-- Almost Nothing: Death, Philosophy, Literature*. Routledge. London. 1997. p.159

*Estragon: I can't go on like this.*

*Vladimir: That's what you think.*

*Estragon: If we parted? That might be better for us.*

*Vladimir: We'll hang ourselves tomorrow. Unless Godot comes.*

*Estragon: And if he comes?*

*Vladimir: We'll be saved.*<sup>18</sup>

It is not coincidental that Beckett greatly admired Charlie Chaplin, who made an entire generation poignantly aware of the perils of being-in-the world. The metaphysical basis for the comicality of clowns, according to Gunther Anders, seems to rest in their inability to distinguish being from non-being, with the result that they are always falling over non-existing obstacles or treating real obstacles as if they were non-existing.<sup>19</sup>

“Waiting for Godot” reminds me of the famous Roberto Bernin’s movie (winner of the Oscar for it) “Life is Beautiful”. Bernini represented one of the most terrible and tragic life history-

a Jewish family is inserted into a concentration camp and how the father makes from this situation a game for his son. And movie is funny and we laugh all the time.

According to Bachtin the dialogic quality of parody and irony resides in the fact they imply an inner debate between a mocked a mocking “voice”, each actively eliciting the other, while vying for control. *The two may test and contest one another, as well as related aspects of society and culture. In other cases the process helps prepare the way for transformation.*<sup>20</sup>

By exploiting the humour and the comic ambivalence of language he uses it against itself to reveal the absurdity if human life and compromise at the same time the sense of nothingness and despair. Like Simon Critchley wrote Beckett’s humour is at the level of idiom, in the fine grain of details and its goal is nothing less than the core of the eddy. It is the force that operates the endless spiral moving of Waiting.

*It's something that gets in the way of the perfect Aufhebung ( Hegel ) or synthesis, resolution. And I think that lots of the slapstick in Beckett is about that failure:the failure*

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<sup>18</sup> [http://samuel-beckett.net/Waiting\\_for\\_Godot\\_](http://samuel-beckett.net/Waiting_for_Godot_)

<sup>19</sup> Günther Anders, “Being without Time: On Beckett’s Play *Waiting for Godot*,” in *Samuel Beckett: A Collection of Critical Essays*, 14

<sup>20</sup> Sylvie Debevic Henning „Beckett’s Critical Complicity: Carnival, Contestation, and Tradition p. 2

*of tragedy, the failure of matter to get aufgehobt, to go up there and be sublime. We want to go to the heavens as heroes but we trip over our own shoelaces and piss ourselves. Mercier limits the humor and grotesque to the role of guard duty on the borders of our physical existence.* <sup>21</sup>

By creating grotesque images, parody, irony, by his clown personages Samuel Beckett reveals the limitations and narrowness of any philosophical interpretation of his works. Undermining the most important and significant concepts like absurdity of human life, nothingness, the problem of identity, he puts into question the favourite critic interpretations of its: the endless despair, emptiness and lack of meaning in human life. The carnivalesque dimension counter this tendency, commenting ironically upon our culture repeated attempts to do away with the problematic aspects of existence and even mocking our desire to do so.

*“The buffoon shares with Hermes the fact that he too is a mediator between life and death, between fertility and underworld....The jester, clown or fool of old has been the character through whom the spectator have been able to vent their anxieties, turning them into liberating and facetiously defying bellows of laughter, who evokes a certain reconciliation, someone who escapes the dance of death.”*<sup>22</sup>

Beckett's grotesque perspective affirmed from one hand that human life has no meaning, that is full of suffering and anguish and on other hand subverted it in a funny and unique way.

POZZO:

*Up! Pig! (Noise of Lucky getting up.) On! (Exit Pozzo.) Faster! On! Adieu! Pig! Yip! Adieu!*  
*Long silence.*

VLADIMIR:

*That passed the time.*

ESTRAGON:

*It would have passed in any case.*

VLADIMIR:

*Yes, but not so rapidly.*

*Pause.*

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<sup>21</sup> Vivian Mercier, *The Irish Comic Tradition* (1962; New York: Oxford UP, 1969) 49.

<sup>22</sup> *Matheus Franciscus Maria Berk. The Magic Fluite.p.16*

ESTRAGON:

*What do we do now?*

VLADIMIR:

*I don't know.*

ESTRAGON:

*Let's go.*

VLADIMIR:

*We can't.*

ESTRAGON:

*Why not?*

VLADIMIR:

*We're waiting for Godot.*

ESTRAGON:

*(despairingly). Ah!*

*Pause.*<sup>23</sup>

The Endless Waiting in Beckett's drama pervades any signification, because it is impossible the concurrence of the signifier and signified. Derrida insists upon a joyous affirmation. Beckett's creative world is without origin and truth, without fault.

A great text is like a machine, capable of producing multiple meanings. "Waiting for Godot" constitutes a temptation to a variety of interpretations, where every conclusion is neither true nor false: it is the Phenomenon of Waiting.

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<sup>23</sup> [http://samuel-beckett.net/Waiting\\_for\\_Godot\\_](http://samuel-beckett.net/Waiting_for_Godot_)