



**The Rev'd Canon  
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**Theatre and Theology as  
Transformative  
Encounter**

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**THE UNIVERSITY OF WINCHESTER**

**Theatre and Theology as Transformative Encounter: A critical theological  
analysis of Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, Harold Pinter's *The  
Birthday Party*, and David Hare's *Racing Demon*  
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## ABSTRACT

This dissertation explores the theological implications of three twentieth century plays: Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, Harold Pinter's *The Birthday Party*, and David Hare's *Racing Demon*, each of which has its own particular theological implications, giving rise to new ways of seeing and understanding God's way of being in the world.

*Waiting for Godot* is famously the play in which nothing happens, a parody of the absurdity of human existence. But if *Godot* is seen as a parable, then it is open to other interpretations, and can reveal within the action of the play, and particularly in the relationship between the protagonists, all manner of transcendental moments of hope and possible glimpses of God.

*The Birthday Party* also may seem nihilistic, an indictment of the ubiquity and of violent power and intimidation, but it also gives rise to consideration of the nature of an implicit countervailing power, one which is fundamental to Christian theology though often overlooked.

*Racing Demon* explores one particular parish as a microcosm of the Church of England, and behind this poses the fundamental choice between a theology based on origins and an unchanging tradition, and one which is open to the world and looks for divine possibilities within the joys and sorrows of everyday life.

The conclusion drawn is that the old top-down theology, which depends upon power and presence, can no longer hold, and that instead what might be called "God" is to be found within the current and events of life, a transcendence, which belongs with immanence.

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## Introduction

‘The only works we value to call classics are those which ... are complex and indeterminate enough to allow us our necessary pluralities.’<sup>1</sup>

In *The Empty Space*, Peter Brook writes, echoing the language of religious conversion, that a theatrical performance can well ‘amend my thinking for life’.<sup>2</sup> For Brook, such a moment of disclosure depends on a conjunction between the action of the play and the desire of the audience to see more clearly into itself. Brook certainly does not mean that any theatrical performance can do this. In fact much of his book is devoted to suggesting that much modern theatre is in practice “deadly”, by which he means it deals in the comfortable repetition of the known and familiar.<sup>3</sup> However, over against this all too common failure, he cites certain plays which have an enduring life-changing quality – ‘Two tramps under a tree, an old woman pulling a cart, a sergeant dancing, three people on a sofa in hell.’<sup>4</sup> These enduring images ‘scorch[es] on the memory an outline, a taste, a trace, a smell – a picture ... this will be the essence of what it has to say.’ For the American theologian, David Tracy, this is the hallmark of classic texts, which are those ‘that bear an excess or permanence of meaning, yet always resist definitive interpretation.’<sup>5</sup> They will prove resistant to any temptation to domesticate reality by neatly packaging it. We leave the theatre unsettled and possibly with our perceptions changed.

Of the many plays which have proved to have this inherent possibility, I have chosen three, each of which I believe can have such a transformative effect on the audience, though it is important to add that no such effect is guaranteed. First, so much will depend on the actual production and performance, and secondly on the receptiveness of each member of the audience. As with the parables of Jesus, any theatre audience today may ‘look, but not perceive, listen but not understand.’<sup>6</sup> Also, as with any classic texts, there will always be a surplus of meaning on which each production will draw. None of the plays we shall consider have had the last word spoken on them, and we can plumb them for meanings which may extend the author’s original intention,

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<sup>1</sup> Frank Kermode *The Classic: Literary Images of Permanence and Change* (New York: Viking Press, 1975) pp.117, 121.

<sup>2</sup> Peter Brook *The Empty Space* (London: Penguin Books, 1972) p.152.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid p.44.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid p.152.

<sup>5</sup> David Tracy *Plurality and Ambiguity: Hermeneutics, Religion, Hope* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1987) p.12.

<sup>6</sup> Mark 4: 12, NRSV.

but which will speak to our time. The same is true of biblical material. It too will be seen through the lens of the reader in his or her situation, and this mutual openness means that there can be a genuine interaction between different texts.

The first two, Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* and Harold Pinter's *Birthday Party*, have the track record to be rightly called classics. David Hare's *Racing Demon* is too recent, and may be considered too particular, both in time and subject, to merit this, but it is of particular interest in adverting to theological themes (as well as ecclesiastical ones), and together with the other plays in Hare's trilogy, *Murmuring Judges* and *The Absence of War*, forms a critique of the state of the nation through its leading institutions which has continued to resonate.<sup>7</sup>

*Godot*, *The Birthday Party* and *Racing Demon* all have the potential to unsettle the audience. We come away with questions rather than answers, unsettled rather than satisfied. In this way they reflect our time, where the master-narrative has been pronounced dead, but where we still inevitably see our lives as narratives, just as we continue to encounter the Christian faith in narrative terms, whether in the microcosm of a single parable, or in the biblical saga as a whole. The big question for theology is "What is the nature of this narrative?" Is it one with a controlling plot, or something more open, pierced by different possibilities. Or, to put this in a helpful analogy given by David Hare: Can we distinguish plot from narrative?<sup>8</sup> If Christianity rests upon an all-inclusive already mapped-out plot (or master narrative) which is imposed upon experience, then it seems increasingly out of kilter with life as we know it. In particular, the great world traumas of the past century, symbolised in the one word 'Auschwitz', mean that any considered theology must reflect the failure of traditional theodicies and any idea of some grand divine plan. However Christianity does not need to rely on the divine master-plan. Both the Bible itself and subsequent Christian history can be seen as an open-narrative, or what Merold Westphal has called, perhaps confusingly, a 'mega-narrative', to distinguish it from the controlling second-order meta-narrative. Such a second-order narrative can perhaps be better seen as a plot which circumscribes all that happens. God in this case is rather like a novelist in a

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<sup>7</sup> However in a comment in the theatre programme: 'But *Racing Demon*, first staged at the NT in 1990 and now gloriously revived by Daniel Evans, is in an unmistakable modern classic.' (Penelope in Hampstead Theatre programme for *Racing Demon*, February 2011).

<sup>8</sup> In his memoir *The Blue Touch Paper* David Hare quotes V.S Naipaul, 'Plot is for those who already know the world; narrative is for those who want to discover it.' David Hare *The Blue Touch Paper* (London: Faber & Faber, 2015) p.204.

traditional novel, ultimately controlling the characters and bringing it to a final resolution. Drama in general because it is essentially dialogical and also open to interpretation by different audiences, defies any such closure. This is particularly evident in our three plays.

*Waiting for Godot* takes us straight into the presence of the two tramps, with no prior explanation. Their presence on stage is unheralded and unexplained and any background is picked up in morsels as we go. For instance we learn that Vladimir and Estragon have been by the River Rhone, so they have travelled. We also learn that they have been together a long time but not always. Similarly in *The Birthday Party*, we know nothing about the background of any of the characters. We sense Stanley's dread, but its cause remains a mystery. Pinter was criticised for this by those used to plays where the basic situation had been made clear at the beginning of the play. In *Racing Demon* too, though this may bypass the professional Christian who even may recognise the North Lambeth originals of the characters in the play, we have no initial explanations as a presumably largely secular audience is introduced to the familiar yet strange world of the Church of England. In all three plays the structure of each play, taken together with the texts' refusal to give explanations, is such that we experience the characters' world as we experience real life, as being, in Heideggerian terms, thrown down without an explanation.<sup>9</sup> The only explanation, the only meaning, is that which comes within that experience itself.

What makes the three chosen plays particularly significant, is that each can be seen as the antithesis of any attempt to impose an overarching meaning. So *Waiting for Godot* is, in Martin Esslin's categorisation, a prime example of the "theatre of the absurd", which, he says 'strives to express its sense of the senselessness of the human condition and the inadequacy of the rational approach by the open abandonment of rational devices and discursive thought.'<sup>10</sup> It presents this absurdity not by argument, but purely through concrete stage images. Esslin suggests that this is the way of the poet rather than the philosopher, and compares it to the difference 'between the idea of God in the works of Thomas Aquinas or Spinoza and the intuition of God in the works of St. John of the Cross or Meister Eckhart'.<sup>11</sup> In the theatre of the absurd we are taken straight into the world of experience, bypassing philosophical or theological

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<sup>9</sup> Martin Heidegger *Being and Time* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2011) p.174.

<sup>10</sup> Martin Esslin *The Theatre of the Absurd* (London: Bloomsbury, 1961) p.24.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.* p.25.

theory. So in *Waiting for Godot*, there is no sense of a conventional plot, and the audience will seek in vain for this. Instead it is ‘essentially polyphonic’ a series of statements and images, which must be apprehended in their totality, as Esslin expresses it, ‘rather like the different themes in a symphony’.<sup>12</sup> But perhaps these do not have to be apprehended in their totality. Perhaps instead they can be understood through David Tracy’s theological metaphor of ‘fragments’, which, as Tracy suggests, are more analogous to Beethoven’s quartets than to the great unified statements of his symphonies.’<sup>13</sup> Or in another analogy, such a fragmentary and liberating approach can be found in African American traditions, in ‘the slave narratives, the spirituals, the blues, the gospel songs, and the preaching, rituals, and customs of so many black churches’.<sup>14</sup> Contrary to what Tracy calls a ‘totality system’ or the meta-narrative, today we find meaning and a form of transcendence in ‘distinct and possibly explosive images’ which can become the bearers of meaning.<sup>15</sup> The totality, represented say in *Godot*, may seem absurd, but over against this, within the text and action of the play, we can be struck by fragmentary instances of that which does not fit its overall nihilistic impression and instead breaks through in a transgressive and possibly transcendent way. These instances can then transform how we see the whole play. Instead of being about the absurdity of the world, it is thus transformed into a vehicle of possible transcendent moments in, for instance, the solidarity of the protagonists, in the bearing of suffering, in the waiting itself, and in the intimations of hope for those who have eyes to see.

In Pinter the dialogue is even more sparse and the vision bleaker than Beckett’s, and in *The Birthday Party* there is little to find which mitigates the consuming tragedy of Stanley. But perhaps here any subversion comes not in the action and words of the play itself, but in what is provoked in the audience, particularly in what it says about the use of power and violence against the scapegoated individual or group. This fits with much British theatre of the time in a real concern for the victims of an uncaring society and also with Pinter’s own Jewishness. As Bill Naismith has said ‘Though

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid. p.45.

<sup>13</sup> David Tracy ‘Fragments: The Spiritual Situation of Our Times’ in eds. John D. Caupito and Michael Scanlon *God, the Gift, and Postmodernism* (Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1999) p.175.

<sup>14</sup> David Tracy ‘African American Thought’ in *Black faith and Public Talk* ed. Dwight N. Hopkins (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1999) p.33.

<sup>15</sup> David Tracy ‘Fragments’ op.cit.178.

never associated with party politics, there is unquestionably a “political” dimension to *The Birthday Party*.’<sup>16</sup>

The third play, *Racing Demon*, stands within a more Brechtian tradition, in which the audience is given responsibility for adjudging and acting on the various arguments put forward in the play. David Hare’s concern in the trilogy of which *Racing Demon* is the first, is to critique Thatcher’s Britain by dealing with the various arms of “the Establishment” – church, judiciary, and the political arena. Here, as in Brecht, the characters, are representative, the fruit of Hare’s painstaking research into the breadth and inner contradictions of the Church of England, from General Synod to parish pump. As with *The Birthday Party*, the theme of power predominates, allied here with theological attempts to close down debate and to find a certainty where none exists. If one accepts with Lyotard that we have witnessed the death of grand narratives, any theology today will necessarily be tentative.<sup>17</sup> No longer can theology, as it were, prescribe final solutions, or speak with incontestable authority. Given the fragmentary nature of the perceived world, religion (and theology) will no longer fulfil its literal task of binding together, but instead can only join our playwrights, and culture in general, in using fragmentary images and words. These may be imbued with the possibility of redemption and hope, in which case they can speak into the world of Beckett, Pinter and Hare. So, what follows will be a conversation of mutual interaction and hopefully enrichment, which starts from the understanding that theologies, just as much as plays, are cultural artefacts and relate to their time, but that both have revelatory potential.

I will look at the plays in chronological order. The first, *Waiting for Godot*, is now seen as the catalyst for much that followed, and I will explore it both for signs of ‘immanent transcendence’ and in its entirety as an extended metaphor or parable.<sup>18</sup>

*The Birthday Party*, like *Godot*, is in Esslin’s view also an example of the Theatre of the Absurd, but in fact brings up different issues, particularly that of the exercise of power. *Racing Demon* is not just a metaphor for modern society but also poses profound theological questions and choices.

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<sup>16</sup> Bill Naismith *Harold Pinter* (London: Faber & Faber, 2000).

<sup>17</sup> Jean-François Lyotard *The Postmodern Condition : A Report on Knowledge* (Manchester : Manchester University Press, 1984) p.1.

<sup>18</sup> Cf Paul Ricoeur *Religion, Atheism and Faith in The Conflict of Interpretations* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1974) p.467.

In the conclusion I will bring these strands together, suggesting that they lead us to a new way of understanding God, what Richard Kearney has called ‘anatheism’ or ‘God after God’.<sup>19</sup> Here, Kearney suggests, drama makes that transition possible:-

Drama may be described accordingly...as an agnostic arena that may present us, after the event, with free options of theism or atheism.

Emancipating the audience from the ideologies and mythologies of first belief, the aesthetic space liberates each spectator into possibilities of non-belief or second belief.<sup>20</sup>

### 1.Waiting for Godot

And all our yesterdays have lighted fools  
The way to dusty death. Out, out, brief candle!  
Life’s but a walking shadow, a poor player  
That struts and frets his hour upon the stage  
And then is heard no more: it is a tale  
Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury  
Signifying nothing. (*Macbeth*)<sup>21</sup>

I’m talking about death - and you’ve never experienced *that*. And you cannot *act* it. You die a thousand casual deaths-with none of that intensity which squeezes out life... and no blood runs cold anywhere. Because even as you die you know that you will come back in a different hat. But no one gets up after *death* - there is no applause - there is only silence and some second-hand clothes, and that’s – *death*. (Tom Stoppard: *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*)<sup>22</sup>

*Waiting for Godot* was Martin Esslin’s first and prime of example of what he called the theatre of the absurd.<sup>23</sup> More recently, however, both in the work of Beckett’s friend John Calder but more particularly in Michael Bennett’s *Reassessing the Theatre of the Absurd*, there is a new reading of the play, which sees it as less about the absurdity of human existence, and more as an extended metaphor or parable which deconstructs that very absurdity.<sup>24</sup>

The absurdity is evident from the very beginning of the play: ‘Nothing happens, nobody comes, nobody goes, it’s awful,’ says Estragon.<sup>25</sup> This line echoes the very

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<sup>19</sup> ‘After the terrors of Verdun, after the traumas of the Holocaust, Hiroshima, and the gulags, to speak of God is an insult unless we speak in a new way... That is what I mean by a return to God after God. God must die so God can be reborn.’ Richard Kearney *Anatheism: Returning to God after God* (New York, Columbia University Press 2010) p.xvi.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid p.11.

<sup>21</sup> William Shakespeare *Shakespeare: Complete Works* (Oxford: OUP 1894) p.867.

<sup>22</sup> Tom Stoppard *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* (New York: Grove Press, 1967) p.60

<sup>23</sup> Cf. Martin Esslin *The Theatre of the Absurd* (London: Bloomsbury 1961).

<sup>24</sup> Michael Y. Bennett *Reassessing the Theatre of the Absurd* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011).

<sup>25</sup> Samuel Beckett *Waiting for Godot* (London: Faber and Faber, 1965) p.41.



opening line ‘Nothing to be done’, and the identical words and accompanying stage direction at the end of both of the two acts: ‘Well, shall we go? Yes, let’s go. *They do not move*’.<sup>26</sup>

In a literal sense this is true. The two tramps, Vladimir (Didi) and Estragon (Gogo) remain under the only scenery, the tree, whilst one day follows another in the two acts, with little to distinguish the two. In each act they converse with each other: Vladimir in his more philosophical-theological manner, and Estragon at a more down-to-earth practical level. In each they are visited by Pozzo and Lucky, umbilically linked to each other by the halter and rope round Lucky’s neck. In each act they are also visited by a small boy taken as Godot’s messenger. The whole production is laden with images of the closeness of death, whether in the deliberate cruciform shapes on stage,<sup>27</sup> coupled with the reference to the crucified thieves in Luke’s gospel right at the beginning of the play, from the discussion of the possibility of suicide in each act, to the various falls with Gogo sleeping in a ditch, to Pozzo’s parting words, ‘They give birth astride a grave. The light gleams an instant. Then it’s night once more.’<sup>28</sup>

For Martin Esslin, all this illustrates the post-modern situation with its exposure of the absurdity of life in the face of inevitable annihilation.<sup>29</sup> The two protagonists play verbal games to divert attention from the bleakness of their lot. Even what might appear to be profound meaningful assertions, are shown to be vacuous, as when Vladimir says:-

Let us do something, while we have the chance! It is not every day that we are needed. Not indeed that we personally are needed. Others would meet the case equally well, if not better. To all mankind they were addressed, those cries for help ringing in our ears! But at this place, at this moment of

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid. pp. 9, 54, 94.

<sup>27</sup> The crucifixion imagery is set out in Beckett’s notebooks:- ‘cruciform patterns formed by moves along the upstage horizontal lone and back down the vertical centre line on a raked stage’. The bodies of Pozzo and Lucky after their fall from the vertical lie in the shape of a cross. There are several tableaux of Pozzo and Lucky supported between two friends – recalling in Ruby Cohn’s words, ‘the many paintings of a crucified Christ between two thieves.’ Estragon and Vladimir often stand one either side of the tree, and Estragon in particular stretches out his arms – in John Donne’s words, ‘mine own cross to be’ – even passing through the cross, as he takes up a yoga position on the tree.’ James Knowlson in ed. Ruby Cohn: *Waiting for Godot*, (London: Macmillan Education, 1987) p. 52.

<sup>28</sup> *Waiting for Godot* op.cit. p.89.

<sup>29</sup> Martin Esslin quotes Ionesco’s definition of the Theatre of the Absurd: ‘Absurd is that which is devoid of purpose... Cut off from his religious, metaphysical, and transcendental roots, man is lost; all his actions become senseless, absurd, useless.’ *Eugene Ionesco Dans les armes de la ville* (Cahiers de la Compagnie Madeleine Renaud-Jean-Louis Barrault (Paris : no.20, October 1957), quoted in Esslin op.cit. p.23.

time, all mankind is us, whether we like it or not. Let us make the most of it, before it is too late!<sup>30</sup>

Any lingering sense of profundity here is subverted in the final clause: 'Let us represent worthily for once the foul brood to which a cruel fate consigned us.' The same can be said of Lucky's long soliloquy later in the first act, the appearance of philosophical and theological acumen conceals pure nonsense.<sup>31</sup>

Esslin was writing at a time when Sartrean existentialism was at its zenith. For Esslin, despite Beckett's own disavowal of this, Beckett had written a literary exposition of Sartre's existentialism, in which 'the hope of salvation may be merely an evasion of the suffering and anguish that spring from the reality of the human condition.'<sup>32</sup>

For Esslin, *Godot* is an extended metaphor which makes the absence of meaning and therefore of God, plain:-

The full meaning of the play emerges only at the final moment, when the audience realises that the shape of the second act exactly mirrors that of the first, and that, by implication, we have seen a fragment of a process that may be repeated over an endless series of days of waiting. This establishes the basic metaphor of the play as an image of the human condition – which from the first day to the last, is the experience of something which we feel ought to have meaning, ought to reveal its meaning, but which, from one day to another, always fails to produce that meaning.<sup>33</sup>

No wonder Beckett called it a tragi-comedy. It is tragic in the absence of meaning, whilst comic in its absurdity. John Calder points to the ubiquity of direct religious allusions throughout the Beckett canon, used sometimes satirically, sometimes as the natural conversational reactions of his characters to their situations, and sometimes as a new source of creative activity.'<sup>34</sup> However, for Esslin this only serves to accentuate the final absence of meaning for, despite being permeated by theological and biblical references, *Godot* can be understood as a search by Beckett for a God he

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<sup>30</sup> *Waiting for Godot* op.cit p.79.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid* p.42ff.

<sup>32</sup> Martin Esslin *The Theatre of the Absurd* op.cit. p.61.

<sup>33</sup> Martin Esslin in Ruby Cohn (ed.) op.cit. p.174.

<sup>34</sup> John Calder *The Theology of Samuel Beckett* (London: Calder Publications, 2012) p.57.

did not believe in except perhaps as a remote and indefinable possible presence with no relevance to life as actually experienced.<sup>35</sup>

Absurdity itself has biblical resonance, for instance the ‘vanity of vanities, all is vanity’ of Ecclesiastes, but does this mean that this is the only or final word? We now feel free to see *Godot* or any other text with new eyes and new interpretations, including more positive religious ones. We are also freed from having to consider Beckett’s original intention, or even to reconsider what that might have been. So Leonard Pronko has written: ‘Beckett’s view of life is basically a religious one: it is the view of a man who seeks some meaning beyond the trivial happenings of everyday life, a purpose beyond the physical needs of a specific time and space.’ I will argue that we can see *Godot* as an evocation of a new radical theology, one which has turned its back on a supernatural ontological God, but instead points to a pure incarnation, where God may be glimpsed within the action of the play. Here the very physicality of drama, especially in a play like *Godot*, keeps us rooted in the contingency and down-to-earthness of our existence, such that, in Antonin Artaud’s words, ‘metaphysics must be made to enter the mind through the body.’<sup>36</sup>

Inevitably a director, a cast, an audience today will bring their own experience and understandings to the text. We are creatures of our own time. So, contrary to Martin Esslin’s verdict, Michael Bennett suggests that ‘the [present-day] director’s conceptualization of nothingness has changed from a Sartrean view of nothingness as negation to a Heideggerian view of nothingness as a springboard for possibility.’<sup>37</sup> Though Bennett and Esslin both understand *Waiting for Godot* as an extended metaphor, for the former the ‘springboard for possibility’ lies in seeing metaphor in the more particular form of the parable. Purely as a metaphor, it may well be interpreted in the nihilistic way that Esslin takes, but as a parable it can perform a

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<sup>35</sup> ‘Religious interpretations [of *Godot*] seem to overlook a number of essential features of the play – its constant stress on the uncertainty of the appointment with Godot, Godot’s unreliability and irrationality, and the repeated demonstration of the futility of the hopes pinned on him. The act of waiting for Godot is shown as essentially absurd. Admittedly it might be a case of “*Credere quia absurdum est*”, yet it might even more forcibly be taken as a demonstration of the proposition “*Absurdum est credere*.” Martin Esslin *The Theatre of the Absurd* op.cit pp.56f.

<sup>36</sup> Antonin Artaud trans. Victor Corti *The Theatre and its Double* (Richmond, Surrey: One World Classics 2010) p.70.

<sup>37</sup> Michael Y. Bennett *Reassessing the Theatre of the Absurd* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011) p.33.

more positive and active function, in Paul Ricoeur's formulation, of orientating, disorientating, and re-orientating.<sup>38</sup>

For instance, Bennett takes the example of the "parable" of Estragon's struggle with the boot, which occurs in play's opening stage direction where Estragon, 'sitting on a low mound, is trying to take off his boot': 'He pulls at it with both hands, panting. He gives up, exhausted, rests, tries again.'<sup>39</sup> The emphasis is on Estragon's nearness to the ground and to his feet and all that ties him to the earth – he spends his night in a ditch where he is repeatedly beaten. For Vladimir this was 'all too much for one man.'<sup>40</sup> This could be simply a metaphor for the absurdity of life, but it can also be seen paradoxically as an example of a recurring theme in the play, of life being given some meaning through friendship and mutual support exemplified in Vladimir and Estragon's relationship, and reinforced at the end of the other passage about Estragon's boot in the second half:-

Estragon: You'll help me.

Vladimir: I will, of course.

Estragon: We don't manage too badly, eh Didi, between the two of us?

Vladimir: Yes, yes. Come on, we'll try the left first.<sup>41</sup>

This caring exchange gives an inkling at least of a reorientation which goes beyond nihilism, and the same can be said of the play as a whole which can also be seen as a parable. As we have seen, it may seem a metaphor for a general pointlessness, and an advocacy of stoicism at best. But it also conceals as much as it reveals, and this concealment, whatever the theological views of Beckett himself, can give rise to new interpretations. This is a particular glory of theatre, that inevitably with every production it will realize such new interpretations this through the working together of director, cast and audience. New secrets are uncovered, new possible meanings revealed. Rather than being about meaninglessness, it can be seen as intimating new possibilities, perhaps elusive and hard to grasp, but still there.

In this *Waiting for Godot* it reflects the paradigmatic source of parables, the biblical narrative. Not only do the gospels contain extended metaphors in the form of parables – obvious metaphors but ones which, as Sallie McFague has shown, are an 'assault on

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<sup>38</sup> Paul Ricoeur *Biblical Hermeneutics* (Semeia 4 1975) p.126.

<sup>39</sup> *Waiting for Godot* op.cit p.9.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid* p.10.

<sup>41</sup> *Waiting for Godot* op.cit. p.69

the accepted, conventional way of viewing reality.<sup>42</sup> They ask the hearers to re-evaluate their whole way of understanding the world. Meanwhile, John Hick has gone beyond the particular gospel parables and argued that the person of Jesus as the Christ should also be seen as metaphor or a parable of God.<sup>43</sup> Rowan Williams, from a rather different theological standpoint, speaking of the parables of Jesus, declares that they get their sense ‘within the larger parable, that is the life, death and resurrection of Jesus.’<sup>44</sup> To see the parabolic as all-pervasive is to be released from the literalist mindset which can only take on board one totally explicable interpretation. The metaphorical inevitably means that there is no final interpretation, and this is especially true when speaking of a God, who is never known directly. As Ian Ramsey said, ‘Let us never talk as if we had privileged access to the diaries of God’s private life.’<sup>45</sup> This is evident in the mystery of *Godot* but it is also clear in the Bible where God and silence belong together. Parables, including *Waiting for Godot*, never give to a final interpretation.

Another feature of New Testament parables is their emphasis on relationship. Sallie McFague gives the examples of parables such as the Prodigal Son, the Good Samaritan, the Unjust Steward or the Great Supper, which all hinge round such relationships.<sup>46</sup> This is equally true of the Hebrew Bible where the five most common metaphors are king/subject, judge/litigant, husband/wife, father/child, master/servant.<sup>47</sup> This links with the binary nature of relationships in *Waiting for Godot* – Vladimir and Estragon, Pozzo and Lucky. Their interactions are crucial, and they contribute to the overall metaphor, because relationship too is about revealing and concealing. As in the Bible, so in *Godot*, the particular parables within it are contained within the embracing parable of the whole play.

In addition to the centrality of relationships, the parables of Jesus also concern an action to be taken. They are not just interesting stories or academic puzzles. First they have to be “got”, the penny has to drop, and this takes the form of a challenge to act in a particular way. Here *Godot* may seem to transgress, for notoriously it is a play

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<sup>42</sup> Sally McFague *Metaphorical Theology: Models of God in Religious Language* (London: SCM Press, 1982) p.47.

<sup>43</sup> John Hick (ed) *The Myth of God Incarnate* (London: SCM Press, 1977).

<sup>44</sup> Rowan Williams The Judgement of the World in *On Christian Theology* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000) p.41.

<sup>45</sup> Ian Ramsey *Religious Language* (London: Macmillan, 1963) p.107.

<sup>46</sup> Sallie McFague op.cit. p.46.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid. p.43.

where nothing happens and, as already noted, there are many biblical passages where this also seems to be the case, where ‘what has been is what will be, and what has been done is what will be done; there is nothing new under the sun.’<sup>48</sup>

However, parables fundamentally subvert – in Crossan’s word, ‘shatter’ – the way we see things.<sup>49</sup> They perform Peter Brook’s definition of a great play that it can amend my way of thinking for life.<sup>50</sup> When the penny drops, everything is seen differently, and this is as true in *Godot* as in the gospels. It produces what John Caputo and others have called ‘the event’.<sup>51</sup> Something does happen. Leaves sprout on the apparently dead tree at the beginning of the second act, and all through the play there are other intimations of new possibilities. Though there is a profound sense of their being nothing new under the sun, of nothing really changing, for those who have eyes to see and ears to hear, it does. As well as the leaves on the tree, there is the reversal of roles for Pozzo & Lucky. According to Beckett *Godot* is a tragi-comedy, and much of it is the latter. In the face of apparent awfulness, the existential threat of non-being, Vladimir and Estragon keep up their stream of banter into which we as the audience are drawn. They are a vaudeville duo putting on a show for us and, as in all good shows, time stands still. We are drawn out of *chronos* into *kairos*, from the ordinary secular moment into what might be called sacred time. This may seem to be mere escapism, but it can equally be seen as what Peter Berger has called a ‘signal of transcendence’: ‘by laughing at the imprisonment of the human spirit, humour implies that this imprisonment is not final but will be overcome.’<sup>52</sup> In other words, the apparent tragedy of entrapment is no longer the last word; it is seen through humour to be both relative and provisional.

For Roger Grainger, such an intimation of transcendence is evident too in the verbal and physical game playing between Didi and Gogo, as with Didi’s little routine with his hat and more generally the pair’s waiting game for Godot.<sup>53</sup> These serve to open up the sheer boredom of waiting to something which Grainger sees as sacred, and which stands in stark contrast to the hierarchical relationship between Pozzo and

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<sup>48</sup> Ecclesiastes 1:9. NRSV.

<sup>49</sup> John Dominic Crossan *Cliffs of Fall: Paradox and Polyvalence in the Parables of Jesus* (New York: Wipf & Stock 2008) 94.

<sup>50</sup> Peter Brook *The Empty Space* op.cit.p.152.

<sup>51</sup> John Caputo *The Insistence of God: A Theology of Perhaps* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press 2013) pp.80-82.

<sup>52</sup> Peter Berger *Rumour of Angels* (London: Penguin Books, 1969) p.90.

<sup>53</sup> *Waiting for Godot* op.cit. p.10f

Lucky where the game is enforced, as when for instance Pozzo compels Lucky to dance. Didi and Gogo play for the sake of it, not to win, not for some hierarchical advantage, and in doing so evince what a sanctified life is about: the ‘between-ness’ of relationships.<sup>54</sup> Godot may never arrive, but their games give a space for purpose and hope.

Undergirding the mutuality of the games and the repartee between Didi and Gogo, there is a care, one might almost call it love. This love is certainly not always evident but every so often emerges, as when for instance in the stage direction, when Didi, first seeing Gogo asleep, puts his coat round him, and then when he wakes, startled and anxious, hastens to comfort him – ‘he runs to him, puts his arms round him’ – with echoes of the return of the prodigal.<sup>55</sup> That between-ness need not remain implicit for it can be identified as the role of the Holy Spirit which according to John Taylor is just this, to be the ‘the invisible third party that stands between me and the other,’<sup>56</sup> or it is to be the ‘and’, the lowly but vital conjunction between people.<sup>57</sup> This is a real companionship, sealed not in the breaking and sharing of bread, but between Didi and Gogo with a turnip and a carrot, and if there are Eucharistic echoes here, it reinforces the sense that something we might call God can be discerned within the relationship.<sup>58</sup>

These seemingly insignificant events within the play can be bearers of waiting and become ends in themselves; and the absence of Godot makes the immediate events of the play more rather than less significant. Whilst the rumour of Godot remains and seems necessary to sustain a sense of purpose in the waiting, yet the real intimations of life and hope and enjoyment are much more mundane, as we have seen in the parable within the parable, Gogo’s boot, with its literally down-to earth, earthiness. If we explore the twin themes of the play’s title - Godot and waiting - we can see the essential ambiguity and paradox which is at the heart of every parable. There is no definite meaning for Godot, as there is no definite meaning for life as we experience it. It is all held under a “perhaps”. Beckett said that the key word for him was

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<sup>54</sup> Roger Grainger ‘*We Hang Ourselves Tomorrow: Boredom as Implicit Religion.*’ In *Implicit Religion* (online) ISSN 1743-1697 doi.10.1558/imre.v.10.i2.164, 2007 p.167. [Downloaded 3 March 2016]

<sup>55</sup> *Waiting for Godot* op.cit. p.70.

<sup>56</sup> John V. Taylor *The Go-Between God* (London: SCM Press, 1972) p.19.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.* p.127.

<sup>58</sup> *Waiting for Godot* op.cit.p.20.

“perhaps”.<sup>59</sup> Perhaps there is meaning, perhaps not, perhaps we count for something, perhaps we do not, perhaps there is a God, perhaps not. *Waiting for Godot* is not simply an expression of a god-forsaken world, where the only meanings and purposes that exist are manufactured ones. The paradox of the “perhaps”, in its link with openness to possibility and hope, makes other ways of seeing possible too.<sup>60</sup> Perhaps Godot will come, perhaps not. But, as John Caputo, argues the perhaps is the only way we can live.<sup>61</sup> We cannot see the end and there is no overarching divine view or plan. Godot may be distant, even dead, but that does not mean that God too has left us to lives of tragic absurdity, for the play can be interpreted as challenging the equation of Godot and God. The waiting too is not necessarily as empty and purposeless as it may seem at first sight. Waiting can provide the space for possibility.

### **Godot**

Beckett was notoriously circumspect about identifying ‘Godot’, and certainly never equated him with God. The only tongue-in-cheek inkling we have of the name’s origin is that Beckett once said that ‘godot’ came from godillot – hobnailed boot – chosen because of the importance of boots in the play.<sup>62</sup> If Godot can be said to be God in the widest sense, then he is an absentee God, never actually arriving at the meeting place. His existence would seem to be a rumour conveyed by one or two small boys who may or may not be believed, or who alone perhaps have that childlike quality which is necessary for belief. There is an essential ambiguity in Godot himself if he is equated with God. We cannot manage without God, or without absence of God. *Waiting for Godot*, like the Bible, is an extended metaphor. At its heart it is relational. The relation it holds out is a strange friendship between Didi and Gogo. It also posits another sort of relationship, between Lucky and Pozzo which is mutually destructive.

Godot is known only by his absence. Will he ever come, does he exist at all?

Certainly if we link Godot with traditional understandings of God, we see the influence on Beckett of Arnold Geulincx for whom God was so far away that he was

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<sup>59</sup> Tom Driver ‘Beckett by the Madeleine’, Columbia University Forum 4 (Summer 1961), in Graver and Federman *Samuel Beckett: The Critical heritage* (London: Henley, 1979) p.220 quoted in Ronan McDonald *The Cambridge Introduction to Samuel Beckett* (Cambridge: CUP, 2006) p.42.

<sup>60</sup> Cf. Anthony Uhlmann *Beckett and Post-structuralism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999) p.21.

<sup>61</sup> John D.Caputo *The Insistence of God: A Theology of Perhaps* op.cit.p.1ff.

<sup>62</sup> Mary Benson in Ruby Cohn op.cit. p.27 quoting Roger Blin the first director of *Waiting for Godot*.



not necessarily aware of our presence.<sup>63</sup> For that reason we should be aware of our near irrelevance, our almost nonexistence, and we should accept the humility which is our due. John Calder sees this as crucial to understanding Beckett. The god of his childhood, particularly of his devout Quaker mother, had disappeared into the stratosphere. It is a belief which is fatalistic: ‘nothing to be done’, words derived from Geulinx, open the play.<sup>64</sup> The God we are left with is a one who remains in the background, but not to be admired, certainly not worshipped, but either as the cause of all suffering or as indifferent to it. *Waiting for Godot* posits the post-Auschwitz question which sabotages all traditional theology: “Where was God when it happened? How could an omnipotent all-loving divinity allow it?”<sup>65</sup> A church with spoke of heaven had failed to deal with the gross injustices of earth, and consequently all the great attempts of theodicy were seen to be hollow.

Without Godot, however, life is absurd, a day-to-day continuum of much the same thing, with no real achievement, and nothing except a very fallible memory (something which is stressed in the play) to link the succeeding days. It is an absurdity which suits the vaudeville duo, or the clown, more than the philosopher or theologian. Though Didi in particular, and also Lucky in his great soliloquy, lay claim to these roles, it is always with a sense of their irrelevance and inner contradictions.

The two days covered by the play emphasise the unchanging nature of life where there is really nothing to be done. The scene, the characters, the dialogue is much of a muchness. But yet they are not quite identical. First the meagre stage set has an obvious transformation, one which baffles the characters. There are a handful of leaves on what had seemed a stunted barren tree, with its echoes of the cursed fig tree of the Gospel, as well as of the cross. Secondly the roles of Lucky and Pozzo have been reversed. The rich and powerful in the form of Pozzo has been unseated and brought down to earth, and is now being led round by an upright Lucky.

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<sup>63</sup> Cf John Calder op.cit.p.16.

<sup>64</sup> John Calder op.cit.p.16.

<sup>65</sup> ‘The theological fact is that Christian theology cannot fully return to history until it faces the Holocaust. It cannot face that interruption in history without facing as well the anti-Semitic effects of its own Christian history. It cannot face that interruption without realizing that the return to history must now be the return through the radical negativity disclosed by that event. All the retrievals of those authoritative and formerly repressed themes which empower a theological return must yield to the radical *Sachkritik* which the eschatological event itself demands. Every hermeneutics of retrieval for Christian theology must today include a radical hermeneutics of suspicion on the whole of Christian history.’ David Tracy *On Naming the Present* (London: SCM Press, 1994) p.64f..

Yet Godot does not come. There is no denouement, no happy ending. Either we assume Godot has more important things to do, or is too distant anyhow, or more likely has no reality at all. He just represents the protagonists need for identity, meaning and purpose. The rumour of Godot survives, but certainly in any traditional understanding of God he has ceased to exist.

Theology too has had to wrestle with this, certainly ever since Dietrich Bonhoeffer's call for a 'Religionless Christianity' and his rejection of the *deus ex machina*,<sup>66</sup> to which he added:

The Bible directs man to God's powerlessness and suffering; only the suffering God can help. To that extent we may say that the development towards the world's coming of age...which had done away with a false conception of God, opens up a way of seeing the God of the Bible, who wins power and space in the world by his weakness.<sup>67</sup>

This serves as a piece of redirection for looking for 'Godot' or rather for God in the play. Godot as presented belongs to world of Nobodaddy, but it does not follow that this a godless play, with a Sartrean message of existential isolation. In Godot there are alternative possibilities and these lie in the waiting, in the consequent suffering, and in the intimations of fragmentary hope in occasional epiphanies. Or the 'events'. For Bonhoeffer, though, this is not new, but a proper return to the New Testament's understanding of God's choice of the weak to shame the strong, and the low and despised to bring to nothing the things that are.<sup>68</sup> Didi and Gogo, along with many others among Beckett's characters elsewhere, fit this description. It is in them that we can find not just a cry for justice, but also a fundamental humanity which is seen not least in its resilience and a continuing hope against the odds – in the stature of its waiting.<sup>69</sup>

### ***Waiting***

In the original French version its title was "En attendant Godot", which serves to put the emphasis on the waiting as the real subject of the play. Waiting turns into passing

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<sup>66</sup> It may be significant that the publication in English of Bonhoeffer's *Letters and Papers from Prison* in 1953 was the same year that *Waiting for Godot* was first produced, not that one directly influenced the other, but both reflects the zeitgeist of the time, of the fundamental issues raised by the horrors of the Second World War and its aftermath.

<sup>67</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer *Letters and Papers from Prison*, ed. Eberhard Bethge (London: SCM Press, 1953) p.361.

<sup>68</sup> I Corinthians 7:27-28 NRSV.

<sup>69</sup> Cf. W.H. Vanstone *The Stature of Waiting* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1982).

the time, and despite Vladimir's reminder to Estragon that they are keeping an appointment with Godot, the waiting becomes an end in itself. The absence of meaning is veiled in play and repartee and the daily visit of Ponzio and Lucky. There is a profound sense of there being nothing new under the sun, of nothing really changing. For this reason the changes that do take place, especially between the two acts of the play, have significance, and this lies not in relation to the absentee Godot, but in themselves, suggesting immanent meanings and therefore an immanent God. Simone Weil in her essay *The Love of God and Affliction* speaks of Christ not as a martyr, for martyrs enter the arena singing as they go to face the wild beasts. In other words they suffer, but are not truly afflicted, for they die in firm hope. Christ on the other hand 'died like a common criminal, confused with thieves, only a little more ridiculous. For affliction is ridiculous.'<sup>70</sup> The crucifixion and ultimate fate of the two thieves is a central motif of *Waiting for Godot*. It is there in the stage set with the tree and the two figures of Vladimir and Estragon beside it. It is there in one of Vladimir's opening lines 'One of the thieves was saved ... it's a reasonable percentage,' and later enlarged:

Two thieves... one is supposed to have been saved and the other ...damned... And yet how is it that of the four evangelists only one speaks of a thief being saved? The four of them were there or thereabouts, and only one speaks of a thief being saved... Of the other three two don't mention any thieves at all and the third says that both of them abused him.<sup>71</sup>

Vladimir certainly knew his Bible! Weil goes on to speak of the infinite distance which in affliction can separate us from God – very much the play's view of Godot – but for her the other side is that he is completely present in the affliction, when the soul is nailed to the very centre of the universe.<sup>72</sup>

Weil's view is not far from the theology of Kierkegaard, who had also seen the paradoxical and absurd nature of faith.<sup>73</sup> For Kierkegaard most forms of theology – in

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<sup>70</sup> Simone Weil 'The Love of God and Affliction' in *Waiting for God* (London: Collins Fontana Books, 1959) p.84.

<sup>71</sup> Beckett referred to a passage in St. Augustine: 'There's a wonderful sentence in St. Augustine. I wish I could remember the Latin. It is even finer in Latin than in English. "Do not despair: one of the thieves was saved. Do not presume one of the thieves was damned."' Samuel Beckett, quoted by Harold Hobson in *Esslin op.cit.*p.53.

<sup>72</sup> Simone Weil *op.cit.* p.113.

<sup>73</sup> 'A knight of faith... is one who makes what Kierkegaard calls the "the double movement of faith". He is ready to give everything up, perhaps he does indeed give everything up but, at the same time and

particular he has Hegel in mind – start from the wrong place. The only viable starting place is existence itself, and there is a deep pain in looking into this open-eyed, as *Waiting for Godot* demonstrates. But that which can give meaning and value is also there in existence. *Waiting for Godot* expresses the pain together with the evasions and explanations that we all use to make life bearable, but by doing so points to the silence beneath, which may indeed be dreadful, simply marked by its emptiness. The protagonists are always chatting and joshing each other, but beneath and between the banter is the silence. They do not really move beyond that but it certainly points to the possibility of what Kierkegaard calls “transfiguration”.<sup>74</sup>

*Godot* takes us into that deep pain. In fact in its crucifixion references, it takes us into the abandonment of Jesus on the cross. Both theology and this play challenge us to go on speaking of God in the face of this abandonment, and theology can only do so by turning its back on an inherited view of God as “out there”, omnipotent, omniscient and within himself untouched by suffering. *Waiting for Godot* exposes the emptiness of most attempts to maintain a presence or a meaning or any transcendental other. Lucky’s speech is a lightning tour through the philosophical-theological attempts to give some external significance to life, spewing forth words and ideas which are transformed into pure nonsense. The only possible theology today is one that somehow takes seriously God’s identification with suffering by starting with the cross.<sup>75</sup>

*Waiting for Godot* can be seen as nihilistic, reflected, for example, in the play’s references to the story of the passion which dwell solely on the final abandonment of Jesus by his Father and on his death. With death always waiting in the wings it is not surprising that it is resistant to anything other than its obvious meaning, that nothing happens, that everything is meaningless, and its lampooning of other possibilities. But here it can be matched by many biblical texts – Ecclesiastes, Lamentations, some of the psalms, or in the tram-lined inevitability of some apocalyptic. However in *Godot* and in these there are the bits that do not fit with this overall fatalistic aura, and these

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“by the power of the absurd” equally expects to get everything back.’ George Pattison *The Philosophy of Kierkegaard* (Chesham: Acumen, 2005) p.110.

<sup>74</sup> George Pattison *ibid.* p.141.

<sup>75</sup> “The only theology that can possibly begin to address the need is one in which God embraces suffering and is found within it.’ Jurgen Moltmann *The Crucified God* (London: SCM Press, 1974) p.276.

‘The gospel... proclaims the faith that it is the crucified man, and not the perpetrators of crucifixion, who is the man of God and to whom God truly belongs.’ Graham Shaw *God in our Hands* (London: SCM Press, 1987) p.239.

serve to open up the possibilities of Beckett's "perhaps" which is unsurprising in a play which is an extended metaphor.

### **Conclusion**

*Waiting for Godot* presents two characters trying to make sense of things in a fragmented existence, and in doing so resonates with a modern audience. We inevitably try to make sense of things however disordered or pointless they seem. Towards the end of the play in the course of a long conversation with Estragon, Vladimir uses the phrase 'When you seek you hear' resonant of both 'Let those who have ears to hear, let them hear' and 'Those who seek find'.<sup>76</sup> However the repartee goes on:-

Vladimir: That prevents you from finding.

Estragon: It does.

Vladimir: That prevents you from thinking.

Estragon: You think all the same.

Vladimir: No, no, impossible.

Estragon: That's the idea, let's contradict each other.<sup>77</sup>

We are not denied the possibility of meaning or disclosure, just in this exchange the simple obvious meaning. There is never one definitive interpretation. We find ourselves, like Didi and Pogo, in a state of waiting, just as do many within the New Testament parables – householders, bridesmaids, farmers, guests at a banquet. They are waiting for the day of the Lord, or in terms of the play, for Godot. The whole New Testament extended metaphor gives substance to that waiting, but never a full description. We may have intimations, just as *Waiting for Godot* gives up fragments of hope in the protagonists' care for each other, in their play and repartee, and above all in their continuing to wait. They, nor we, can escape the possibility that finally all is vanity, that death will come to make a nonsense of the meanings we cling to in life. We, like Estragon and Vladimir are left with a "perhaps", one which is also there in the biblical text But the latter, certainly, and I believe *Waiting for Godot* also, does not leave us in despair, but rather opens to hope, or to the Holy Spirit.

Earlier we noted Roger Grainger on the place of games and play in Godot – he likens it to what transpires in a theatre workshop.<sup>78</sup> We deal here with pure play for its own sake, without concern for winning or losing, and this shows the vital place of relationships and what Grainger calls the 'between-ness' of a true relationship, which

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<sup>76</sup> Mark 4:9 and Luke 11:9. NSRV.

<sup>77</sup> *Waiting for Godot* op.cit.p.64.

<sup>78</sup> Roger Grainger op.cit. p.167.

the relationship between Didi and Gogo exemplifies, for all its ups and downs. For Grainger, this is ‘implicitly religious’, but we could go further and name it as the work of the Holy Spirit, as John V. Taylor did in his classic text *The Go-between God*, where the Spirit is in the gaps and fissures, as the lowly conjunction that binds together.<sup>79</sup> Or as Richard Rohr puts it: ‘The space in between everything is not space at all but Spirit.’<sup>80</sup> So Didi and Gogo are bound together, through play and mutual understanding.

Though *Waiting for Godot* challenges theology by its devastating questioning of meaning and therefore of God in the face of suffering and death, and no theology today will pass muster which does not start with such questioning. Yet it is not the whole meaning of the play, where there are many intimations of what might be called ‘redemptive possibilities’. The nihilism of *Godot* can be seen as a necessary deconstruction of the plot based on a theodicy which no longer works, and a pointer to more humanly-based possibilities. Theology does not need to be wedded to the traditional teleologies and eschatologies which have for centuries tried to rule the world. These have disintegrated in the face of terrible experience but this does not mean that we are simply left with nihilism, for *Godot* in many ways is a play which counters that. Instead, as a modern parable, it leaves the future open, and gives to those who attend, many ‘small epiphanies, hints and intimations, tiny traces, tiny openings, easily overlooked, where something of significance, something we might call “promise”, is actually taking place.’<sup>81</sup> This may seem surprising but only if we have not taken on board the core Christian understanding that, as Clive Marsh says, ‘[though] God suffers with [the world] in crucifixion [...] yet [God] is not consumed by its suffering, for, as the source of life, God is always able to go on giving life to the world’: in other words as Marsh writes, ‘resurrection’.<sup>82</sup>

### 3. The Birthday Party

‘Later on, he would remember that incident when he came (truly) to understand that men pretend to abide by what is right and never yield except to force.’ (Albert Camus)<sup>83</sup>

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<sup>79</sup> John V Taylor *op.cit.* p.19.

<sup>80</sup> Richard Rohr *Immortal Diamond: The Search for Our True Self* (London: SPCK, 2013 ) p.xxi.

<sup>81</sup> David Kleinberg-Levin *op.cit.* p.27.

<sup>82</sup> Clive Marsh *Christianity in a Post-Atheist Age* (London: SCM Press, 2002) p.70.

<sup>83</sup> Albert Camus *The First Man* (London: Penguin Books 1995) p.169.

*The Birthday Party*, one of Pinter's earliest plays, is set in 'the living-room of a house in a seaside town.'<sup>84</sup> The central character is Stanley the lodger, who, as with all Pinter's characters is initially unexplained, though it comes to light that he once played the piano, with the peak of his career being a performance in Edmonton. His landlady is Meg, who both mothers and flirts with him, whose husband Petey prefers being out of the house, and is certainly so for most of the duration of the play. Meg, with her maternal instinct, has decided that they would celebrate Stanley's birthday, though he himself denies that it is, and on that very day, two new lodgers come to the house, an event already dreaded by Stanley for unstated reasons. Stanley's relationship with these new lodgers is never made explicit, but we assume that there it is something sinister. Before the evening of the party, Goldberg and McCann, the two new lodgers, interrogate Stanley. Somehow he holds out, only to crack at the party that follows, after his glasses have been trodden underfoot by McCann, at which he tries to strangle Meg, and then rape a guest, Lulu. The last we see of Stanley is his departure the following morning, taken away by Goldberg and McCann, barely able to speak but impeccably dressed in dark suit and tie. He is taken to the black hearse-like car outside. Has he been tortured? Is in fact dead? Certainly his individuality has been verbally or physically beaten out of him. The whole is charged with a sense of menace and latent violence which pervades most of Pinter's work, which would come to be described as Pinteresque.

There are Kafkaesque echoes as Stanley is threatened by unknown menaces, fearful to leave the house, listening for the knock on the door, undoubtedly reflecting Pinter's own experience of growing up as a Jewish lad in the East End, just as the wider history of the Jews in Europe is also there, with shades of Anne Frank and her family hiding in the attic, with the ever-present threat of being found out and being caught. But it is more than solely a Jewish experience, part of being human. The right to one's own privacy and independence so often is tied up with a sense of guilt or inadequacy, a wish not to be exposed. This in turn has a political dimension, expressed today in the use of surveillance, and a general intrusion into others' lives. And what of theology, the God from whom no secrets are hidden, who shines a searching light into the heart? Does maintaining one's integrity necessarily involve some secret interior space?

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<sup>84</sup> Harold Pinter *The Birthday Party* (London: Faber and Faber, 1991) p.9.

One of the salient features in *Waiting for Godot* was the contradiction between words and action, which disorientates, but gives rise to new possibilities. Pinter too has been seen in this light, as being concerned with revealing hidden meanings and unspoken psychological states lurking behind the words or in the silences. But what we find in a play such as *The Birthday Party* is not so much inadequate language, though Pinter is a master at reproducing the cultural speech patterns of his characters, as language which is always married to action. The words in *The Birthday Party* are themselves freighted with desire and power and violence. They are never innocent.

If we were taking a biblical parallel, it would be with the image of God's word as effective in creation, as a two-edged sword. Austin Quigley quotes Wittgenstein's dictum, 'Look at the sentence as an instrument, and its sense as its employment',<sup>85</sup> in relation to Pinter. Meaning and use go together. Or as Martin Esslin says 'what matters [in Pinter's use of language] is more what people are doing to each other through it rather than the conceptual content of what they are saying.'<sup>86</sup>

So in *The Birthday Party*, power relationships are established primarily through language. We, as audience, discover these relationships and what makes the individual characters tick as the play progresses through the interplay of words. Pinter was often criticised for failing to give any background, any pre-history in his plays. But the words themselves in a sense provide this. All are laden with pre-existing meaning. Pinter emphasises this with his use of cliché. On the one hand continuous use of cliché may suggest barrenness in language and a failure in imagination, but on the other it highlights how much of what we are and present is formed by our past and our cultural inheritance, and therefore how little is original. Each character in *The Birthday Party* carries baggage from the past revealed in their conversation. Not only are their words and sentences cultural constructs, but their characters are as well. So, for example, in the interchange between Meg and Stanley at the beginning of the play, Meg imposes her language, her whole way of seeing things inherited from childhood, on Stanley. She simply cannot understand why he will not go through with the birthday party, which we as the audience are aware is a charade. She, as a cultural construct, is set on taking Stanley into her domain. Or in the far more sinister encounter with Goldberg and McCann, Stanley is faced with a barrage of conformist banalities, with Goldberg and McCann representing the two great autocratic western

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<sup>85</sup> Austin Quigley *The Pinter Problem* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1975) p.46.

<sup>86</sup> Martin Esslin *Pinter the Playwright* (London: Methuen, 1992) p.238.



religions, albeit with the irony that both are also “outsiders”: Goldberg as the Jew and McCann as the Irish Catholic.<sup>87</sup> And yet Goldberg reminisces, with echoes of Philip Larkin, ‘ I know what it is to wake up with the sun shining, to the sound of the lawnmower, all the little birds, the smell of grass, church bells, tomato juice...’<sup>88</sup> The outsiders have taken on board the accepted banalities of the culture.

Religion is certainly not immune from cliché. The use of Scripture very often falls into this with superficially convincing proof texts which in fact prove nothing, or dogmatic utterances which are deemed to carry their own inherent authority. *The Birthday Party* exposes the moral pressures which state and church can put upon individuals, and invites us to recognise that the words are simply disguises for power and aggression. The real game is being played with words as weapons. Against them, Stanley seems to have no chance. Can the subject become an active agent, or are we always the captives of the language that imposes cultural power?

Goldberg’s question to Stanley, ‘Who do you think you are?’ might be seen as the crux of the play. It forces Stanley to answer in terms of the other. By then he has been bombarded into non-being, into conformity allied with death. Just as Goldberg is a creation of the texts he has learnt by heart (‘an all-round man, a cosmopolitan’), and McCann of his Irish Catholic indoctrination (‘You’re a traitor to the cloth.’ ‘What about the Albigenist heresy?’ ‘What about the blessed Oliver Plunkett?’),<sup>89</sup> so Stanley too is to become a ‘man of culture’, under the hegemony of the way things are done.

“Who do you think you are?” might be seen as the primary existential challenge. Are we authentic individuals? Here Stanley can be seen as the embodiment of personal autonomy, resisting every attempt to take his freedom away from him, whether this be from the well-intentioned Meg or via the verbal and physical brutality of Goldberg and McCann. Meg, Goldberg and McCann on the other hand, as revealed in their talk, are living in worlds of self-deception. Stanley, on the other hand, is trying to live the authentic life of the outsider, but in fact he is living in fear. He is the embodiment of angst, because he cannot be free of his past, and, as in Sartre’s *Huit Clos*, with its notorious line, ‘There is no need for the rack, Hell is other people’,<sup>90</sup> no other character in *The Birthday Party* reflects back the identity that Stanley has assumed.

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<sup>87</sup> Cf Michael Billington *Harold Pinter* (London: Faber and Faber, 1996) p.79.

<sup>88</sup> *The Birthday Party* op.cit p.45.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid p.51.

<sup>90</sup> Jean-Paul Sartre *Huit Clos* (Gallimard: Paris, 1947) p.26.

He is on his own. By contrast when Jesus asks his disciples, ‘Who do the people say that I am?’, Jesus resists any attempt to label him – John the Baptist, Elijah, one of the prophets, even the Messiah.<sup>91</sup> Or when interrogated by Pilate, Pilate’s question ‘So you are a king?’ draws the response, ‘You say that I am a king.’<sup>92</sup> He does not need affirmation, whereas Pinter’s characters all need that to give them their identity. But “Who do you think you are?” as spoken by McCann, does not come across as a philosophical challenge, but as an act of verbal violence aimed at the heart, in a sequence of questions designed to totally disorientate Stanley. *The Birthday Party* echoes the Foucauldian view that the exercise of power is ubiquitous, but without Foucault’s proviso about its essential ambiguity.<sup>93</sup> In this play at least, power is synonymous with control and implicit violence. It is also the case that power here is associated particularly with state and church power. We can see this in Pinter’s other writings, but it is there in the dialogue and action of *The Birthday Party*. So it is that, ironically, Goldberg as the archetypical Jewish lad made good, is called by McCann ‘a true Christian’, and McCann himself, as we saw above, echoes language from the church.<sup>94</sup> The dissident is to be dealt with either by conversion to the social mores or by elimination.

A theological response to *The Birthday Party* is twofold. First, it must involve an awareness and admission of the way in which power has been used in the history of the church, and too often its alliance with crushing of dissent and general authoritarianism, and therefore taking to heart the implications of the play about institutional violence and abuse. Secondly, though, it means seeing an alternative form of power that belongs to the teaching of Jesus and to Christian understanding which emphasises ‘power made perfect in weakness’. This is not a derogation of power *per se*, for though Paul, for instance, speaks of ‘Christ crucified as a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Greeks’<sup>95</sup> he adds with some emphasis, that to those who understand the matter aright, Christ is both the power and wisdom of God. For Jürgen Moltmann, we need to see the power that belongs to God in trinity and thus to the church, is of a completely different order from power as normally

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<sup>91</sup> Mark 8:27f.

<sup>92</sup> John 18:37.

<sup>93</sup> Michel Foucault ‘Power’ in *Essential Works of Foucault 1954-1984*, ed. James d.Faubion trans. Robert Hurley and others. Vol.3 (New York: The New Press, 2000) pp.326-348.

<sup>94</sup> *The Birthday Party* op.cit. p.29.

<sup>95</sup> 1 Cor.1:18-23 NRSV.

envisaged. It is not the common idea of God as ‘a divine monarch in heaven and on earth [which] generally provides the justification for earthly domination – religious, moral, patriarchal or political domination – and makes a hierarchy, a “holy rule”. For Moltmann this can only have the corollary that requires ‘abject servitude’.<sup>96</sup> By contrast, for Moltmann the doctrine of the Trinity can be developed as a ‘theological doctrine of freedom’ pointing towards ‘a community of men and women without supremacy and without subjection’.<sup>97</sup> It thus depends upon being in relationship, something which Stanley so conspicuously lacks. In his situation, Moltmann’s prerequisites for such a radical form of shared power, depending on ‘dialogue, consensus and harmony’<sup>98</sup>, seem completely unattainable. The freedom which Moltmann goes on to speak of, depends on community, whereas for Stanley and the modern dissident it must come from asserting oneself against any oppressive or manipulative or even well-meant form of power.

For John Milbank, the church needs to realize its separate pedigree. Whereas secular culture is based on ‘original violence’, something which Hobbes and Machiavelli exposed and Darwin, Nietzsche and Freud have substantiated in their different ways, the Christian self-understanding is of a kingdom of infinite peace.<sup>99</sup> It might be difficult to substantiate this, when even Milbank’s hero, Augustine, declared that ‘it was better for a few abandoned people to perish than that innumerable souls, whose way to salvation they impede, should burn with them forever in Hell.’<sup>100</sup> The use and misuse of power in the church has too often run in tandem with that of the state and wider society. As Sykes says ‘Christians are in no position to blame Machiavelli for a “realism” about power which already had centuries of theological justification attached to it.’<sup>101</sup>

Foucault’s work has shown that the Christian church has inevitably been involved with the use of power from its inception. It cannot all be laid at the door of the Constantinian settlement. Far from Paul himself being an example of meek powerlessness, Foucault reveals him as the architect par excellence of ‘pastoral

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<sup>96</sup> Jurgen Moltmann *The Trinity and the Kingdom of God* (London: SCM Press, 1981) p.192.

<sup>97</sup> Ibid p.192.

<sup>98</sup> Ibid p.202.

<sup>99</sup> John Milbank *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2006) pp.261,278.

<sup>100</sup> Augustine of Hippo *Contra Gaudentium I*, 22,25, cited in Stephen Sykes *Power and Christian Theology* (London: Continuum, 2006) p.88.

<sup>101</sup> Sykes op.cit. p.91.

power'.<sup>102</sup> This kind of power is differentiated from other forms, by its ultimate aim of salvation in the next world, by being prepared to sacrifice itself for fellow-Christians, by having both an individual and corporate concern, and necessarily with the need to make windows into people's souls. This last is the rub, for a form of power marked by servanthood, sacrifice, and the valuing of every person, is also marked by an ultimate intrusiveness which opens the gates to all sorts of possible new forms of power, benevolent or sinister.

We are left theologically with the ambiguous nature of all exercises of power. This is confirmed by *The Birthday Party*, though in the latter there is almost nothing to suggest that the use of power might be beneficial. Stanley becomes a sacrificial victim but with no redemption. Whereas the death of Christ is community-creating, *The Birthday Party* ends in failure to communicate, both in Stanley's final 'Ug-gughh..ug...gughh' and 'Caahhh...caahhh.'<sup>103</sup> and Goldberg's earlier :-  
Don't talk to me about school. Top in all subjects. And for why? Because I'm telling you. I'm telling you, follow my line? Follow my mental? Learn by heart. Never write down a thing. And don't go too near the water.

And you'll find what I say is true

Because I believe the world...[vacant]..

Because I believe the world ...[desperate]

BECAUSE I BELIEVE THE WORLD ...[lost].<sup>104</sup>

Even the loquacious Goldberg is lost for words.

The final words of the play are Meg's, still in her self-deluded private dream world, speaking of the party, 'I was the belle of the ball'.<sup>105</sup>

If power remains ambiguous in both *The Birthday Party* and in theological understanding and in both is often freighted with latent violence, and if words finally prove inadequate, we are left with the image which in the play is that of a party where everything goes wrong, with the participants reinforced in their mutual alienation, and with Stanley as the scapegoat. He fits René Girard's understanding of this, in that he

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<sup>102</sup> Michel Foucault *The Subject and Power* (Critical Inquiry, Vol.8 No.4, Summer 1982) pp.777-795.

<sup>103</sup> *The Birthday Party* op.cit.p.84.

<sup>104</sup> Ibid p.78.

<sup>105</sup> Ibid p.87.

is both vulnerable and close at hand, and also that he bears the marks of a victim.<sup>106</sup>

His gaucheness, eccentricity, and even his short-sightedness mark him out.

In contrast, theologically, the party is a paradigm of the kingdom, with the eucharist as its anticipation. The party (supper, feast) is an occasion of mutuality, reinforcing the instinct that we need each other, that there is no such thing as pure self-realization, whilst at the same time - especially when twinned with the concomitant image of the Body of Christ - suggesting that we retain, and in fact enhance, our distinctiveness within the whole. *The Birthday Party* seems to suggest this to be an impossibility. The party in the play stands for enforced conformity. Stanley has to turn up, play blind man's buff, beat his toy drum, whether he likes it or not. The only real game played is the power game and Stanley is the loser.

Pinter's play may suggest that there is an inevitability about this destructive play of power which dooms any such image to mere utopianism. It is unrealisable. The Church has often been party to this in taking Eucharistic imagery as a reflection of some already existing ideal, and therefore removing its eschatological and universal significance. So Hugh Rayment-Pickard has focussed on the strange omission in church liturgies of the crucial words from the Last Supper accounts both in the Gospels and in 1 Corinthians, that the sharing of the bread and wine are a foretaste of the Kingdom.<sup>107</sup> This sets the Eucharist firmly within time with a future reference, and a programme to be realised. Without this, the Eucharist can easily take on a timeless nature with a transcendent reference, and with nothing of relevance to the world. Both *Waiting for Godot* and *The Birthday Party* leave no room for such transcendentalism. In the former we are firmly and inescapably in time, in a world of waiting, and in the latter, there is no recourse to any *deus ex machina* for poor Stanley.

The presupposition of *The Birthday Party*, that we are bound by a human version of the survival of the fittest, may in John Milbank's view be based on a false belief in 'original violence', whereas Christian theology 'construes the infinite not as chaos, but as harmonic peace'.<sup>108</sup> However this begs the question, why we need theories of origins at all, or at least why we should be forever bound by them. Milbank wants us

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<sup>106</sup> For René Girard the scapegoat, 'may be an arbitrary victim... chosen only because he is vulnerable and close at hand.' René Girard *Violence and the Sacred* (Baltimore, John Hopkins University Press, 1977) p.2, and at the same time are marked out 'because they bear the marks of victims' (René Girard *The Scapegoat* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1986) p.21.

<sup>107</sup> Hugh Rayment-Pickard *In forgetfulness of the Kingdom* (Church Times, 9<sup>th</sup> October 2015).

<sup>108</sup> John Milbank *op.cit.* p.5.

to return to the hegemony of an overarching and finally triumphant cosmic narrative, what John Caputo has called ‘an embarrassing exercise of fantasy.’<sup>109</sup> For all its language of peace, it contains an implicit violence which belongs to any master narrative which necessarily excludes however inclusive it may appear. If instead we are given creative possibilities with real choices, then there is no inevitability about anything and the kingdom becomes a realizable possibility to be prayed and striven for. The alternative is a consecration of the present, one which may seem to bring peace but in fact, as Stanley finds in the play, is really impotent entrapment.

This programme of action includes at its centre the utopian image of the party or feast, one where, in Rowan Williams’ words, ‘we step back before the mystery of the other’, whilst at the same time being a state of mutual belonging.<sup>110</sup> Pinter presents the party without such a space for the other. As the play progresses Stanley’s individuality is squeezed out of him, every encounter is a source of dread, not only of the Gestapo-like visitors, Goldberg and McCann, but also of the female protagonists. Meg and Lulu seem to have Stanley’s interests at heart, but both want to recreate him in their own image and are unconsciously blind to his reality.

This does not mean that there is any inevitability in this. Everything remains contingent, and our theology needs to hold out the alternative, especially against dehumanising and conformist pressures in society and within the Church itself. Such a contrary stance will, as Stanley discovers, inevitably in which contradiction and impossibility are places of human suffering – Stanley but the Christian affirmation is that it is possible to find through this suffering a birth of new possibility, though bought at the price. Suffering, as Daniel Barber points out in his study of Deleuze, can, contrary to the tragic destructiveness of *The Birthday Party*, be productive:-

There is a productive power in suffering, for suffering binds us to the place where we are, which is to say that it frees us from discourses, from pre-established senses, that would impose themselves on – and thus obscure this place .... It also enables us to create new possibilities of existence, possibilities

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<sup>109</sup> John D. Caputo *The Insistence of God: A Theology of Perhaps* (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press 2013) p.143.

<sup>110</sup> Rowan Williams *The Spirit in the Desert* (London: World Community for Christian Meditation, 2015) p.17.

made possible only when suffering reveals the impossibility of existence amidst the possibilities we are presently given.<sup>111</sup>

Suffering is necessary if there is to be any breakthrough from present impossibilities into new creativity. Deleuze says that ‘creation takes place in bottlenecks’,<sup>112</sup> which is a rather different image from that of the contemporary refrain “there is no alternative” or the cul-de-sac of *The Birthday Party*. The bottleneck in the party image is caused by the seeming incompatibility of unity and diversity. It is this dialectic which somehow pushes against conventional wisdom, and strains (the suffering) for a breakthrough into a new, but certainly not another-worldly, state.

*The Birthday Party* can be seen as a play upholding the place of dissent, but it is also a tragedy about its seemingly inevitable futility. Stanley is finally forced to conform or die. What Christian theology adds to this is not some other-worldly perspective whereby we see things differently – ‘God’s in his heaven, all’s right with the world’ – but rather the possibility of moving through the suffering and the seeming end to new states of affairs. This after all is what we can find in the Jesus story, ‘the image of a conscientiously dissident free spirit condemned and crucified by the state, but symbolically vindicated by the divine act of resurrection...potentially the most vivid possible religious affirmation of conscientiously dissident free-spiritedness in general.’<sup>113</sup> Pinter’s play can be seen as calling theology to return to this and turn its back on a false other-worldly security which has too often been used to subjugate others, rather than reflecting and acting on its dissident beginning, and continually renewing this by moving into the cracks and chaos of our own situation in order to find the new configuration where unity and difference go together in God’s party.

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<sup>111</sup> Daniel Colucciello Barber *Deleuze and the Naming of God: Post-Secularism and the Future of Immanence* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2015) p.178.

<sup>112</sup> Gilles Deleuze *Negotiations*, trans. Martin Jouhin (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995) p.176 quoted in Barber op.cit. p.184.

<sup>113</sup> Andrew Shanks *God and Modernity* (London: Routledge, 2000) p.110.





#### 4. Racing Demon

I began researching the play because I was fascinated by the CoE – the state it found itself in and its peculiar problems as they reflected on other institutions in Britain. Since *The Secret Rapture* I'd been interested in the nature of goodness, what it constitutes in the present day. I found the Church's people in the inner cities devote themselves, perhaps fourteen hours a day, to doing what is effectively social work, yet drained of a great deal of religious content it used to have. And they're doing this work which nobody else is willing to do, being paid miserably to do it and they're doing it from the best intentions. And what powers them is a belief in God's love.<sup>114</sup>

In *Racing Demon*, David Hare seeks to expose the inner contradictions of the Church of England in a play about tensions between the clerical members of a Team Ministry in South London. As with all Hare's work, his research was intensive, and the characters are based on real people. He even spent a week at General Synod. As with *The Birthday Party*, it is a play about the dynamics of power, and about the outsider in the group, but unlike Pinter's play, that outsider role is experienced in one way or another by every character.

Though it was the first of a trilogy of plays about the establishment – the law in *Murmuring Judges*, the political world in *The Absence of War – Racing Demon* stands on its own in so far as Hare saw the Church of England as a metaphor for the other institutions. The institution in each case comes over as anaesthetic and repressive, leaving those “at the coal face” who actually connect with real people, stranded and confused, but when it comes to the individual characters, there are neither heroes nor villains. As Richard Boon has observed: ‘For Hare, “rightness” does not reside within any one figure, but is something that has to be beaten out in complex arguments between characters and hence, crucially, between stage and audience.’<sup>115</sup>

Nor is he against the Church *per se*, for as he said, ‘the one thing I have learnt and understood from five years' study is that British society needs not to abolish its institutions, but to refresh them. For, if not through institutions, how do we express the common good?’<sup>116</sup>

*Racing Demon* works at both political and existential levels –with the issue of power paramount as in *The Birthday Party*, and with an evocation of empathy for each character and their particular angst, as in *Godot*. Frequently Hare's plays are more

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<sup>114</sup> David Hare, quoted in Richard Boon *About Hare: The Playwright and the Work* (London: Faber & Faber, 2003) p.127.

<sup>115</sup> *ibid* p.43f.

<sup>116</sup> David Hare *Asking Around: Background to the David Hare Trilogy* (London: Faber and Faber, 1993) p.8.

Brechtian than this – for instance in *Stuff Happens* about the lead-up to the second Iraq war, in *The Permanent Way* on the privatisation of the railways, or in *The Power of Yes* about the 2008 financial crisis - with members of the audience being invited to take stock and come to their own conclusion on the basis of the evidence provided. Though this is partly true in *Racing Demon* - inevitably the audience will come to form a verdict on the Church of England - yet here this judgement will necessarily be provisional for Hare ensures that we are led into the interior worlds of the characters, such that whatever our final verdict, it will be tinged with understanding and even admiration.

*Racing Demon* concludes with the words of Frances, one of the play's two female characters:-

I love that bit when the plane begins to climb, the ground smooths away behind you, the buildings, the hills. Then the white patches. The vision gets bleary. The cloud becomes a hard shelf. The land is still there. But all you see is white and horizon. And then you turn and head towards the sun.<sup>117</sup>

Frances is the erstwhile lover of new curate Tony, who after his ordination summarily rejects her on the grounds that he now has to keep up a certain “moral” standard. Later she becomes the almost too close confidante of Team Rector, Lionel, whose own wife is both dowdy and depressed. We can read those last lines as a merciful release from the goldfish bowl of the Church of England as Frances has experienced it. Her own life has mirrored this, coming from a clerical family but no longer able to believe. Yet the release into the ‘white and the horizon’ and then into the full glare of the sun, may be magnificently liberating, but at the same time it is vacuous. Like so many modern forms of spirituality, it lacks substance and any real engagement with the world in which we actually live. The messiness, good intentions, and sometimes downright nastiness of church life in the inner city at least reflects a sense of God’s involvement in the world of South London, and if God is to be found, it will be there rather than above the clouds.

First, it will be necessary to look one-by-one at the clerical *dramatis personae* of the play, as each embodies a different and perhaps incompatible theology. That diversity may be a source of richness as long as they are in conversation with each other, but

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<sup>117</sup> David Hare *Racing Demon* (London: Faber & Faber, 1990) p.88.

once they take absolutist positions with a claim to a total perspective, suspicion is aroused. In *Racing Demon*, Hare shows how easily theology can become such a disguise for power. The need for certainty can easily override the basic theological regard to the underlying mystery and unknowability of its divine subject. The play poses the tension in what it means to live by faith, with a concern for the particular, with a continuing search for a truth at which we never arrive, whilst also showing the tempting but simplistic attempts to short-circuit this, which carry with them a desire to denounce and silence those still on the way. As Rowan Williams has put it:-

All speakers speak from a perspective, social and historical, and their words are part of the universe they claim to see as a whole. Since that is so, it will be right to suspect that the claim to understand and to speak for the global context of your own speaking is essentially a claim to power and a prohibition of free response and continuation.<sup>118</sup>

If, as Williams makes clear, we can never have a total perspective on anything, it follows that such claims by some of the characters in the play can only be interpreted as unconscious bids for power.

Secondly, having looked at each character individually, I will suggest that the play points to a fundamental dichotomy within the church today. On the one hand, there are those for whom success is paramount and for whom this can only be realised through holding to a seemingly definite and assured belief in the transcendent God as the giver of eternal truths, which have been revealed once and for all. This is the standpoint of both Tony and the Bishop of Southwark. Such dogmatism has no place for a perceived weakness that is intrinsically linked with failure; one embodied, as they see it, in Lionel the Team Rector. On the other hand, there is the real experience of the Team members, shown to be actively involved with the community they serve, trying to live out the gospel with more questions than answers, seemingly without spectacular results, and reflected in the apparent failure and the both acknowledged and unacknowledged inner turmoil of Lionel and some of his team. *Racing Demon*, despite containing a good deal of humour, immerses the audience in this underlying sense of the suffering of both the communities they serve as well as those working within them, with a lot of that latter's suffering being either self-imposed or coming from the institution of the church itself. Such an emphasis is hardly surprising when

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<sup>118</sup> Rowan Williams "Theological Integrity" in *On Christian Theology* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2000) p.5.

Hare himself has stated that one of the prime tasks of the playwright, and therefore one of his own constant aims, is to 'put people's sufferings in a historical context; and by doing that [...] help explain their pain.'<sup>119</sup> Though such an explanation may satisfy simply in terms of cause and effect - the equivalent of the talking cure of the psychiatrist's couch - it does not deal with the more fundamental question of why and how such suffering may be related to the essential nature of Christian faith itself, and particularly to one founded on a 'divine weakness which is stronger than human strength' and demonstrated in its identification with others in their need.<sup>120</sup>

### ***Lionel Espy***

The central character, Lionel Espy, is a decent man who leads a team in a struggling South London parish. There are two problems. The churches are empty and his own faith is at a desperately low ebb. As curate Tony remarks, 'He reeks of personal failure. And anguish. Like so much of the Church.'<sup>121</sup> As the play opens Lionel is facing criticism from the Bishop of Southwark over his leadership of his team ministry. Espy, benighted, doubt-ridden, no longer knows what he believes except, perhaps, that priests should be good listeners to their parishioners for whom they are sometimes the only person to whom they can turn. But what help they can offer is limited. "Is that it?" asks one woman who has recently undergone an abortion and whose marriage is in crisis.<sup>122</sup>

This crisis of faith is expressed in his opening prayer-soliloquy :\_

God. Where are you? I wish you would talk to me. God. It isn't just me. There's a general feeling. This is what people are saying in the parish. They want to know where you are. The joke wears thin. You must see that. You never say anything. All right, people expect that, it's understood. But people also think, I didn't realize when he said *nothing*, he really did mean absolutely nothing at all. You see, I tell you, it's this perpetual absence – yes? – this not being there – it's that – I mean. Let's be honest –it's just beginning to get some of us down, You know? Is that

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<sup>119</sup> David Hare *Writing Left-Handed* (London: Faber & Faber, 1991) p.34.

<sup>120</sup> 1 Corinthians 1:25 NRSV.

<sup>121</sup> David Hare *Racing Demon* op.cit. p.49.

<sup>122</sup> David Hare *Racing Demon* op.cit. p.12.

unreasonable? There are an awful lot of people in a very bad way. And they need something besides silence. God. Do you understand?<sup>123</sup>

Lionel's plight mirrors that of many of his parishioners. No-one seems to listen to them either, whether it's the DHSS or their partners, or the system in general. For Lionel this means a priest's role is "being there" together with a lot of listening, and a distrust and embarrassment about words, especially religious ones. 'The moment you start using language, you distance people.'<sup>124</sup>

### ***Tony Ferris***

Tony, the new young curate, comes in as Lionel's nemesis. His theology becomes evident early on as that of 'fulfilling God's mission on earth',<sup>125</sup> an aim which soon becomes incompatible with his relationship with Frances who is unceremoniously discarded as a lover, though Tony, as Frances points out, significantly avoids using the word 'sin' for what he has been up to. Sin belongs to others.

Tony's soliloquy ends:-

I've got to pray for Lionel. Christ didn't come to sit on a committee. He didn't come to do social work. He came to preach repentance. And to offer everyone the chance of redemption.<sup>126</sup>

This enthusiasm leads him into interfering with one of Lionel's pastoral cases with nearly disastrous results. As Frances says, 'He wants to get hold of people and solve them.'<sup>127</sup>

Tony becomes unwittingly the Judas of the play, betraying Lionel to the Bishop, and in his encounter with his other two colleagues who have laid in wait for him at the Savoy where the Bishop is to meet him, he voices his frustration at Lionel and at the whole church which he sees as betraying the Gospel and substituting an enlightened humanism – 'You do good work... God knows, fourteen-hour days covering for all

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<sup>123</sup> Ibid p.1.

<sup>124</sup> Ibid p.59.

<sup>125</sup> Ibid p.9.

<sup>126</sup> Ibid p.20.

<sup>127</sup> Ibid p.30.

the other community services. But when it comes down to it, that's not the whole message. It's got to be distinctive. People need more.'<sup>128</sup> Harry replies in terms of the 'dream that's haunted the church for two thousand years...of all temptations...just about the most dangerous on offer. The illusion of action.'<sup>129</sup>

Tony's recourse is to the 'supernatural religion, a divine intervention', a God who must have a purpose even in the car crash which killed his own parents.<sup>130</sup> His supernatural interventionism is literal, which only serves to highlight its inadequacy and banality.

### ***Donald ("Streaky") Bacon***

Streaky is the most sympathetic of all the characters in the play. His theology, such as it is, is summed in this:-

Love the job, love my work. Look at other people in total bewilderment. I got to drink at the Savoy. It was wonderful. It's all wonderful. Why can't people enjoy what they have? ... Lord, I have no theology. Can't do it. By my bed there's a pile of paperbacks called *The Meaning of Meaning*, and *How to Ask Why*. They've been there for years. The whole thing's clear. You're there. In people's happiness. Tonight, in the taste of that drink. Or the love of my friends. The whole thing's so simple. Infinitely loving. Why do people find it so hard?<sup>131</sup>

This is usually greeted in the theatre with acclaim. Yet it hides a weakness, the weakness that love conquers everything, that love somehow is God, rather than the other way round. That love is the supreme gift, rather than the giver. That an abstraction – happiness, love – can suffice. That weakness becomes apparent at the end, when, for all his kind words and best intentions, in his way he also betrays Lionel:-

STREAKY: Look Lionel, you know what I feel about you.

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<sup>128</sup> Ibid p.51.

<sup>129</sup> Ibid pp.53f.

<sup>130</sup> Ibid p.67.

<sup>131</sup> Ibid p. 55f..

LIONEL: No, listen, I'm just asking.

STREAKY: You tell me. I'll go into battle. If that's what you want. I never miss a line-out. I never have. But I love this area. You know I'll fight for you, don't get me wrong. I'll fight for a while. But finally it isn't about us.

LIONEL: No.

STREAKY: It's about people.

(pause)

LIONEL: Yes.<sup>132</sup>

### ***The Bishop of Southwark***

Lionel's clash with the Bishop of Southwark provides the central motif for the production. There is a quote from a vicar in Hare's 'Asking Around': 'The trouble with bishops is that after a while they think they're God. They move us around like chessmen.'<sup>133</sup> One of the best scenes takes place over a chessboard and the stage set is primarily black and white. The bishop's first advice to Lionel is to 'keep everyone happy'.<sup>134</sup>

Though he admits the final incomprehensibility of God, the bishop is obsessively attached to what he sees as a divinely given tradition in which, for instance, women have no role as priests or bishops, in which change is seen as submission to culture, in which beliefs must be held in their credal formulation, where reinterpretation necessarily undermines, and in which Lionel stands for all that he hates - 'You stand in the centre of the parish like some great fat wobbly girl's blouse. Crying for humanity. And doing absolutely nothing at all.'<sup>135</sup>

### ***Harry Henderson***

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<sup>132</sup> Ibid p.85.

<sup>133</sup> David Hare *Asking Around: Background to the David Hare Trilogy* op.cit. p.38.

<sup>134</sup> David Hare *Racing Demon* op.cit. p.4.

<sup>135</sup> Ibid p.79.

Harry's is the sub-plot of the play. Ironically, he is the one who had contended with Tony earlier about not passing judgment, and is himself now unmasked by the press as gay. For Hare a sub-plot is important.<sup>136</sup> It gives an interpretative parallel to the main action. In this case, the whole issue of the church as an institution can be assessed by this one issue. How does it deal with those who do fail to conform to the accepted model, and how, in the light of this, does it relate to the "outsider"? Harry's exclusion, partly self-imposed, removes any sense that the church is a comfortable organization at peace with itself. Instead it points to an underlying fear, which rears its head again later when Lionel himself finds his own position as Team Rector under threat.

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Hare succeeds in getting us to see the various points-of-view. We can feel for Lionel in his tiredness and frustration, and in the way he is eventually deprived of his living despite episcopal promises to the contrary. On the other hand we can also sympathise with Tony in his frustration at what he sees as the ineffectiveness of the inner-city church. Our hearts warm to Streaky with his simple faith and go out to Harry as he is effectively drummed out by the gutter press and a church which in practice denies the very inclusiveness it proclaims. Even the Bishop can be understood, at least in his wish to hold things together and to ensure that priests are effective, though we may draw a line at his personal views, particularly his antipathy to women.

Certainty is reflected in Tony, Streaky and the Bishop in very different ways. Tony's is that of biblical revelation, Streaky's that of the simplicity of experience, and the Bishop's that of the church's infallible and unchanging tradition. In the face of this, the seeming hesitancy of doubt, the "perhaps" of the seeker, the openness and indefiniteness of the explorer, and the dialectical juggling of anyone who is grappling with the big issues such as why the just suffer or how can a post-modern world and religion be reconciled, may not have the immediate attractiveness or marketability of a clear message.

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<sup>136</sup> Hare has said: 'What I'm trying to do with epic narrative, with subplot, is to create a theatre that goes back to Elizabethan ideas of plot and subplot.' Richard Boon op.cit. p.132.



Such certainty though is almost always based on a dichotomy between belief and action, or at least a supposition that the former must precede the latter. This is where Tony stands. Good works must take second place to “preaching the gospel” rather than the works being the embodiment of the good news, speaking for themselves. The latter is too tentative and too inclusive. Yet drama itself, including a play like *Racing Demon*, by its very nature puts works first. So Martin Esslin writes:-

Only what characters *do* tells the audience what they are like. Thus it must be the action of people within the plot which develops character, while the character of the individuals involved in turn *motivates* the action and makes the plot interesting to follow.<sup>137</sup>

Here theatre is closer to life than a theology which wishes to privilege belief and motive. The play makes clear that they must cohere, and that without such integrity, the church is doomed. How easily such integrity can be compromised, thereby undermining the institution itself, comes out in the ‘promise’ supposedly made by the suffragan Bishop of Kingston to Lionel about the security of his tenure, which turns out not to be the case.

More fundamentally than this, from its very beginning the play collapses transcendence into immanence. Calls and references to a God out there are seen as vacuous. Lionel’s prayer ‘God, where are you?’ establishes this. The Bishop’s leech-like adherence to ‘formulae that have served men well for two thousand years’, underlines this emptiness (transcendence reduced to formulae), whilst Tony’s attempt at theodicy (‘He makes us suffer. Through suffering we learn’) which ends up with the enormity of suggesting that it was God’s will that his own parents died in a car crash, all serve to show that, especially after the malign events of the last century, a simple idea of transcendence is no longer fit for purpose.<sup>138</sup>

The problem for the church as accurately presented in the play, is that its whole structure seems wedded to this transcendental model. This is reflected in a hierarchical church, with the bishop as final arbiter of the Team’s fate, and the clergy

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<sup>137</sup> Martin Esslin *The Field of Drama* (London: Methuen, 1987) p.116.

<sup>138</sup> David Hare *Racing Demon* op.cit p.76 & p.68.

conforming to what John Howard Yoder calls the ‘chaplaincy model’,<sup>139</sup> with the church as a wider body playing no part at all. It is significant that, with the exception of the outsider Frances, the non-clerics only appear as victims and recipients of care. There is no sense of the church as community. If there is any movement it is managerial, lacking any fundamental theological analysis and re-think. We get reform, with an emphasis on efficiency, modernisation and attractiveness when what is called for is a fundamental reconfiguration.

Yet in its being there and in its actions, the church as portrayed does give an indication of an alternative theology, rooted in the earliest self-understanding of the church, for instance, as given by St Paul:-

We are treated as imposters, and yet are true; as unknown, and yet are well known; as dying, and see – we are alive; as punished, and yet not killed; as sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; as poor yet making any rich; as having nothing, and yet possessing everything.<sup>140</sup>

This can be applied not just to Paul and the first Christians, but also to God, the God who is enmeshed in the world, where his seeming absence is part of his meaning. This is what all the characters, save Lionel in his opening lines – ‘Where are you God etc?’ – are evading. Where is God to be found, and with that, is theology dead? Paul’s words show that this is not a new question, but one which faced those first Christians in the light of the crucifixion and their own experience. The conclusion for them and also for us, in Terry Eagleton’s words is:-

that the death of God is not a question of his disappearance. On the contrary, it is one of the places where he is most fully present. Jesus is not Man standing in for God. He is the sign that God is incarnate in human frailty and futility. Only by living this reality to the full, experiencing one’s own death to the end, can there be a path beyond the tragic.<sup>141</sup>

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<sup>139</sup> John Howard Yoder *For the Nations: Essays Public & Evangelical* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans, 1997) p.114.

<sup>140</sup> 2 Corinthians 6:8-10 NRSV.

<sup>141</sup> Terry Eagleton *Culture and the Death of God* (London: Yale University Press, 2014) p.160.

Here the shortcuts of Tony, with his simplistic fundamentalism, and the Bishop of Southwark, with his credal ‘truths’ and his exhortation to Lionel ‘to keep everyone happy’, fail because they do not do justice to God or meet the human predicament. So what theology can we bring into play?

Like *Waiting for Godot* and *The Birthday Party*, *Racing Demon* can be viewed as a parable told around the puzzle, “Where is God in this?” To pursue this I turn to two theologians who, in different ways, have grappled with this question, John Howard Yoder and Robert Jenson.

For Yoder, ‘[t]hat power is weak and weakness strong is no poetic paradox; it is a fact of life.’<sup>142</sup> That suffering is powerful, and that weakness wins, is true not only in heaven but on earth. This is a statement about the destiny not only of the faith community but also of all creation. The church is the body in which this is to be lived out, and so everything about it, including such issues as official relationships with the state, hierarchical ministries, lifestyle and way of being, must be submitted to the test of Jesus and the gospel.

Yoder is hostile to anything that he sees deriving from the Constantinian settlement, whereby church and state divided the world. Under the Constantinian settlement from which we still suffer, the “church” is no longer predominantly a body of people and only secondarily the things they do together and the facilities they use to do them together. Rather the church becomes the institution which services the entire population with a certain categories of “religious” resources. In particular it becomes the service station for “crisis” experiences and for “the depth dimension”. Except in times of emergency, therefore, it should stay out of economic and political concerns and deal with the needs of the soul.<sup>143</sup> Ever since Constantine, suggests Yoder, the church has been cursed by the neo-platonic theology which supported a division between body and soul, and in which earthly and heavenly cities are separated.<sup>144</sup>

Though Yoder may seem to be advocating a form of Christian isolationism, by turning our back on establishment and finding again our Christian distinctiveness, in

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<sup>142</sup> John Howard Yoder op.cit. p.35.

<sup>143</sup> John Howard Yoder op.cit. p.106.

<sup>144</sup> John Howard Yoder op.cit. p.82.

fact this is far from the case. His favourite Old Testament paradigm is that of Jeremiah's injunction to the exiles in Babylon to stay there, to renounce notions of an early return to Judaea, to settle in, to buy land and plant gardens and vineyards, to marry off their children and enjoy their grandchildren, and especially to 'seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare.'<sup>145</sup> This may mean singing the Lord's song in a strange land, but this can be done, and the Jewish people can be fully involved with society, with only one sacred non-negotiable, there is no other God.

For the Christian church, this means a total immersion in society whilst holding onto the paradigm of the story of Jesus, in what Yoder calls, 'the Paradigmatic Public Role of God's People'.<sup>146</sup> The life of Christians can thus become God's model to the world. As a consequence for Yoder 'having a particular identity & making sense to one's neighbours, serving their wellbeing, are not disjunctive alternatives. In fact there is no reason to want to make sense to your neighbours if you have no identity worth sharing with them.'<sup>147</sup> This relationship will necessarily be a critical one, something which establishment can make difficult though not impossible, for the church must and will live by what Yoder calls the 'lamb-like' way of Christ.<sup>148</sup> This is something that *Racing Demon* reveals in the team despite their deficiencies.

Robert Jenson too is concerned to stress the living dynamic of the church as the embodiment of God's mission in the world. Whilst conscious that grand narratives are dead and buried, the particular narrative of Christianity, what he calls a 'realistic narrative', has a central place today. Stories remains central to our understandings and without a story promise becomes impossible for stories can embody hope and this is certainly the case with the Christian narrative. The forward-thrust of this story, which is for Jenson the narrative of the triune God, stands in stark contrast (he thinks) to all those ways of seeing God and the world in terms of the timeless, of the eternal, or of a reality beyond this one. Here the gospel of God in Christ 'has been our great debunker ... He who says that God has happened in time and space ends all attempts to give life

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<sup>145</sup> Jeremiah 29:7 NRSV.

<sup>146</sup> John Howard Yoder op.cit. p.25.

<sup>147</sup> Ibid p.41.

<sup>148</sup> 'If the Lamb that was slain was worthy to receive power, then no calculation of other non-lamblike roads to power can be ultimately authentic.' Yoder op.cit. p.135.

meaning on the basis of the timeless.<sup>149</sup> Here he singles out those, who have ‘perverted the gospel into an ideological weapon against the future’, and we could think here particularly of Tony and the Bishop in the play.<sup>150</sup> This kind of belief in the unchanging unalterable faith ‘leaves theology drained of its content and left as a set of dead words’.<sup>151</sup>

Instead God is God, not as a metaphysical being, but only through the story of which we are a part, and such a God is therefore not to be conceived as a timeless entity but, in Jenson’s words, as a ‘lively, active event’.<sup>152</sup> Such a theology, as with Yoder’s, may seem to cut the church off from the world, embedding us in our own particular story, especially as Jenson, following St.Paul, also sees the church as the actual embodiment of the risen Christ. Where, we might ask, does that leave the rest of humanity? But stories need not be exclusive. In fact they are the best proven means of communication, and in any case this particular ‘realistic narrative’ is not just a matter of words, but is to be lived out by Christians, and finds its particular validation in the fact that promises are kept. For Jenson this is crucial, for the story is fundamentally about promise. A church which fails to keep promises, as the Bishop does with Lionel in *Racing Demon*, is one that has betrayed its *raison d’etre*.

Hare’s own verdict on his work takes us into his own mind. For him, there really is ‘something which isn’t just what we’re conditioned by...If a writer doesn’t have a sense of the other, by which I mean soul or spirit, I don’t want to know.’<sup>153</sup> However, his play is about more than this. It brings up that great divide between those on the one hand who see faith as timeless, with the church as the preacher of certainties and the preserver of tradition, and those on the other who see the need for a church ‘released from the burden of furnishing social orders with a set of rationales for their existence’<sup>154</sup> or from providing secure havens for the individual soul, in the hope of becoming instead the living narrative of God’s way in the world, one freed from the normal criteria of success and failure.

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<sup>149</sup> Robert W.Jenson *Theology as Revisionary Metaphysics: Essays on God and Creation* ed. Stephen John Wright, (Eugene, Oregon: Cascade Books, 2014) p.11f.

<sup>150</sup> Ibid p.9.

<sup>151</sup> Ibid.

<sup>152</sup> A.H.Verhoef *Postmodernism and the Need for Story and Promise: How Robert Jenson’s Theology addresses some Postmodern Challenges to Faith* in *Acta Theologica* 2012, 32(1) p.179.

<sup>153</sup> Malcolm Page *File on Hare* (London: Methuen, 1990) p.83.

<sup>154</sup> Terry Eagleton op.cit.207.



## Conclusion

‘It seems to me that transformations just that abrupt do occur in this life, and they occur unsought and unawaited, and they beggar your hopes and your deserving.’  
(Marilynne Robinson)<sup>155</sup>

In *Middlemarch*, George Eliot gives a remarkably prescient parable:-

Your pier-glass or extensive surface of polished steel made to be rubbed by a housemaid, will be minutely and multitudinously scratched in all directions; but place now against it a lighted candle as the centre of illumination, and lo! The scratches will seem to arrange themselves in a fine series of concentric circles round the little sun. It is demonstrable that the scratches are going everywhere impartially, and it is only your candle which produces the flattering illusion of a concentric arrangement, its light falling with an exclusive optical selection.<sup>156</sup>

This prefigures our current situation and that reflected in our three plays. For most the candle has been blown out and we can only see the purposeless scratches in the contingency of our lives. Some light candles and claim to see their truth, and some suffer the delusion that their particular candle is analogous to the sun shining in full splendour.

Our discussion of the plays however has suggested the impossibility and implausibility of claiming such an overarching absolutised vantage point. Godot does not come and maybe does not exist at all; Stanley silently screams in vain - there is no rescue; attempts to cling to the vestiges of such supernaturalism held with an unconsciously cruel certainty by Tony and the Bishop in *Racing Demon*, fly in the face of the real world encountered by Lionel, Frances, and Streaky Bacon, in which suffering comes uninvited and without explanation. There is, in all three plays an awareness that the seeming certainties of supposed revelation or tradition to which life had to be accommodated, will no longer serve and previously accepted ways of ‘justify[ing] the ways of God to men’, no longer ring true.<sup>157</sup>

In his memoir “The Blue Touch Paper” David Hare quotes V.S Naipaul, ‘Plot is for those who already know the world; narrative is for those who want to discover it.’<sup>158</sup>

We might see the theological equivalent as the plot being the faith of those who have the whole scheme worked out with nothing new needed, and the narrative approach

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<sup>155</sup> Marilynne Robinson *Gilead* (London: Virago Press 2005) p.231

<sup>156</sup> George Eliot *Middlemarch* (Ware, Hertfordshire: Wordsworth Classics, 2000) p.218f.

<sup>157</sup> John Milton *Paradise Lost Book I* in *Milton: Poems* (London: Everyman Edition, 1962) p.160.

<sup>158</sup> David Hare *The Blue Touch Paper* (London: Faber & Faber, 2015) p.204.

being that of those who believe that God can only be encountered within the realities of life and in the questions which are begged. In other words, just as patterns may be discerned in the random scratches on the steel surface, so the audience can discover in our three plays that all is not quite as it seems. We do not have to be left dwelling on the absurdity of life, for in each one there are signs and moments where something other breaks through. There is also that which binds these fragmentary moments together, uniting those scratches on the polished steel under an overriding image. We have seen the illumination of the individual fragments, for example, in the badinage between Vladimir and Estragon in *Godot*, a sign of a friendship which binds them together under the image of the cross, in the new life of leaves on that “dead” tree, and in the act of waiting. We have seen it too in *The Birthday Party*, in Stanley’s sheer bloody-mindedness, taking his stand against trite attitudes with their implicit violence. Stanley may be doomed, but we the audience are left with uncomfortable questions about the glib assumptions by which we live and that which is left unsaid. We have seen it in the real debate of *Racing Demon*, between those who would take a short-cut solution to some ready-made explanation of what life is all about, again with its implicit exclusionary violence, and those, who with a mixture of doubt and assurance, pursue a life of active care for the marginalised.

But once we see the plays as extended metaphors or parables, then each one has the potential to subvert our initial assumptions, for instance that life is absurd, through that orienting, disorienting and reorienting effect that Paul Ricoeur said was the purpose of a parable.<sup>159</sup> Each play can, in Peter Brook’s words, ‘amend my thinking for life,’<sup>160</sup> in other words effect what religious tradition would call “conversion”, where disorientation is a vital part of the process, the blinding of Saul on the Damascus road, or more fundamentally, the chaos from which creation takes shape. This disorientation is certainly there in the plays. Is there any point in waiting for Godot or is life as meaningless as it seems, with one day much like the one before? Do those new leaves on the tree amount to anything? Can Stanley resist his inquisitors or is he doomed to real death or at least the metaphorical death of conformity? Do the various voices of the church have any substance, or is the institution doomed, with its pomp and pretension covering nakedness, and its poor foot soldiers really, at best, social workers in disguise? Or in all three plays, does the image of a meal or party

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<sup>159</sup> Paul Ricoeur *Biblical Hermeneutics: Semeia 4* (1975) p.126.

<sup>160</sup> Peter Brook *The Empty Space* (London: Penguin Books, 1972) p.152.



point to something that transcends? Vladimir and Estragon share their carrots and turnips, just as they share their lives; the birthday party may be one from hell but it also indicates the possibility of another party where there is harmony and welcome for all; Tony, Harry and Streaky share their tequilas with cherries and umbrellas at the Savoy, 'Call it a Last Supper' says Streaky.<sup>161</sup>

This kind of theatre takes the audience seriously, and seeks to involve them; not by closing down argument, but by opening it up, and changing the way we think. As Howard Barker has put it:-

[Playwrights] are paid to think dangerously, they are the explorers of the imagination, the audience expects it of them. If they think safely, what is the virtue of them? Do you want to pay £10 to be told what you knew already? That is theft. Do you want to agree all the time? That is flattery, and the audience is always flattered, which is why it has become so sleek.<sup>162</sup>

Beckett, Pinter and Hare variously are prepared to discomfort the audience, in a way which chimes with the biblical precedent. The parables of Jesus, as earlier of the prophets, were told to unsettle, to get people to see things differently. The whole extended parable of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, does this supremely.<sup>163</sup> From the outset it is seen as the stumbling block, hence the bafflement of the disciples, hence the listeners and onlookers miss what is happening, hence the desire to work out a foolproof theory of the atonement. To be left with stories feels insufficient. We prefer something in a cast iron formula, a clinching argument, an overarching narrative in which our role is clear.

But then something blows up, perhaps literally a bomb explodes and people are killed or maimed, and those theoretical solutions to the mysteries of life, and particularly that of suffering, are also blown to bits. Our lives are interrupted, echoing Johann Baptist Metz's comment: 'the shortest definition of religion is interruption'.<sup>164</sup>

Because life is open to sometimes outrageous changes and chances, good theatre takes us beyond tidy explanations, and so does good religion. The plays we have looked at

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<sup>161</sup> *Racing Demon* op.cit.p.47

<sup>162</sup> Howard Barker *Arguments for a Theatre* ( Manchester: Manchester University Press,1989) p.47.

<sup>163</sup> 'Jesus died as a parabler and rose as a parable' John Dominic Crossan *The Dark Interval: Towards a Theology of Story* (Allen: Argus,1975) p.126.

<sup>164</sup> Quoted in Lieven Boeve *Lyotard and Theology* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014) p.125.

reflect the times, which continues to be our time, in which all assumptions have been shaken, including the ultimate one of God and final meaning.

This has in fact always been the case. Theology, whether consciously or not, has always been provisional and on the way, and its statements more about asking questions than giving definitive answers.<sup>165</sup> What has happened more recently, however, is the demise of the master narrative, and as Lieven Boeve has asked, ‘Can God escape the clutches of the Christian master narrative?’<sup>166</sup> For Lyotard himself, there is the concept of the *differend*, referring to an inexpressible event, one which escapes ultimate conceptualisation.

Lyotard’s *differend* draws attention to the way in which the second stage in any phrase is arbitrary but in the world of the grand narrative is seen as predetermined, with alternatives ruled out. If we were to take the parable as an example, the explanation, as for instance that given to the parable of the sower (Mark 4:13-20) or to that of tares (Matthew 13:36-43) serves to undermine the whole challenge of the parable, and the existential question it poses. By turning it into an allegory it imposes a single meaning and in this way prefigures the whole hegemony of a Christian master narrative; its origins within the New Testament itself.<sup>167</sup> God is working his purpose out with a grand plan in which everything can be made to fit. Yet it never does, and especially in our own age in our post-Auschwitz consciousness, no such overarching scheme will serve. Our three plays in their different ways make that plain. Godot does not come, Stanley is destroyed, Lionel and his team are, in their various ways, left to grope about in the dark. But what we find instead, is the possibility of the unexpected, a form of transcendence within the immanence, within the messiness of time and place. Once we have seen this, then it transforms everything, especially when it happens against the grain of the narrative. Leaves sprout on the apparently barren

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<sup>165</sup> ‘Theology is a question-driven quest’. Catherine Keller *On the Mystery* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2008) p.33.

<sup>166</sup> Lieven Boeve *Lyotard and Theology: Beyond the Christian Master Narrative of Love*, (London: Bloomsbury, 2014) p.59.

<sup>167</sup> For Ivana Noble it was not until the later conciliar decrees that Christianity became a master narrative, but I am convinced that we can see the beginnings in its New Testament origins.’ The grand narrative story of being itself overshadows the small stories of particular people and communities, from which we can learn what Christ does and who he is.’ Ivana Noble *How to avoid Grand Narratives in Christology: A Challenge of Postmodern Hermeneutics* in Milltown Studies, Dublin, Milltown Institute of Philosophy and Theology, Summer 2010, p.51.

[https://www.academia.edu/9441507/How\\_to\\_Avoid\\_Grand\\_Narratives\\_in\\_Christology\\_A\\_Challenge\\_of\\_Postmodern\\_Hermeneutics](https://www.academia.edu/9441507/How_to_Avoid_Grand_Narratives_in_Christology_A_Challenge_of_Postmodern_Hermeneutics) [downloaded 20 March 2016].

tree, Stanley holds on till the bitter end, the clergy persist in caring despite discouragement.

Yet all is to play for, for everything is open-ended. In each of the three plays, we enter the action without any explanation. Any we get is picked up as the drama proceeds. Similarly at the end we are left without resolution, with neither vindication nor judgement. This must be so if there is no plot, no master-narrative. In this way our plays serve as metaphors or parables of life as we experience it.<sup>168</sup> For all the attempts at super-imposed meaning, most of our experience is a case of “stuff happens”, which may, as Michael Polanyi pointed out, make Christian faith unsatisfactory and inadequate in that its striving can never reach an endpoint at which, having gained its desired result, its continuation would become unnecessary. He adds: ‘Take away doubt, sin and anguish, and Christian faith turns into a caricature of itself. It becomes a set of inaccurate, often false and largely meaningless statements, accompanied by conventional gestures and complacent moralizing.’<sup>169</sup>

However, as we have seen, it does not follow that because the plot is no more, God is dead or that theology has to be moribund. Rather, what follows is that we may find a life-changing transcendence, without recourse to dualism, within the immanent, in the interstices, in amongst the *differends* and in radical surprises and shocks, in what Paul Ricouer calls ‘the grace of immanent transcendence’.<sup>170</sup> Otherwise, theology would have to inhabit a separate world from the rest of humankind. As Walter Benjamin put it ‘God’s transcendence is at an end. But he is not dead, he has been incorporated into human experience.’<sup>171</sup> He is part of the one drama of our lives. And the liberation we find is not from this world – this would be the equivalent of Peter Brook’s “deadly theatre”, a short period of escapism – but in it.<sup>172</sup>

Unlike Platonic philosophy, theology does not seek to ban the poets (nor the playwrights) from the city. Theology deals in a narrative laden with metaphor and therefore with many possible meanings, and with always more to be unearthed. This is the transcendence of the parable, where both the drama on stage and the drama of

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<sup>168</sup> In a lecture given on 24th November 2015 at King’s Place, London, David Hare said that all his plays, with one exception, were metaphorical

<sup>169</sup> Michael Polanyi *Personal Knowledge* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962) p.281

<sup>170</sup> Paul Ricouer *Religion, Atheism and Faith* in *The Conflict of Interpretations* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1974) p.467.

<sup>171</sup> Walter Benjamin *Selected Writings* Vol.1:1913-1926, ed. M.Bullock and M.W.Jennings, H.Eiland and G.Smith, (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press 1996) p.289, quoted in Paul Fletcher *Disciplining the Divine* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2009) p.157.

<sup>172</sup> Cf. Catherine Keller op.cit.p.41.

our own lives, together with the drama of the biblical and Christian tradition, offer us a paradoxical form of transcendence, one which is discovered within immanence such that calling another separate world into being is unnecessary. Catherine Keller has expressed this:-

Transcendence does not belong to a lone spirit soaring free of the creation and all its constrained, chaotic creatureliness, but to a flow of spirit within the open-ended creation. Transcendence is the transformation of power within the process of creative, influent interrelation.<sup>173</sup>

This kind of transcendence, which we might name as God, is part and parcel of our everyday open-eyed experience of life, to be found within its apparent absurdity. This is no lesser faith, attenuated and hopelessly compromised with modernity, but the only form of faith which is geared into life as we actually experience it, where God is encountered as real only in a piecemeal fashion. There can be no final clinching argument for God's existence, nor any secure sanctuary in which faith can stay immune from the questionings of our time. All of us will share at some time, the sense of futility, but strange hope of Vladimir and Estragon, and the bloody-mindedness and paranoia of Stanley, and the doubts of Lionel, with at least occasionally the underlying certainty of Streaky Bacon, that all manner of things shall be well because 'You're there. In people's happiness. Tonight, in the taste that drink. Or the love of my friends. The whole thing's so simple. Infinitely loving.'<sup>174</sup> But even that cannot be the last word, since there is no last word and the questionings of the questioning God go on. No doubt one day our three plays too will receive definitive interpretations, but at the moment they are open narratives, unsettling, questioning us to the depths rather than supplying solutions, and bring us back to the open-endedness of faith.

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<sup>173</sup> Ibid. p.106

<sup>174</sup> David Hare *Racing Demon* op.cit. p.56

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