

A LACANIAN READING OF SAMUEL BECKETT'S WAITING FOR GODOT

Swayamdipta Das

M.Phil Scholar at University of Calcutta

swayamdiptadas22@gmail.com

Abstract

Since its first performance in 1953, the Absurdist play's very depiction of the act of waiting for someone or something which has no real existence has for long been read along existential lines. The very presence of Godot through its absence in the lives of Vladimir and Estragon and their constant search for it throughout their lives constitutes not only an ontological or an existential crisis marked in post world war Europe but is indicative of a much deeper psychological crisis at the heart of the human characters. As such Waiting for Godot can be seen as being invested with a deeply complex psychical structure that tries to demonstrate the fundamental crises and desires of the human psyche. In this paper, I will attempt to demonstrate using French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan's theories regarding the formation of the subject and his concepts on human desire, how the absent Godot is forever internalized in the human psyche and how the search for Godot is forever deferred in the symbolic order. Martin Esslin in his book The Theatre of the Absurd says that the search for Godot is an unconscious 'search for the self' and the play itself can be seen as dramatizing the relation between the Innenwelt and the Umwelt (the Inner and the Outer). My analysis of the play will show how Godot symbolizes that alienating destination in which the characters project themselves, it is a search for a sense of wholeness, synthesis with the earlier specular image which never existed in the first place and thus renders the search as forever deferring.

Samuel Beckett's Waiting for Godot, since its first appearance in 1953, has remained the centre of attraction in literary circles for numerous reasons. Its depiction of a search and endless wait for Godot has been seen by many as typifying the existential crisis of man in post-war period who has been left devoid of the age old faith in God which had sustained him for so long. It perhaps exemplifies what Žižek would often call the fall of the 'Big Other' in the modern period followed by the reinstating faith in the small 'big others'. As Nietzsche had said long back in The Gay Science that the absence of faith in a higher moral authority would plunge us into a state of absolute chaos, this play shows us a typically helpless condition of man in post war modern era when there remains nothing else to do but to hope and wait for Godot who would perhaps redeem us all one day. Godot never arrives but

Vladimir and Estragon find themselves in a situation in which there remains nothing else to be done- but wait for Godot.

In this paper I would try to locate Godot in Lacan's discourses on human desire, subjectivity, and language or the symbolic order itself and will show how Godot is ever present and internalized in the human psyche. The ever absent Godot is forever present in the psychic kernel of all of us and serves as a fundamental unit in the rationale of all human discourses.

Waiting for Godot and the sublime object of human desire

The play itself can be seen as exemplifying Lacan's discourses on human 'desire'. In Homer's Iliad there is a line describing the chase between Achilles and Hector : "As in a dream, the pursuer never succeeds in catching up with the fugitive whom he is after, and the fugitive likewise cannot ever clearly escape his pursuer; so Achilles that day did not succeed in attaining Hector, and Hector was not able to escape him definitely". Commenting on this line Slavoj Zizek says , "What we have here is thus the relation of the subject to the object experienced by every one of us in a dream: the subject, faster than the object, gets closer and closer to it and yet can never attain it—the dream paradox of a continuous approach to an object that nevertheless preserves a constant distance" (6). And thus, in a way as Lacan indicated , Achilles could never attain Hector: he is either too fast or too slow. This example runs parallel to Zeno's paradox regarding Achilles and the tortoise. Lacan's discourses on human desire is also somehow based upon this paradox. The libidinal economy of the case of Achilles and Hector or Achilles and the tortoise is here made clear: the paradox stages the relation of the subject to the object-cause of its desire, which can never be attained. The object-cause is always missed; all we can do is encircle it in the symbolic order. In short, the topology of this paradox of Zeno is the paradoxical topology of the object of desire that eludes our grasp no matter what we do to attain it. It is also the unattainability of the object of desire that sustains desire. Thus for Lacan the subject is always placed in an impossible relation to the object-cause of its desire and this relation is what causes the object to circulate endlessly in the economy of human desire.

The very paradox of human desire consists in this: we mistake for postponement of the "thing itself" what is already the "thing itself," we mistake for the searching and indecision proper to desire what is, in fact, the realization of desire. That is to say, the realization of desire does not consist in its being "fulfilled," "fully satisfied," it coincides rather with the reproduction of desire as such, with its circular movement. Thus the desire's full satisfaction is always postponed indefinitely into a state that reproduces the 'lack' constitutive of desire. We can in this way also grasp the specificity of the Lacanian notion of anxiety: anxiety occurs not when the object-cause of desire is lacking; it is not the lack of the object that gives rise to anxiety but, on the contrary, the danger of our getting too close to the object and thus losing the lack itself. Anxiety is brought on by the disappearance of desire.

Vladimir and Estragon's endless search for Godot finally resulting in a further search and wait for him perfectly exemplifies the economy and paradox of human desire as explained by Lacan. Godot can never appear on stage because the appearance of Godot would render the circuit of desire in Vladimir and Estragon as closed. Moreover the innate incapacity of language fully to articulate desire extends to subjectivity insofar as it, too, is a function of the symbolic order. The surplus which is left over after every attempt to articulate desire, to bring it to a halt and see it coincide once and for all with some particular object or configuration of objects (or signifier or configuration of signifiers), however frustrating, is also the very lifeblood of subjectivity, as it forestalls the necessary corollary to the fulfilment of desire, the dissolution of the subject. Thus in order to sustain the desire of both the characters on stage Godot must always remain an unattainable object of desire. Godot remains the always deferred object of desire in the play. Its role in the symbolic order is precisely to sustain desire in an never ending chain of signifiers. It must be noted that both Vladimir and Estragon try to configure different objects as Godot without success. The identity of Godot is endlessly deferred in the course of the play. The fact that desire is born at the moment of the infant's accession to the symbolic order (i.e. at the same moment as the infant becomes a subject) leads Lacan to maintain that it is part and parcel of the signifying chain in its essential metonymy: "man's desire is a metonymy. [...] desire is a metonymy" (Lacan 175). The perpetual reference of one signifier to all others in an eternal deferral of meaning as content, as "consisting" in any one sign, as present in any way, is but another formulation of the ceaseless movement of desire. This shows that Godot serves the role not only that of the object of desire but also as the object cause of desire. It perhaps also constitutes what Lacan and other post structuralists would call a central lack in the signifying chain.

It is also perhaps possible to show that Godot can be seen as an embodiment of object *petite a* in Lacan's discourse on desire... *Objet a* is the name we give to the lack generated by the infant's entry into the symbolic (at the injunction of the law in its incarnation as the paternal function); it identifies that which is lost as the individual becomes a subject. As such, it is both the object of the subject's desire (and hence, due to the biological constraints of temporality, coincident with the death drive) and its cause. It is the object of desire insofar as the subject compulsively strives toward it. It is the cause of desire in its phylogenetic persistence in the psyche as a trace of that lost plenitude toward which desire tends; without this trace experience, desire would have neither object nor cause – it would not exist.

According to Slavoj Žižek, "the object *a* is an object that can be perceived only by a gaze 'distorted' by desire, an object that does not exist for an 'objective' gaze. In other words, the object *a* is always, by definition, perceived in a distorted way, because outside this distortion, 'in itself,' it does not exist, since it is nothing but the embodiment, the materialization of this very distortion, of this surplus of confusion and perturbation introduced by desire into so-called 'objective reality.' The object *a* is 'objectively' nothing, though, viewed from a certain

perspective, it assumes the shape of ‘something’ (Zizek 13). Godot too does not exist objectively, it is only through the distorted lens of desire that Godot can be perceived by the two main characters in the play. This “something” which arises out of “nothing” is the “anamorphic object, a pure semblance that we can perceive clearly only by ‘looking awry’ ” (Zizek 14).

Godot as “the answer of the real”

The words most commonly used to define the Lacanian “real” are “ineffable” and “impossible”: “it is impossible to imagine, impossible to integrate into the symbolic order, and impossible to attain in any way” (Evans 160). Although the “real” is seen as something beyond the symbolic domain, the “real” persists (it ex-sists without existing) as a necessary component of the RSI nexus. Evans compares the Lacanian “real” to the Kantian thing-in-itself as “an unknowable x” (205). However unlike the thing-in-itself, however, the “real” is not an abstraction toward which one must turn one’s attention if it is to be experienced. Rather, the “real” insistently makes its presence known through periodic irruptions into the other two orders, unsettling their modes of organising the world and insisting on its equal, if rather more obscure, place in the Borromean topology of subjectivity. Thus, whereas the Kantian thing-in-itself exists always cloaked behind its representations in the epistemological categories to which it is subjected (i.e. whereas its materiality is perpetually cloaked by its abstraction), the “real” actively solicits the attention of the individual, often through an aggressive insistence on its materiality, making itself felt through the very impermeable border which prevents access to it.

For the symbolic order to persist, for things to have some meaning, it must be confirmed by some contingent piece of the “real”. This is something what Zizek would call as the “answer of the real”- a sign given by the “thing” itself. It signifies that at a certain point the “real” and the symbolic network have been crisscrossed and “the real itself has complied with the signifier’s appeal” (Zizek 28). It is as if we await the “answer of the real” at times to comply with the logic and validity of the symbolic order. The wait and curiosity for the answer of the “real” can be seen as somehow similar to the condition Vladimir and Estragon have placed themselves in. Their waiting for Godot corresponds closely to an awaiting for an answer from the “real”. The symbolic order which they occupy in the world is at once shown to be drab and monotonous. One of the features of the Absurdist Theatre can be seen as exemplifying the automotive repetitive function of the symbolic order- a space which continually unfolds meaning without actually leading anywhere and at the heart of which is a central abyss, a gap which the subject feels acutely because the subject is always initiated into the symbolic order as a barred subject. The central ‘lack’ and the absurdity which the Theatre of the Absurd tries to show is precisely the problems which are at the heart of the all encompassing symbolic order- a central lack around which it is structured and the subject which always can only

emerge into the symbolic order as a barred subject at the heart of which there is a central lack.

The infant's entry into the symbolic is a traumatic event in which the original sense of integrity, wholeness, presence, and identification (associated with the primary narcissism of the imaginary order) is lost forever. Even the imaginary compensations of ego formation now recede from consciousness as the irremediable gap between the individual and that which it desires (the ideal-ego, the mother's body, plenitude) comes to the fore as the organising principle of the totalising force of the symbolic order. The repetitive automatism of the signifying chain is thus a compensatory gesture, an obsessive attempt by the symbolic order (and the subjects who live in and by it) to cover over the lack/absence which organises it. The signifying chain must always remain in motion, doubling back on itself and deferring any presence of meaning as content, in order to forestall the terrifying confrontation with this originary and constitutive "absence". In effect, the symbolic order achieves a sustained deferral of this confrontation, proffering alternative signifiers as provisional substitutive compensations for the irremediable lack created in its radical reorganisation of the world.

The Theatre of the Absurd perfectly exemplified by Beckett in his plays (including *Waiting for Godot*) precisely delves into such problems located at the heart of the signifying chain that orders the reality for us. One of the major problems with the symbolic order is also that, although it orders the reality for us and produces meaning, it also runs the risk of devolving into a psychotic process of pure linguistic self-referentiality with any external reference. And this is perhaps where the Lacanian "real" steps in. The role of the Lacanian "real" is "radically ambiguous: true, it erupts in the form of a traumatic return, derailing the balance of our daily lives, but it serves at the same time as a support of this very balance" (Zizek 27). Writing on the role of the Lacanian Real as vital in sustaining the symbolic order Zizek also states that "There is no symbolic communication without some "piece of the real" to serve as a kind of pawn guaranteeing its consistency" (27). Thus the "Real" is not "something that resists symbolization, as a meaningless leftover that cannot be integrated into the symbolic universe, but, on the contrary, as its last support" (28). Zizek in his famous book *How to Read Lacan* writes of something called "a little piece of the real" or an "answer of the real". His main argument is that for the symbolic order to function properly, for things to have some meaning, that meaning must be confirmed by some contingent piece of the "real" that can be read as a "sign". The very word sign, in opposition to the arbitrary mark, pertains to the "answer of the real": the "sign" is given by the thing itself, it indicates that at least at a certain point, the abyss separating the real from the symbolic network has been crossed, i.e., that the "real" itself has complied with the signifier's appeal. This "answer of the real" is thus something that protects the symbolic order from becoming a signifying chain of absolute self-referentiality leading to a psychotic state for the subject as stated earlier. As the symbolic field is in itself always already barred, crippled, porous, structured around some extimate

kernel, some impossibility, the function of the “little piece of the real” is precisely to fill out the place of this void that gapes in the very heart of the symbolic. The “answer of the real” is thus that psychotic kernel that serves as a kind of a support for the symbolic reality perceived by the subject.

This obsession with the “ little piece of the real” or an “answer of the real” can be identified in Vladimir and Estragon’s wait and search for Godot. Godot in a way can never belong to the symbolic domain, it remains outside it and Vladimir and Estragon’s attempts to bring it within the symbolic kernel , to give some ostensible meaning to it all go in vain. Thus Godot can easily be seen as that ‘little piece of the real’ or more aptly as that ‘answer of the real’ which Vladimir and Estragon desperately wait for perhaps in a world gone rendered much more meaningless and crippled by the World Wars. Zizek himself states that in “moments of social crisis (wars, plagues), unusual celestial phenomena (comets, eclipses, etc.) are read as prophetic signs” (28). These prophetic signs are perceived by us as the “answers of the real”. It renders stability to the absolutely self-referential psychotic structure of the symbolic space and ensures that there is at least an external point of reference, a sign which though outside the structure, renders the psychological kernel of the symbolic from becoming psychotic. Godot is thus that “answer of the real”, perhaps that interstitial space connecting the symbolic and the “real” in the Borromean knot, that keeps the entire symbolic order stable or in the words of Zizek “that pawn guaranteeing its consistency” (26). Although Godot never appears in the play, it’s presence is forever internalized in the psychological kernel of Vladimir and Estragon as that “little piece of the real” that must be out there somehow providing the symbolic reality of their lives a kernel or a point of reference which is beyond the symbolic domain and yet paradoxically transfixes it and provides us with hope of a ‘beyond’ of the stifling and never ending self-referential symbolic network. Moreover Vladimir and Estragon’s attitude towards Godot also suffices to Zizek’s definition of the “answer of the real” as providing a kind of an illusion that it “ was not placed there by us but found there” (Zizek 30) , in other words its power of fascination emanates not from its immediate property but because of the place it occupies in the structure. Thus waiting for Godot becomes for Vladimir and Estragon an awaiting for an “answer of the real” not because of the inherent qualities they perceive to be there in Godot but simply because of the special place they believe Godot inherits in the structure (or more precisely “beyond” the structurality of the structure as the “thing” itself or a pure, transcendental referential sign).

Godot as the alienating destination in the imaginary order and the symbolic domain

The Lacanian concepts on subject formation or the formation of the ‘I’ is rooted in the formative stages of the infant beginning with the mirror stage and then the imaginary order (one of the key components in the Borromean knot- the triad of the R.S.I). The Imaginary order is the precursor to subjectivity, it is the realm of unarticulated (but articulable)

identifications and idealisations which are the building blocks of fantasy and ego; it is the most basic level of self-conception and subjectivity formation. The imaginary order which is initiated after the mirror stage results in the ability to perceive the differences between self and other (which amounts to the advent of the self), inaugurating the lifelong quest to return to the pre-imaginary stage of primary narcissism during which there was no differentiation between self and other. In pursuit of this impossible goal the individual develops fantasised identifications that reassure him or her by imaginatively reducing difference to identification, producing in the process an imago or ideal ego, the vision of him or herself which he or she takes to be the essence of identity.

The mirror stage taking place between the ages of six and eighteen months is not merely a developmental stage which is left behind once it has been traversed, but "represents a fundamental [and enduring] aspect of the structure of subjectivity" (Evans 115). Starting with the notion that "there is a real specific prematurity of birth in man" (Lacan 4), Lacan holds that the lack of motor control observed in human infants is countered by an advanced degree of visual ability. The disjunction between this underdeveloped motor control and advanced visual ability attains a formative status when the infant first beholds his or her own image, whether in a mirror or in the imitative actions of another person. Confronted with his or her own mirror image, the infant recognises it as his or her own. That is, at this point, the infant human undergoes a process of radical recognition whereby he or she projects the contents of his or her own consciousness onto the specular image with which he or she is confronted. The traumatic aspect of this recognition comes from the infant's recognition of the organic wholeness of the specular image, which stands in glaring contrast to the perceived fragmentation of his or her own body due to his or her underdeveloped motor ability. He or she recognises the specular image as his or her own, but simultaneously recognises a fundamental incompatibility, one which seems to indicate a wholeness in the specular image which is as yet unavailable to the individual: "this Gestalt [...] symbolizes the mental permanence of the I, at the same time as it prefigures its alienating destination" (Lacan 2).

The infant admires the wholeness of the specular image in the mirror and desires identification with that image suppressing any awareness of its difference and producing the imaginary formation known as the ego (the always illusory and deceptive image one has of one's self which is). This advent of the ego "situates the agency of the ego, before its social determination, in a fictional direction, which will always remain irreducible for the individual" (Lacan2).

With the advent of the ego the individual enters the imaginary order and undertakes the lifelong series of identifications between ego and imaginary object (i.e. the imaginary attributes of a given object) which constitute the dynamic sense of "self". In other words, the ego formation is a primarily a process of alienation and méconnaissance (misrecognition) that will both facilitate the individual's accession to the symbolic order and plague him or her

with a sense of incompleteness throughout life. Thus the determinants of the ego and the 'self' are forever based on a fictive sense of identification with objects that are forever situated in an alienating destination. Basically, the imaginary is the scene in which the ego undertakes the perpetual and paradoxical practice of seeking "wholeness, synthesis, autonomy, duality and, above all, similarity" (Lacan 5) through identification with external objects. Each such identification is necessarily illusory, however, as it is but a pale imitation of the originary wholeness that was sacrificed in the primal identification of the ego with its specular image in the mirror stage.

This need of the human psyche to confirm its identity and sense of self-hood by means of identifying with objects external to itself is dramatized in the play *Waiting for Godot*. Vladimir and Estragon provide each other with this 'other' image of the mirror which becomes the source of identity, the source of the consciousness of the 'I' for each of them. And this is precisely the reason why they can never leave each other. As Estragon says, "We always find something, eh Didi, to give us the impression we exist?" (Beckett 112). They "have ... been together all the time now" for "Fifty years perhaps" (Beckett 84), as Vladimir answers to Estragon. What is happening here between the two can be precisely summed up in a stage direction in the text: "They look long at each other, then suddenly embrace ... End of the embrace. Estragon, no longer supported, almost falls" (Beckett 88). The human subject looks at the mirrored image, embraces (internalizes) it as its own identity, but when it is separated from it, it is not even able to stand. Thus, this fictional identity always carries with it the fear of breaking down into that primordial, disintegrated, fractured nothingness of the self. They have often felt: "We weren't made for the same road" (Beckett 85). But when Vladimir asks Estragon, "Then why do you always come crawling back?", Estragon says, "I don't know" (Beckett 90). Then again at another moment Estragon emphatically says, "I don't know why I don't know!" (Beckett 108). They do not know because this is the drama of the psyche given external form in the play. This is the tragic human condition since this duo represents "all humanity": Vladimir says, "at this place, at this moment of time, all mankind is us, whether we like it or not!".

The precariousness of the sense of identity formed at the onset of the mirror stage is also perfectly dramatized in the play by the way that both Vladimir and Estragon, time and again, lose balance, stagger, almost fall and sometimes fall indeed- for instance in the middle of the play, "Estragon loses his balance, almost falls. He clutches the arm of Vladimir, who totters" (Beckett 24) and again when Lucky dances, we see that Estragon "imitates Lucky, almost falls" (Beckett 59). The fictional sense of identity and selfhood based on unity, completeness that the infant experiences in the mirror stage is always challenged by the physical reality of the infant-his underdeveloped motor coordination. Thus Vladimir and Estragon falling down time and again can be seen as an onstage dramatization of the developmental stages of the infant in the mirror stage when the sense of unity and wholeness

imagined by the individual is forever challenged by the actual underdeveloped motor-coordination in the infant's body and thus they are bound to fall down often because they try to proceed with an internalized image of themselves at the heart of which there is a *méconnaissance*. Thus both Vladimir and Estragon, who are actually infants in the larger sense of the term, fall down often on stage. This is perhaps the risk of proceeding with a fantasized image of the self- but that is all we have in the face of nothingness.

Now as we enter into the world of language—which Lacan calls the Symbolic order—various names come to signify the “ideal-ego”, Lacan calls them “ego-ideals”. Here our identity enters forever into the unending chain of signifiers. For both Vladimir and Estragon, Godot is perhaps that alienating destination in which man projects himself, with the phantoms that dominate him —the “veiled imago”. As the symbolic order is something in which meaning is perpetually deferred along the unending chain of signifiers, in the play too, the identity and search for Godot is forever forestalled along the signifying chain. Thus if Godot is the promised identity for Vladimir and Estragon (and for all humanity for that matter), its position in the symbolic chain is bound to be forever deferred, every time taking up a new meaning and identity. Thus in the course of the play, various objects come to be identified as Godot by the two main characters. Lucky is at one time thought to be Godot and even the mall boy is thought to be Godot. The endlessly deferred search for Godot can be seen as a search for a sense of wholeness with the earlier specular image which never existed in the first place and thus renders the search in the symbolic chain as forever deferring. In the symbolic chain any final signifier becomes an impossibility and so there can only be an endless wait for Godot. The endless search for Godot and the random signification of different objects as Godot demonstrates the repetitive automatism of the signifying chain as a compensatory gesture to forestall the terrifying confrontation with the originary and constitutive absence or lack.

In *The Theatre of the Absurd*, Martin Esslin writes that an author of the Absurdist theatre writes not by logic, but by “his intuition of the human condition” (41). And therefore, Esslin writes again, “the Theatre of the Absurd concentrates on the power of stage imagery ... dredged up from the depth of the subconscious” (352). Beckett's powerful play can be seen as dramatizing some of basic conflicts and tendencies of the human unconscious. The search for Godot is forever internalized in the human psyche, its absent presence existing in all the realms of the Lacanian “real”, “symbolic” and the “imaginary”.

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