The Search for a Metaphysical Entity in Modern Drama

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ABSTRACT

This is a thirst which all the fountains of the earth cannot quench. Each of these mysterious needs is one side of aperimeter whose complete figure, when we finally perceive it, has one name: GOD" (Bogardt, 1965). In the twentieth century man finally murdered God and found himself "left to live in a world hopeless, forlorn, desperate, frustrated, full of agony . . . . without an answer to the basic human questions". When did this modern malaise start? In how far is this devastating new truth of nothingness reflected in the arts?

Existentialism emerged in form of a number of themes recurring in the works existentialist writers, implying the ever-present tensions of the human condition. In this study some of these themes are traced in two contemporary dramas: Waiting for Godot *by Samuel Beckett and* Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead *by Tom Stoppard.*

The conclusion is reached that the essential thirst underlying modern drama is the search for a metaphysical entity – the irony of modern man, after having confined himself to the terrible freedom of one existence between birth and death and shunning any meaning beyond that of the one existence in a hostile universe, still inevitably yearing for transcendance.

"This is a thirst which all the fountains of the earth cannot quench, Each of these mysterious needs is one side of a perimeter whose complete figure, when we finally perceive it, has one name: GOD" (Bogardt, 1965).

But the conflict is that "God is dead. God remains dead. And we have killed him. How shall we, the murderers of all murderers, comfort ourselves? What was holiest and most powerful of all that the world has yet owned has bled to death under our knives. Who will wipe this blood off us? What water is there for us to clean ourselves? What festival of atonement, which sacred games shall we have to invent? Is not the greatness of this deed too great for us? Must not we ourselves become gods simply to seem worthy of it?" (Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche).

In the twentieth century man finally murdered God and rejected the hungry search for transcendence and immortality. Man in existentialistic spirit confined himself to the fettered freedom of an existence between birth and death, shunning any meaning beyond that of the one existence in a hostile universe, yearing

for authenticity and looking for meaning within himself. This has resulted in a gaping void:
". . . in all the tears, the disillusionments of a generation that is witnessing the end of our western civilization, great in its technology, great in its organization, but without an answer to the basic human questions, with God murdered, an generation left to live in a world hopless, forlorn, desrate, frustrated, full of agony, a world over which Moloch reigns – this at least implies that the void is still felt, that men are still seeking for answers, that the spiritual is a void. Yet men are crying for the true Truth, for the Way, for Life" (Rookmaaker, 1975).

Man, doomed by himself to freedom of decision, writhes in the restless anguish of incompleteness, burdened by the breath of immortality, of eternity within himself, for "it is virtually impossible for man now to accept a religion he has invented. In this lie both modern man's real tragedy, his despair, and his understanding of himself" (Rookmaaker, 1975).

Feodor Dostoevski termed an individual's search for meaning to his life as "his most profound expression of freedom", and so "freedom must be taken as the tragic gift it is. It must be accepted with its reverse side which spells evil and destruction".

When did this modern malaise start? Breisach (1962) sees the year 1914 as the end of the Age of Happiness and Plenty, "but the route of this march led straight into the greatest holocaust of history; and now after nearly half a century has passed no one yet knows whether the end of it has come. During it man underwent physical and mental terror to an extent hitherto unknown. One horrible, unbroken line led from the trenches of the First World War to the barbarism of the modern concentration camp with its deliberate extinction of millions of human beings. Instead of the expected better world man found one where he was confronted by the combined threats of atomic devastation and the totalitarian state . Soon after World War 1 the prevalent mood in Europe changed. Now the exalted hopes gave way to deep and dark despair".

Art has never been neutral, but has always mirrored man's conception of reality, his view of the world, "and Picasso took the step. He did so when he accepted the failure, and took the consequences. There are no universals. The general, the absolute, is non-existent. And if there are no universal absolutes, then ... we can understand his hesitation ... then this world is absurd, nonsensical, without meaning" (Rookmaaker, 1975).

The use of the term *absurd* is really an anachronism here. The idea of the absurd has of course been present for quite some time, but was only used later by Sartre, Camus, and the Theatre of the Absurd, under the "tutelage" of Ionesco. At the turn of the century there was an absurd paly by Jarry, *Ubu Roi* – an art which tried to show what Rookmaker has called "the . . new truth, the truth that there is no truth".

With the new devastating truth of nothingness came what Bresach calls "a fervent, often frenzied, soul-searching for the causes of the malaise". Various philosophical systems emerged. Breisach explains philosophy as having two divergent tendencies: one to question the meaning of the world and of human life; the other to provice answers presented in systems of thought. Opposed to these closed systems and pointing out the dangers of thinking from the basis of a confined system, existentialism emerged – a term which implies a recalling of the purpose of philosophy (resembling neither ready-made answers nor prescriptions for the malaise and disenchantment). Existentialism, rather than referring to a rigid system of propositions, refers to a number of themes recurring in the works of existentialist writers, implying the ever-present tensions of the human condition:

Some of these themes are:

* An appeal to every individual to view human life as an adventure, to create meaning in a meaningless world;
* to keep questioning his purpose and take responsibility for his actions;
* the already-mentioned hostility to closed systems which attempted to view truth objectively; and
* man's estrangement from what he can be.

The existentialist themes such as the concept of the terrible freedom of man and the responsibility resulting from it, the endless questioning of purpose and search for meaning, the call for authenticity and the conception that man's life cannot be bound into a logical system, yeasted into the arts. What has become known as "modern" art has penetrated deeply into man's psyche, resulting in a process of searching. Writers such as Kafka began to write in a form of pure challenge. Their writings didn't depend on the comprehension of the reader; but on his coming to an understanding of his own life in the process of reading this literature. Esslin created a lable which has since become a formula: the *Absurd.* Ionesco defines the Absurd as "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" (1968, p. 23). David Grossvogel (1962) points out that "absurd supposes a human judgement: only man can confront the disparity of experience the nausea which he terms 'absurd' . . . no object is absurd until a man thinks it so, until then it merely is – the absurd has no grip on it".

William Oliver explains the misconception of critics attempting to define the absurdists from the point of view of craft instead of subject. He terms the impossibility for man to cease acting as long as he lives, an absurdity. Oliver makes the interesting statement that Absurdist drama is as old as tragedy and farce (the double mask of Absurdity) – he explains that, when viewed from the examination of the subject matter rather than style, the definition of absurdity includes the works of the Greek tragedians and farceurs as well as the great dramatists of the English Renaissance (including Shakespeare). Thus the basic idea of man trying to come to terms with the absurdity of his condition is after all not a new one. It is the belief that our existence is absurd because we are thrown into this world without asking to be, we die without asking to die, we are between life and death trapped within a body and a reason, unable to grasp the concept of a time in which we were not or in which we will not be. Oliver defines nothingness as "something we perceive only in so far as we cannot experience it".

WAITING FOR GODOT – SAMUEL BECKETT

Most of the ideas explored above the prevalent mood of meaninglessness and nothingness, the absurdity of the human condition, are incorporated in this play of anti-theatre, rejecting conventions like plot and structure. The sense, or rather the non-sense, is to be sought in the conveyance of the feeling of bewilderment, misery and anxiety experienced at an attempt to find meaning in human existence. The theme is not the mysterious Godot, but *waiting* – the meaningless process of waiting which makes men aware of the senseless folowing of time. We find a waiting for possible salvation – exactly this waiting which keeps man from fully facing up to the human condition, which the existentialist regards with so mush contempt. The waiting for Godot, for a vague promise of salvation, is the very search for a metaphysical entity that has become ever more apparent in contemporary drama.

The absurdity of the human condition is conveyed by means of haphazard structure and stylized, puppet-like characters, against a vast, deserted landcape consisting of a single tree by a roadside leading through a piece of no-man's land,

whiling away the senseless flow of time by conversing in world-games typical of music-hall clowns – all of this eventually merging into a static yet wholly theatrical unity.

The sequence of events is simple and stark as the set. Two tramps, Vladimir and Estragon, are waiting on a lonely road for Godot. They argue, cross-talk, indulge in desultory word-games, discuss philosophy, eat a carrot and attempt suicide – unsuccessfully. Two other characters appear – Pozzo and Lucky, the former leading the latter by a rope around his neck. Pozzo pulls the rope and snaps his whip. Lucky falls, gets up and does as he is ordered to. Pozzo commands him to think in order to provide amusement for the bored tramps, he bursts forth into incoherent speech and is silenced only when all fall upon him. Pozzo eats chicken and discusses the condition of his pipe and the weather. They leave Vladimir and Estragon to their endless waiting for Godot. A boy appears, telling them that Godot will not come today, but certainly tomorrow.

The second act takes place on what seems to be the next day – a few leaves have appeared on the stark and stylized tree. They perform the same antics and Pozzo and Lucky appear again, the rope is shorter, Pozzo has become blind and Lucky dumb. They leave without recognizing the tramps. The boy returns to inform them that Mr. Godot will come the following day, also without recognizing them. They go on waiting.

Any glorious visions that an individual reader might entertain as to arriving at last at a clear understanding of this play will be dashed immediately by the warning from Esslin that "any endeavour to arrive at a clear and certain interpretation by establishing the identity of Godot through critical analyses would be as foolish as trying to discover the clear outlines hidden behind the chiaroscuro of a painting by Rembrandt by scraping away the paint". Nevertheless, human curiosity has provided quite a few suggestions as to the identity of Godot, such as the possibility of the name being a diminutive of God (from the analogy of Pierre/Pierrot, of Charles/Charlot (which is incidentally the French name for Charlie Chaplin, whom the clowns resemble in some ways, and who has been growing in importance within the framework of modern dramatic theory and practice)) and the similarity to a certain character in a play by Balzac, a character much talked about but never seen, called Godeau. His arrival is eagerly awaited as an event that will miraculously save the situation. Yet all agree in the end that the identity of Godot is of secondary importance.

The characters are puppet-like – the two tramps, Estragon who has presumably been a poet, ill-tempered and abused, and Vladimir, more compassionate and practical. These two have been together for a long time and although they frequently come to the conclusion that they'd be better off on their own, they are linked in some way – their characters complement and complete each other. Apart from these two, the waiting characters, there are the two moving ones, Pozzo and Lucky, linked by means of a rope (Pozzo the master with the rope – and whip hand –, Lucky the slave with the rope around his chafed neck and carrying the burdens). It has been suggested that these two symbolize the aspects of man – Lucky the intellectual, Pozzo the physical dominating the intellect. I can only bear in mind Esslin's warning, however, and refrain from too rigid an exegesis, for Beckett himself, refraining carefully from comment on his symbolism, warned that there is no central or main character, even.

Certain patterns occur, stressing the theme of waiting, of the human search for salvation by means of a metaphysical entity. Waiting by the roadside for an uncertain appointment with a mysterious person who promised "nothing very definite ... a kind of prayer ... a vague supplication", they spend their achingly empty lives. In wating, time has become meaningless. They were waiting the day before, and ... is today Wednesday or Friday? ... or did he perhaps say Sunday? When they return the next day a few leaves have sprouted from the seemingly barren tree. In senseless word-games, sometimes of lyrical beauty, the two tramps while away the slow-moving time, to keep themselves from thinking also at times. Vladimir out of the blue brings up the subject of the two thieves who were crucified with the Saviour, the one finding salvation, the other damnation. This touches upon a crucial theme admitted by none less than Beckett himself when asked about the theme of the play. He quoted a passage from the writings of St. Augustine: "Do not despair, one of the thieves was saved. Do not presume: one of the thieves was damned". Thus the theme of the uncertainty of hope of salvation and the chance involved in the bestowal of grace. This is echoed in the behaviour of Godot (the long-awaited metaphysically seen saviour) who favours the messenger boy who looks after the goats, but beats his brother who minds the sheep (a contradiction of the judgement of Christ, who sits the sheep on his right hand and the goats on his left). Esslin points out that if Godot's kindness is bestowed fortuitously, his coming is not a source of pure joy, but can also mean damnation. When Estragon believes Godot to be approaching, he is terrified and tries to hide behind a tree. His first thought is that "I'm accursed". He runs away, shouting that "I'm in hell!". The similarity with visions of

the Last Judgement is obvious, mankind is divided into those who will be saved and those who will be damned. The tramps also refer to Cain and Abel, the damned and the chosen. In the senseless gabbling of Lucky, too, the thin thread of sense that seems to come through is once again the concept of the chance-like means of salvation: "... a personal God ... loves us dearly with some exceptions for reasons unknown ... those who for reasons unknown but time will tell are plunged in torment, plunged in fire. . . ".

Waiting for Godot cries of despair at the inability to find a meaning in existence, is concerned with the act of waiting as an essentail aspect of the human condition, with the hopeless nullity of attainment, with the persistent hope of salvation through the uncertian workings of grace – with the search for a metaphysical entity.

ROSENCRANTZ AND GUILDENSTERN ARE DEAD

This play, by the highly acclaimed British playwiright Tom Stoppard, has much in common with Beckett's play. The two main characters have a great deal in common with the two tramps. Like Vladimir and Estragon they act out their author's *Angst* about the human condition and despair at the inability of man to find meaning in existence. Stoppard didn't hesitate to acknowledge his dept to Beckett, for he once stated in an interview that "at the time when *Godot* was first done, it liberated something for anybody writing plays. It redefined the minima of theatrical validity. It was as simple as that. He got away. He won by twenty-eight lengths, and he'd done it with so little – and I mean that as an enormous compliment. There we all were, bursting a gut with great monologues and pyrotechniques, and this extraordinary genius just put his play together with enormous refinement, and then with two completely unprecedented and uncategorizable bursts of architecture in the middle – terrible metaphor – and there it was – theatre! So that was liberating. It's only too obvious that there's a sort of Godotesque element in *Rosencrantz.* I'm an enormous admirer of Beckett" (Hayman, 1977).

The germ of this play originated with the preoccupation of Stoppard's agent Ewing, with the question of who the king of England was when Rosencrantz and Guildenstern were to arrive with Hamlet. In May 1964 the Ford Foundation in Berlin invited half a dozen young playwrights to a colloquium where Stoppard wrote *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern meet King Lear.* He was aware of the "confounded difficulty" of writing new lines for any Shakespearian character.

Later he rewrote his script and left out King Lear, concentrating on the earlier events at Elsinore. Presented on the fringe of the Edingburgh Festival, it was enthusiastically acclaimed by critics such as Kenneth Tynan and within six months it was in rehearsal in London for the National Theatre.

Stoppard in masterly fashion blends originality and existing theatre. The plot is on one level a part of the Hamlet story – viewed from an original angle, it offers a new dimension. It could perhaps be described as a "rearrangement of the normal perspective", like a pocket pulled inside out to show the seams. Stoppard uses the actors in the paly as a means of connecting the Shakespearian tragedy with the contemporary comedy.

Like Beckett, Stoppard makes use of the anti-hero, the "little man" (cf. earlier comment on the new significance of the Charlie Chaplin figure).

He confesses that "my plays are actually constructed of people deflating each other. I am a very hedgy sort of writer. What I think of as being my distinguishing mark is an absolute lack of certainty about almost anything. So I tend to write about oppositions, rather than heroes, don't I? I don't feel certain enough about anything to put a hero up to say it for me" (Hayman, 1977).

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern exist on the edge of events they cannot control – they are told very little about what is going on: "What a fine persecution to be kept intrigued without ever quite being enlightened . . ". Shakespear portrayed them as a couple of henchmen, yes-men to the king, described by Hamlet as "sponges": "Ay, sir, that sucks up the king's countenance, his rewards, his authorities, but such officers do the King best service in the end. He keeps them, like an ape, in the corner of his jaw, first mouthed, to be last swallowed. When he needs what you have gleaned, it is but squeezing the sponge, and it shall be dry again"

Stoppard concentrates on their ignorance and impotence – he protrays them more clearly as a couple of bewildered innocents. Coming from "roughly south according to a rough map", they were picked by a vague summons: "On names shouted in a certain dawn . . a message . . a summons . . there must have been a moment, at the beginning, when we could have said – no. But somehow we missed it". The puppet-like little men desperately try to get a grasp on their destiny, to retain control of their world, yet they have to depend on other people: "We've not been – picked out – simply to be abandoned . . set loose to

find our own way ... We are entitled to some direction ... I would have thought".

They are not free, but are like Vladimir and Estragon caught within an enforced passivity, to a hopeless state of waiting. In order to while away the time but more specifically in an attempt to impose order on their hopelessly amorphous and chaotic world, they indulge in elegant word-games: "words, words. They are all we have to go on".

Ros: *Took the very words out of my mouth.*
Guil: *You'd be lost for words.*
Ros: *You'd be tongue-tied-*
Guil: *Like a mute in a monologue.*
Ros: *Like a nightingale at a Roman feast.*
Guil: *Your diction will go to pieces.*
Ros: *Your lines will be cut.*
Guil: *To dumbshows.*
Ros: *And dramatic pauses.*
Guil: *You'll never find your tongue .....*

This will prove, towards the end of the play, to have been a very prophetic statement.

In their directionless, dislocated world of uncertainty and prevalent doom, they view death as the last fastness, as did Beckett's tramps.

Guil: *The only beginning is birth and the only end is death — if you can't count on that, what can you count on?*
Ros: *There's only one direction, and time is its only measure.*

Being as they are enforced in their state of passivity and inaction, yet with a persistent awareness of imminent doom, of uncertainty at their direction, they become preoccupied with death: "Where's it going to end?"

Guil: *Death, followed by eternity .... the worst of both worlds.*
Ros: *It could go on for ever, I suppose. Do you ever think of yourself as actually dead, lying in a box with a lid on it?*

At this stage Guildenstern still feels that "Life in a box is better than no life at all". Later on he will brokenly realize that: "We've travelled too far, and our

momentum has taken over, we move idly towards eternity without possibility of reprieve or hope of explanation", to Rosencrantz's final expression of resignation: "All right then. I don't care. I've had enough. To tell you the truth, I'm relieved".

Their preoccupation with death and eternity brings us to a dilemma of modern man which is most crucial for this study – the uncertainty of the after-world, in a universe in which God has been murdered:

Guil: *Death followed by eternity . . the worst of both worlds. It is a terrible thought.*
Guil: *No, no, no . . Death is . .. not. Death isn't. You take my meaning. Death is the ultimate negative. Not-being.*
Ros: *Eternity is a terrible thought. I mean, where's it going to end?*

After a moment of reflection his mind escapes by his laughing it off with a joke starting: "Two early Christians chanced to meet in heaven ..." The implication is clear. They show all the symptoms of modern man's search and thirst for immortality, his secret search for a metaphysical entity, for transcendence.

Ros: *(quietly) Immortality is all I seek ....*
Guil: *(dying fall) Give us this day our daily week ....*

The allusive power of this invocation of a lost metaphysical entity suggests a world of nostalgia for something holy that has been irretrievably lost.

This brings us to another theme – a nostalgic yearning for something vague that has become lost, a void felt at the loss of intuition, mysteriousness, something to believe in:

Guil: *(wistfully) I'm sorry it wasn't a unicorn. It would have been nice to have unicorns.*

This wistful longing for a lost metaphysical entity would seem to be the essence of much contemporary drama. This then also leads directly to another prevalent theme – the relativity of truth, of reality:

Player: *Everything has to be taken on trust, truth is only that* which is taken to be true. *It's the currency of living. There may be nothing behind it but it doesn't make any difference so long as it is honoured. One acts on assumptions.*

Guil: *A man breaking his journey between one place and another at a third place of no name, character, population or significance, sees a unicorn cross his path and disappear. That in itself is startling, but there are precedents for mystical encounters of various kinds, or to be less extreme, a choise of persuasions to put it down to fancy; until "My God," says a second man, "I must be dreaming, I thought I saw a unicorn." At which point a dimension is added that makes the experience as alarming as it will ever be. A third witness, you understand, adds no further dimension but only spreads it thinner, and a fourth thinner still, and the more witnesses there are the thinner it gets and the more reasonable it becomes until it is as thin as reality, the name we give to common experience . .. Look, look! recites the crowd. A horse with an arrow in its forehead! It must have been mistaken for a deer.*

The players act as a reflection on reality, on the relativity of truth, the theme of truth versus appearance, on reality and identity:

Player: *We always use the same costume more or less, and they forget what they are supposed to be in you see ... Stop picking your nose, Alfred. When queens have to they do it by a cerebral process passed down in the blood ...*

These experts in the field of death ("Between 'just desserts' and 'tragic irony' we are given quite a lot of scope for our particular talent") also comment on the relativity of truth as it relates to death:

Guildenstern's question: "You die so many times, how can you expect them to believe in your death?", is deftly answered by the player: "On the contrary, it's the only kind they do believe in. They're conditioned to it" – the idea then being stressed that people blieve only in what they expect (this theme is strengthened when the Player King tells of the time when they got permission for a convicted criminal to be executed in the course of a production. He thought it would be very realistic, but it was in fact the very opposite, for the man wouldn't act but instead "just cried and cried").

Another recurrent theme is that of chance, time and divine intervention, also explored in *Waiting for Godot.* This theme is first introduced in their game of coin-tossing, which takes an unusual turn when the coins come down heads for ninety-two times consecutively. This fills Guildenstern with terror as he desperately looks for explanations other than the horrifying idea that the laws of

probability have become suspended.

Guil: *One. I'm willing it. Inside where nothing shows, I'm the essence of a man spinning double-headed coins, and betting against himself in private atonement of an unremembered past.*

Ros: *Heads.*

Guil: *Two: time has stopped dead, and the single experience of one coin being spun once has repeated itself ninety times ...*
(He flips a coin, looks at it, tosses it to Rosencrantz.)
On the whole, doubtful. Three: divine intervention, that is to say, a good turn from above concerning him, cf. children of Israel, or retribution from above concerning me, cf. Lot's wife. Four: a spectacular vindication of the principle that each individual coin spun individually is as likely to come down heads as tails, and therefore should cause no surprise each individual time it does.

Guildenstern touches upon another theme also exploited in *Waiting for Godot*, that is the idea of the fortuitous bestowal of grace (children of Israel) or damnation (Lot's wife) at the hand of a vague and somehow terrifying metaphysical entity. Their coin-game exemplifies the terrible truth of the human condition. The incredible, inevitable succession of *heads* sets the mood for the relentless, irrevocable succession of events the two characters will become ensnared in:

Guil: *Wheels have been set in motion, and they have their own pace, to which we are ... condemned. Each move dictated by the previous one – that is the meaning of order. If we start being arbitrary it'll just be a shambles; at least, let us hope so. Because if we happened, just happened to discover, or even suspect, that our spontaneity was part of their order, we,d know that we were lost.*

They desperately try to escape the course set for them – they struggle in the helplessness of their constricted freedom which is really the only freedom to move around on one spot. They try to break loose from the mechanism to which they are condemned just to come back to the hopeless realization of the terrible implication of their freedom, even their struggling, being just a "part of their order". This echoes the existentialist concept of man's terrible freedom to make decisions steering the course of his life, together with his inability to evade the finality of death.

Thus one can share their sense of being appalled at the fact that everyone's life moves relentlessly towards death, and that it does not matter what man does with is circumscribed freedom of choice.

Guil: *Free to move, speak, extemporize, and yet. We have not been cut loose. Our truancy is defined by one fixed star, and our drift represents merely a slight change of angle to it: We may seize the moment, toss it around while the moments pass, a short dash here, an exploration there, but we are brought round full circle to face again the single immutable fact – that we, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, bearing a letter from one king to another, are taking Hamlet to England.*

And yet, ironically, when they do get an opportunity of taking responsibility, when something at last depends on their choice, when they open the letter and find that it carries orders for Hamlet to be killed upon arrival, the appearance of their having control over their destiny is highly illusory, for Hamlet overhears the conversation and changes the contents of the letter to demand their deaths instead. Ironically, it is revealed that they would not have been strong enough to interfere with the king's command in any case:

As Socrates so philosophically put it, since we don't know what death is, it is illogical to fear it. It might be .....very nice. Certainly it is a release from the burden of life, and, for the godly, a haven and a reward. Or, to look at it another way, we are little men, we don't know the ins and outs of the matter, there are wheels within wheels, etcsetera. It would be presumptuous of us to interfere with the designs of fate of even of kings. All in all, I think we'd be well advised to leave well alone. Tie up the letter – there – neatly – like that. They won't notice the broken seal, assuming you were in character.

From this point onwards they gradually lose their grip altogether:

Guil: *What a shambles! We're just not getting anywhere.*
Ros: *(mournfully) Not even England. I don't believe in it anyway.*
Guil: *What?*
Ros: *England.*
Guil: *Just a conspiracy of cartographers, you mean?*
Ros: *I mean I don't believe in it. I have no image. I try to picture us arriving, a little harbour, perhaps ... roads ... inhabitants to point the way ... riding for a day or a fortnight and then a place and the English king ...*

> *That would be the logical kind of thing . . But my mind remains a blank. No. We 're slipping off the map.*

This leads to another theme in *Waiting for Godot* that is reiterated here, one of the main reasons for Vladimir and Estragon's need for Godot is the fact that they find it intolerable to think that nobody is watching what they are doing. This need for an audience is closely linked with the concept of the loss of identity in both plays.

Player: *We're actors .... We pledged our identities, secure in the conventions of our trade; that someone would be watching. And then, gradually, no one was. We were caught, high and dry . . . You don't understand the humiliation of it — to be tricked out of the single assumption which makes our existence viable — that someone is watching . . .*

Ros and Guildenstern admit to the same need:

The truth is, we value your company, for want of any other. We have been left so much to our own devices — after a while one welcomes the uncertainty of being left to other people's.

In gradually slipping off the map, even their words ("They're all we have to go on,") desert them, dissolve into blundering inarticulateness:

Guil: *(worked up) Can't see — the pirates left us home and high — dry and home — drome (furiously) . . . . .*

Language, with which they attempted to impose order on the irrationality of this world, dissolves, deserts them, becomes oblique:

Guil: *There! . . . and we'll soon be home and dry . . . (Rapidly). Has it ever happened to you all of a sudden for no reason at all you haven't the faintest idea how to spell the word 'wife' — or 'house' — because when you write it down you just can't remember ever having seen those letters in that order before.*

Finally there is kind of acceptance, a touching dignity, revealing an aching sense of awareness in the playwright himself.

What is most important in this play is the fact that Stoppard proficiently uses the theatrical condition as an image of the human condition (Hayman, 1977):

"Birth, growth, and death come to seem like the fatalistic web of text that holds the actor struck".

Player: *Life is a gamble, at terrible odds – if it was a bet you wouldn't take it.*

This has an unmistakeably existentialist ring to it – the concept of man being thrown into a hostile universe without having been asked whether he wanted it in the first place.

At the core of this superbly structured play, with a masterly manipulation of plot, language and character, lies the basic awareness of *Angst* at the human condition, the truly existentialist emotions of bewilderment, anxiety, world-nausea, nothingness – the hungry void experienced as the inevitable corollary of the loss of a metaphysical entity.

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