*Waiting for Godot*: The Fragmentation of Hope

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[This is the penultimate manuscript of this article; please do not cite without permission. The final version is published in *Angelaki* 30, no. 1 (2025).]

**Abstract:** *Waiting for Godot*’s many commentators have emphasized the absurdity of hope in the play, but there has not been an account of how the play reprises hope’s historical transformation and weakening in modernity. This essay provides that account, arguing that Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot* sponsors a form of hope appropriate to the predicaments of modern societies. *Godot* stages the blockage of hope by reflecting the obsolescence and fragmentation of the religious and progressive legitimations for the concept that used to be broadly convincing. Despite this blockage, however, *Godot* does not give in to nihilism. It, rather, models a form of responsible, self-aware hope appropriate to an historical situation where hope does not admit of rational justification. To develop this interpretation of the play and to defend its minimalist conception of hope, the essay draws on Theodor W. Adorno’s *Negative Dialectics* and aesthetics.

The philosophical interpreter of *Waiting for Godot* today finds herself in a curiously similar predicament as the play’s characters: compelled to speak but lacking good reason to do so. In all probability, every exegetical claim she would like to make about the play has been written, in one form or another, in the last seventy years of scholarship and dramatic criticism; moreover, the play itself, like all Beckett’s works, is so uniquely resistant to interpretation that even Beckett’s most cited readers must preface their texts with the caveat that they are embarking on a task destined to fail.[[1]](#endnote-1) Critchley (2004), in his duly titled *Very Little…Almost Nothing*, says that readings of Beckett, particularly those informed by philosophical frameworks, either “say too little” by reducing Beckett’s language to a metalanguage (165), or “say too much” by imbuing semantic stability to passages where Beckett’s rigorous negativism has thwarted such imputation (166). So, beyond “passing the time,” there seems little justification in desecrating silence with more talk about *Godot* (WG9).[[2]](#endnote-2) One does not just risk redundancy with another essay on the play, but indeed, like Lucky in his speech (WG28-29), inevitably borrows surreptitiously from a reception history too overwhelming to be accounted for properly. Yet – ah, that wondrous, redeeming ‘yet!’ – Lucky’s speech is itself a synecdoche of the play’s self-understanding: a failed effort to configure chaotically diffuse cultural fragments, inherited from an unfathomably vast tradition, into a formally coherent whole.[[3]](#endnote-3) This consideration, I suppose, cannot justify the foolhardy interpreter today; on the other hand, it does not justify her source materials or predecessors, either.

So I go on babbling: the fragments I will assemble in this essay concern how *Godot* reflects the status of hope today. This situates my interpretation on three distinct strands of *Godot* reception. The first strand is the enormous catalog on whether *Godot* is about the folly of hope and the inevitability of despair, or if it is about the possibility of hope amidst despair.[[4]](#endnote-4) The second strand encompasses the debates about *Godot*’s historical status: is it a parable of the absurdity of the human condition *per se* or is it an historically-situated reflection on the status of culture in a destitute modernity?[[5]](#endnote-5) On a lesser known shore, the third strand is the work on Adorno’s understanding of Beckett as the most advanced modernist artist, whose dramas are the “only truly relevant metaphysical entities since the war” (Adorno 2001, 117).[[6]](#endnote-6)

My argument is that, by systematically negating its central idea of hope, *Godot* stages the fragmentation and obsolescence of the two conceptions of hope that have prevailed in western philosophy and theology. I call these the progressive and the religious conceptions of hope. According to the progressive conception, we may reasonably hope for a better world because it is plausible to believe that history has a progressive structure. There are, of course, different theories of progress: some are predicated on technological innovation, some on natural teleology, some on moral progress or the growth of freedom. All varieties of the progressive conception are imaged and negated in *Waiting for Godot*. On the other hand, the religious conception of hope holds that we may reasonably hope for a better world because we may believe in an omnipotent, omnibenevolent God who has, or who will, structure the universe such that justice and beatitude are finally achieved. This conception, too, is forwarded and negated in *Godot*. Despite these negations of the strategies by which we might rationally ground hope, though, the play does not affirm the antithesis (namely, “hope is impossible.”) Rather, *Godot* prepares an image of hope mutilated but transfigured by contemporary historical conditions. Hope cannot be justified, but neither can despair; hope has been transformed, like experience itself, into something fragmentary, internally contradictory, and uncertain.

How might this argument fit into the scholarly literature just mentioned? In the first place, the interpretation is loosely suited to the category “the possibility of hope in the midst of despair.” However, there are two key respects in which my interpretation resists that categorization. One, *Godot* is not precisely about the *possibility* of hope—it is more exact to say that it is about the *non-impossibility* of hope, since Beckett denies that the conceptual grounds for legitimating hope’s possibility are available. Or, better, *Godot* presents the maddening, aporetical situation of being unable to legitimate hope or despair, despite an ongoing search for hope’s warrants.[[7]](#endnote-7) Relatedly, two, this reading of the theme of hope is novel because it is, to my knowledge, the first to delineate how *Godot* negates our culture’s legitimation strategies for hope, namely, the progressive and religious conceptions. To be sure, others have written about *Godot*’s refusal of religious consolation, Beckett’s agnosticism, and depictions of the idea of God.[[8]](#endnote-8) The rejection of progress is less abundant in the scholarly literature but also present.[[9]](#endnote-9) What is novel about my interpretation, I think, is identifying elements of the play *as* fragmented figures of the religious and progressive conceptions of hope. Such identification allows the play’s determinate negation of philosophically justified hope to come forward more clearly. Not only this, it allows us to say that the drama is not pessimistic: it *does* sponsor a concept of hope, though it is a weak hope that cannot rely on the assurances of reason.

Given this interpretive aim, it will not surprise that I also see *Godot* as an historical response to the aporiae of modern society; more specifically, I agree with Adorno that *Godot* responds to an historical situation in which, after Auschwitz, it has become impossible to definitively distinguish between cultural objects that irresponsibly console us and those that do not (Adorno 2000, 362-3). The incidents comprising *Godot*’s plot are false consolations – “painkillers,” in *Endgame*’s language (Beckett 1957) – that only momentarily distract the characters from the monotony of their existence. Similarly, the play implicates itself, as a mere form of entertainment, as, in all probability, a false consolation for its audience. This situation stems from an impasse: the conceptual grounds of hope have been fragmented and rendered unavailable by the evolution of modern societies and the “events for which ‘Auschwitz’ stands” (Freyenhagen 2013, 27). In *Negative Dialectics*, Adorno refers to this decline of transcendental or metaphysical ideas as “neutralization” [*Neutraliesierung*] (Adorno 2000, 385). Precisely because of the unavailability of justificatory grounds for hope, all images of reconciliation, including the very form of artworks, are potentially false consolations. This historical perspective informs *Godot*’s structure and content. The playperforms and submits itself to this historical critique, and because of that, it captures the aporetical predicament of hope in modern societies.[[10]](#endnote-10)

The rest of my essay is structured according to these considerations. I first argue that *Waiting for Godot*’s ‘plot,’ to use a convenient shorthand for its incidents, is a series of false consolations that are driven by the need for hope. Then I show how *Godot* implicates itself as a possible false consolation for the audience’s need for hope. Third, by engaging the fragmented component ideas of progress and redemption along with Beckett’s subversion of drama’s generic conventions, I argue that the play images and “neutralizes” the religious and progressive conceptions of hope. Finally, I address the question of whether this interpretation amounts to a plausible conception of hope. I do this by confronting my broadly Adornian reading with one inspired by Ernst Bloch’s philosophy of hope. After showing why a Blochian interpretation misses the mark, I claim that *Waiting for Godot* presents us with an image of responsible hope today: a semblance of hope that is fragile, non-impossible, and aporetical. This is a kind of weak, fallibilistic hope that can nonetheless provide orientation and resolve in face of a situation that unavoidably induces despair. Throughout the paper, I refer to important interpretations in the history of Beckett scholarship as well as to Kant and Adorno’s philosophies. But my goal in doing so is not to establish my interpretation as authoritative or to show that Beckett subscribed to Kant or Adorno’s conceptions of modern subjectivity; rather, these connections are intended to elucidate the basic claim that *Waiting for Godot* captures the condition of hope today.

**(I.) The Need for Hope and the “Natural Dialectic” of False Consolations**

It is helpful, and not without scholarly grounds,[[11]](#endnote-11) to frame the need for hope in *Waiting for Godot* with reference to the Kantian conception of hope. Despite his austerity as a moral philosopher, Kant claims that we need hope and sometimes goes as far as to suggest that morality would be empirically impossible without hope (Kant 1996, 8: 309).[[12]](#endnote-12) Kant situates our need for hope in the curious category of a “need of reason” for complete unity and systematicity.[[13]](#endnote-13) This need produces a “natural dialectic” giving rise to the illusion that we can cognize metaphysical objects (Kant 1997, A298/B354-5).[[14]](#endnote-14) The object of hope, the highest good, results from such a natural dialectic. However, for Kant, unlike all other metaphysical objects, the condition for which we hope is *not* illusory because we may justifiably ground hope through practically cognizing – “postulating” – the religious-transcendental ideas of God, immortality, and freedom (Kant 1996, 5:109-115; Kant 1998, 6:66-69).[[15]](#endnote-15)

Adorno, too, inherits the Kantian view that there is an unavoidable, but illusion-engendering, need to experience metaphysical objects. In *Negative Dialectics*, he writes that the resurrection of fundamental ontology in the 20th century, and this philosophy’s enormous cultural impact, can only be explained because it responds to “an emphatic need, a sign of something missed, a longing that Kant’s verdict on knowledge of the Absolute should not be the end of the matter” (Adorno 2000, 61). Adorno calls this the “ontological need” (ibid.), which is an inextirpable drive to find the inner, essential meaning of phenomenal life; to understand what it is in truth; to discover the significance of our struggles and miseries in the cosmic order; and to be consoled that our apparent insignificance is only apparent.

According to this Kantian lineage that Adorno belongs to, then, the “need” for contact with objects that transcend the phenomenal world is an unavoidable constituent of subjectivity (as we know it, at least). Importantly, for Kant and Adorno, *only if such contact is possible* *is hope possible*, too. Just as crucial to these two philosophers, however, is the claim that nothing within experience measures up to the need. From here it is a short step to the belief that there is something radically deficient about empirical life. To be sure, Kant and Adorno’s conceptions of the source and character of this deficiency are not the same, and I do not wish to overstretch the connective tissue. Nevertheless, for both, the need installs an ambivalent, critical perspective on our experience: on the one hand, it compels us, both dangerously and productively, to search for sources and indications of transcendence in a field of experience that cannot provide it; and, on the other hand, it furnishes a basis – and this is again a double-edged sword – for judging the whole of empirical life, without exception, deficient just because it does not satisfy the need.[[16]](#endnote-16) The need for hope is thus properly aporetical: it induces a critical search for signs and warrants of hope at the same time as it enables an undiscriminating and totalizing despair.[[17]](#endnote-17)

In *Godot*, the need participates in all the ambivalences just mentioned, and it is conveyed in two main ways. One, by the structure of the play itself: the dramatic action, as well as the protagonists’ (Vladimir and Estragon) tacit consent to continue living, revolves around a belief, neither justified nor unjustified, that they must wait for Godot to arrive in the evening. There are many signs that Godot is a figment of their imagination, particularly of Vladimir’s, whose name associates him with the hope for revolution.[[18]](#endnote-18) Nonetheless, this doubt of Godot’s reality cannot be confirmed, and this suffices to prevent Vladimir or Estragon from abandoning their routine trek to (what they think is) Godot’s appointed place of arrival. Their performed commitment to Godot’s possibility, and the change his arrival represents for them, border on delusion, but still they keep their appointment. Doubtless, inertia has some explanatory role to play in keeping faith with the ritual, but, given that Godot represents a qualitative transformation of life to them, it is also evident that they cannot help hoping.

The need is also conveyed negatively, in the mutually contradictory and absurd temptations to which Vladimir and Estragon are drawn throughout the play. For instance, in the first act, they envy Pozzo’s slave, the sardonically-dubbed Lucky, for having a clearly defined *raison d’être* (WG21-22). However, immediately after this conviction develops, they sympathize with Lucky’s misery and condemn Pozzo for his sadism and exploitation (WG 23); and, immediately after that, they sympathize with Pozzo when Lucky has been disobedient (WG 24). These moments illustrate a desperate urge to find something to vest some significance in. Similarly, the wish for a rope by which Estragon and, at some points, Vladimir could hang themselves operates as a comforting possibility that the tedium of life could end (WG 12-13).[[19]](#endnote-19) Indeed, the most frequently repeated line in the play – “It passes the time” (WG 9, 32, 45) – points to the fact that any activity of passing interest contains some invested, albeit ambivalent, hope: maybe this, the implicit thought goes, in contradistinction to every other activity, will be a fulfilling use of time – though “it’s not certain” (WG 18).

All these actions, including our heroes’ waiting for Godot, are determined contradictorily: on the one hand, they imply the hope that engaging them will wring some meaning from the dirty old rag of life and interrupt the indifferent gray of waking experience; on the other hand, they are deemed nugatory in two respects: by their essential arbitrariness and indistinctness – their value amounts to “passing the time,” which any activity would do – and by the structure of the play, which suggests in its transition from Acts I to II and at its conclusion that these events have repeated themselves many times before and will continue countless times hence. Pozzo’s tirade against time itself in Act II bears witness to that monotony: “One day, is that not enough for you, one day he went dumb, one day I went blind, one day we’ll go deaf, one day we were born, one day we shall die, the same day, the same second, is that not enough for you?” (WG 58).[[20]](#endnote-20) Nonetheless, even if life drags on, one day practically indiscernible from the next, the dim prospect of something new and different prevents Vladimir and Estragon from complete inactivity or surrender to absolute despair – this despite their frequent avowals that there is “[n]othing to do” (WG 7, 48). This state of affairs attests to the need for hope, which need prevents them from accepting that the endless succession of identical days is genuinely endless and genuinely self-identical.[[21]](#endnote-21) In *Endgame*, Clov asks sarcastically, “What in God’s name could there be on the horizon?” (Beckett 1957,38), and in *Godot*, that question is embodied in the dramatic structure. Vladimir and Estragon are incapable – from weakness, strength, or both – of replying “nothing” to this question.

The fact that the need cannot be extinguished, that it often prevents Vladimir and Estragon from discerning the actual meaninglessness of their actions, makes them easily susceptible to false consolations. Each of the play’s random happenstances, indeed, can be analyzed as a potential false consolation.[[22]](#endnote-22) Perhaps the best crystallization of this feature of the play’s construction is Lucky’s speech. Vladimir, Estragon, and Pozzo wonder why Lucky does not put down his bags when it is unnecessary to carry them, and in a non-sequitur, Vladimir requests that Lucky be ordered to think – perhaps so he explains his behavior, the servility of which both fascinates and appalls the protagonists, or perhaps just so he provides some entertainment. After Vladimir places Lucky’s hat on his head (the proverbial ‘thinking cap’), Pozzo commands Lucky: “Think, pig!” (WG 28).[[23]](#endnote-23) His speech is incoherent, borrowing butchered phrases from theology, speech pathology, sports, and law. It intermittently intrigues Vladimir and Estragon before finally enraging them; they are compelled to shut him up by pinning him to the ground and removing his hat (WG 29).

The consolation desired here is that Lucky’s enslavement to Pozzo, which degrades him to the status of a “pig”[[24]](#endnote-24) but which could also be ended in a moment, be explained.[[25]](#endnote-25) If he could justify his own servitude, it would bestow meaning on something apparently appalling and inexplicable.[[26]](#endnote-26) The horror of his speech, however, is that it neither explains nor entertains; it instead discloses the disfigurement that Lucky’s mind has been subject to. As a reminder that they cannot justify why they bother to go on, and probably as an echo of their own disfigurement, too, Lucky’s speech incites Vladimir and Estragon’s disappointment and rage. At an instant, the main characters switch from sympathy with the oppressed to “identification with the aggressor.”[[27]](#endnote-27) Even before this incident, Estragon has twice imitated Pozzo and bestialized Lucky as “swine” (WG 22-23); in the second act, Vladimir apes Pozzo and Lucky’s dynamic, calling Estragon “pig” as he gives him an order (WG 43). Lucky reminds them of the meaninglessness of their lives and their hopelessness instead of administering a remedy, and this is intolerable. False consolations inevitably produce this pattern; their inadequacy to the need for hope, and their confirmation that consolation is unavailable, inspire disappointment and violence. *Godot* not only shows this in concentrated form—it presents this pattern as the very metronome of time’s passage.

It is not enough to discuss the need and false consolations as they take shape on the stage, however. We should also consider how *Godot* implicates itself and its audience in this pattern. As a work of art, the play makes a claim on its audience’s attention that it is a worthy object of aesthetic consideration and a meaningful use of time. Yet the play’s major dramatic action is the characters’ attempt to pass the time and to identify warrants for believing that salvation from monotony will finally come. Moreover, the characters’ efforts to imbue meaning to others’ actions or their own are crisscrossed by contradictions and confusions. The audience has before it a play whose players do not know what to do with themselves, who fail to meet the definition of dramatic characters, and who cannot satisfy any of the other conventions that traditionally constitute a play, such as plot or poetic language.[[28]](#endnote-28) In effect, the audience witnesses a drama that stages its own failure to be a drama. Nevertheless, the audience comes to its appointed place at its scheduled time and sticks around until the end, waiting for an undefined something despite there being little in the play – including the title[[29]](#endnote-29) – to suggest that something will arrive. In this way, *Waiting for Godot* presents itself as, possibly, an idle and meaningless passing of time, a spiritless continuation of a defunct theatrical tradition, and a false consolation for an audience that is hoping, from art, for something different from normal life. Not even the illusion of reconciliation offered by art can be salvaged in *Godot*. The form of the work places the audience in the same position as Vladimir and Estragon: waiting for, but not experiencing, something different from their daily lives.

**(II.) The obsolescence of the progressive and religious conceptions of hope**

It could be objected at this point of the interpretation that I have too readily assumed that *Godot*, as a work of art, can tell us something about hope *simpliciter*, for I am claiming that we can learn something about the fate of the idea in the play. This is, obviously, a complex issue that touches on questions of mimesis and the social-theoretical relevance of works of art. And, particularly in Adornian readings of Beckett, commentators maintain an extreme circumspection about a kind of ‘mimetic fallacy,’ carefully guarding against transposing the elements of the artwork onto social reality, or vice-versa. I cannot enter into the complexities of this debate here,[[30]](#endnote-30) so I will simply say that we should not throw the baby out with the bathwater. Hermeneutical attentiveness to the quasi-independence of the artwork from social praxis does not entail that aesthetic interpretation can have no grip on concrete social phenomena. Clearly, there is good reason to exercise caution when interpreting works of art for social-critical purchase, but Adorno’s would be a scanty critical theory, indeed, if all aesthetic experience of genuine artworks can provide us is an undifferentiated rejection of modern society. Rather, works of art like *Waiting for Godot*, *via* aesthetic forms, transfigure the appearance of elements of social reality that they draw on. Defamiliarization, the modernist aesthetic technique *par excellence*, would itself be ineffectual if it could only affect art’s forms with no further impact on the social content synthesized through those forms.[[31]](#endnote-31) Through responsible interpretation, aesthetic defamiliarization can shed critical light on the very elements that make up the work, even if art and its interpretation cannot of themselves redeem those component elements.

If this perspective can be conceded, then, let us turn to *Godot*’s theme: hope. We may expect that in its figuring of hope, the play will present this concept distinctively, such that it may be social-theoretically or philosophically relevant. *Godot*, I will argue, presents the obsolescence of the only justificatory grounds for hope that western culture has available. These grounds are the religious and the progressive conceptions of hope. In the play, both conceptions are shown to be null and void for the characters, despite and through the fact that elements of each conception are present as sedimented referents in their speech and actions (II.a. and II.b.). Beyond fragmenting these conceptions in the dramatic action, *Godot* also stages the obsolescence of the progressive and religious conceptions of hope throughthe decay of the generic conventions of tragedy and comedy (II.c.).

Let me emphasize that I am not arguing that Beckett *disproves* the religious and progressive conceptions; what I am saying, rather, is that the play captures a state of consciousness – a state of objective despair, as Marasco understands the term (see 2015, 106-7)[[32]](#endnote-32) – in which the basic conditions for even perceiving progress or the divine are so fragmented as to make these conceptions unavailable as legitimation strategies for hope. This condition implies that – for now – we live in a culture that cannot furnish a rationally-founded hope for a world and experience qualitatively different from our own.[[33]](#endnote-33)

*(II.a. The progressive conception of hope)*

*Godot*’s dramatic action and dialogue render the progressive conception of hope unavailable in three ways. First, avowing progress depends on an intact consciousness of time, but that consciousness has been fragmented beyond recognition in *Godot*. Of the four characters, only Vladimir cares about whether anything from yesterday carries over into today, and his memory is sketchy at best: in Act II, Pozzo and Lucky appear, substantially more ragged and aged than in Act I, and Vladimir is convinced that they saw each other only yesterday (WG 57-8). *Godot* seems to confirm the phenomenologists that perceiving the passage of time requires understanding the future as open; in the play we observe time-consciousness, along with the conviction that progress is possible, at its breaking point. Indeed, the play’s repetitious structure mirrors the implosion of temporal experience.[[34]](#endnote-34) Second, if progress is understood as the growth of a just society of equals through antagonism, the play instead shows a wretched continuation of the master-slave dynamic: oppression persists even severed from the necessity of social reproduction, with struggles against inequality squelched. This suggests that the antagonism between individuals in history does not – against Kant and Hegel – culminate in harmony, but simply in the indefinite continuation of antagonism. There is no trace of past moral progress in the play’s present, and no clear indication of future progress in it, either.[[35]](#endnote-35) Furthermore, the characters can scarcely recognize the master-slave dynamic as undesirable; they are unsure whether they would rather be Lucky than themselves, they attempt to mimic Pozzo and Lucky’s dynamic, and their sympathy vacillates between the master and the slave. Third, progressive conceptions of hope historically have required either a natural teleology – as in Kant’s Third Critique or “Universal History” essay – or a conviction that autonomous action can shape history.[[36]](#endnote-36) In *Godot*, nature is practically annihilated save for a tree whose identity the characters cannot secure due to memory failings (39)—so much for natural purposiveness. As for the consciousness of freedom: for the characters, each action is reduced to the same value of passing the time, and they cannot determine whether they wait for Godot from deadening habit or from conviction. It is not, then, as if Vladimir and Estragon theoretically accept that their actions are heteronomous; perhaps even more concerningly, the question of their freedom or unfreedom does not even trouble them.[[37]](#endnote-37)

The idea of freedom is neutralized in another way.[[38]](#endnote-38) Vladimir and Estragon’s relationship represents the conflictual, unreconciled character of the individual. This internal antagonism is so disharmonious that mind – the seat of practical judgments and volition – and body – what carries these volitions out – are represented as completely outside each other, such that the necessary conditions of rational freedom are not instantiated. As a rule,[[39]](#endnote-39) Vladimir represents an intellect in decline. His name not only recalls revolutionary possibility and the threat of violence; his pet name, Didi, recalls “dither, dither.” Like Hamlet, Vladimir struggles to reconcile intellect with action or feeling. Estragon, or Gogo, on the other hand, represents the estranged body that the mind “drags on” (*trag-on*) behind it. The two characters need each other but their relations are nonetheless deeply alienated: at the beginning of Act II, Vladimir exclaims “You again!” (WG 38) when Estragon enters the stage. *Godot* presents a discordant Cartesian dualism as the state of the individual today, and the functions of each faculty each follow their own path of decadence: Vladimir has “stinking breath,” and Estragon has “stinking feet” (WG 31). With individual experience reaching near complete alienation, and the capacity for rational freedom eviscerated, *Godot* presents a form of life in which the progressive conception of hope is, basically, unintelligible. Beckett’s characters would blankly stare upon hearing the word ‘progress.’

*(II.b. The religious conception of hope)*

While religious evocations of redemption appear in *Godot*, such as references to the afterlife (WG 29) and to the thief Christ forgave on the cross (WG 9), the religious conception of hope is also fragmented. Traces of it survive in the characters’ relation to Godot, who, as the figure of an absent *deus ex machina*, represents possible rescue. But the characters’ indifference to being dead or alive, and the fact that they cannot distinguish the peace of the grave from the peace of the afterlife (WG 51), indicates that the fate of their soul, or whether they are self-identical across time – Estragon (mis)remembers his name as “Adam” (WG 25), for example – let alone making progress in virtue, are no concern for them. Rescue shrivels up into the barest idea of *something different*; the divine cannot be detected in themselves, in each other, or in their environment. To evidence this interpretation, I will examine how the concepts “God” and “soul” –the other two postulates grounding the possibility of Kant’s idea of the highest good[[40]](#endnote-40) – are figured and neutralized in *Godot*.

The word “soul” is used twice in *Godot*, both times in the expression: “Not a soul in sight!” (WG 17, 48). This line is a colloquialism that does not ordinarily connote any metaphysical substances. However, *Godot* makes apparent the religious provenance sedimented in the expression. On its first utterance, Pozzo and Lucky have just entered the stage. Pozzo is reflecting on the loneliness of traveling by oneself, all the while interrupting his reverie with commands to Lucky – who was, of course, traveling with him and carrying all his possessions for the journey’s duration. Pozzo declares that he is happy and relieved to see Vladimir and Estragon, since he needs frequent “society with his likes,” but then he dons a pair of glasses, and, scrutinizing, says, “even when the likeness is an imperfect one” (WG 17-18). That Pozzo deems Lucky to be a soulless creature is obvious. As for Estragon and Vladimir, once Pozzo puts glasses on and has them in his sight, he is unconvinced that Estragon and Vladimir are any different. A beat later, Estragon begs Pozzo for some scrap bones to suck, and the two main characters quarrel about who might replace Lucky. Estragon and Vladimir are utterly unconcerned about getting recognized as beings of equal dignity, and Pozzo quickly forgets that this was something (he said) he was seeking. Pozzo’s stated desire to find a fellow soul is probably less a sincere wish than a habit of an outmoded class identity.[[41]](#endnote-41) In any case, in Act II, Pozzo goes blind and loses any interest in, or capacity for, recognizing a soul. At least since *Oedipus Rex*, outward blindness has corresponded to insight into the conditions of souls. In *Godot*, this motif is parodied: blindness corresponds to the conviction that, whether one looks or not, there is “not a soul in sight.”[[42]](#endnote-42)

When the expression is used a second time, it breaks the fourth wall. In Act II, Estragon experiences overwhelming paranoia – probably a reanimation of a traumatic event – and perceives that “[t]hey’re coming” from all sides (WG 47). To help him escape, Vladimir guides Estragon to the front of the stage, gestures to the audience, and states: “There! Not a soul in sight” (ibid.)! There is something amusing about this escape route, since it is the only one available that actually has people blocking the way. This is a metatheatrical moment in which Estragon’s character indistinctly perceives that the audience’s gaze, and the confines of the theater, are all-encompassing and inescapable. On the other hand, if the audience is thus brought into the world of the play, it is then subject to the same disenchantment as the characters: its members, too, are declared soulless and granted only the single essential determination of ‘threat.’[[43]](#endnote-43) In fact, a third master-slave dynamic in the play – beyond those of Vladimir/Estragon and Pozzo/Lucky – obtains here: the audience impassively demands entertainment and action from players who struggle to provide it to the master who pays for their livelihood. Since Estragon will not brave the path through the auditorium, his “only hope is to disappear,”[[44]](#endnote-44) but that is also impossible: there is no refuge in which to hide himself, and his efforts to hide behind the tree typically inspire the audience’s laughter (WG 47-8).

By interpellating the audience as sheer threat, these scenes stage a social world in which individuals are no longer perceptible as soul-bearing and thus worthy of esteem. The mere existence of others, as in a Hobbesian state of nature, is fearful. Even when people do encounter each other, avoiding conflict results from the dearth of resources to fight over or with, not from mutual recognition. Consequently, the idea of a soul as the dignity-endowing essence of a person tends to disappear in *Godot*’s envisaged world. In combination with the alienation of mind and body, the flagging concern with a consistent self across time, and the absent idea of what a better life would consist of, the concept “soul” grows anachronistic. The characters could not postulate the soul as existing because they do not even possess its concept: as a mere residue adhering like gum to the sole of colloquial expressions, it is but a fragment of daily experience.

The concept of God has a different fate in the play. It is well-documented that “Godot” and “God” are associated.[[45]](#endnote-45) Textual evidence supports that interpretation: Vladimir and Estragon speak of “our saviour” pardoning the thief on the cross in connection with the salvation Godot represents for them (WG 9); and the shepherd boys tend to two of Godot’s flocks, one the goats and one the sheep, which is ostensibly an allusion to the New Testament parable.[[46]](#endnote-46) *Godot* also resuscitates the antiquated form of the *deus ex machina*. This plot device had formal currency only when it was assumed that characters did not have the capacity themselves to resolve the difficulties in which they were entangled. Their difficulties, it was understood, were engineered by divine powers and so required divine intervention for resolution. Consequently, the form thrived in eras when it was commonly assumed that human capacities were impotent in face of natural-divine forces (e.g., the Church’s “everyman” plays in the early Medieval period or Greek drama before the Golden Age of tragedy).[[47]](#endnote-47)

In *Godot*, one of the criteria for the *deus ex machina*’s plausibility is met: it certainly seems that the characters are incapable of changing their situation themselves; thus, they wait for Godot’s intervention. But, on the other hand, the characters cannot sustain a belief in an interventionist God because there is no sign that divine forces have played any role in generating the characters’ situation. In addition, Estragon typically fails to remember why they are waiting or whom they are waiting on, and neither character has any sense of whether, once Godot comes, life will be any different. The overall effect is that the characters appear to be waiting in vain for salvation from a figure who, reportedly, beats one of the shepherd boys (WG 34) and who seems to have little to no capacity for influencing the world.

In *Godot*, then, we have a situation where some, but not all, of the subjective conditions for belief in a salvific God are present. The sense of individuals’ practical impotence to improve their lot, conjoined with the desire for radical change, suffice to generate the concept of something that is not-ourselves and that represents possible difference from the ever-same. What is lacking, though, is a determinate meaning for “salvation” – after all, “differences” can be good or bad – and the idea of a world-shaping power (something analogous to “spirit”). *Godot*’s concept of God thus devolves to a figure who represents possible change—though we do not know if the change is for good or ill, if he has the sufficient power to effect the change, or if he even exists. Godot is God, then, only without his perfections of omnipotence, omnibenevolence, and omnipresence.

*(II.iii. Tragicomedy as aporetical suspension of dramatic genres)*

I have argued that the decay of aesthetic forms can be read as a cipher of the decline of the metaphysical assumptions that those forms depend on.[[48]](#endnote-48) In addition to the fragmentation of the progressive and religious conceptions of hope in the play’s dramatic action, *Waiting for Godot*’s generic status as a “mongrel tragicomedy”[[49]](#endnote-49) allows the drama to present the obsolescence of the two generic conventions that it participates in. *Godot* is aporetically positioned between two dramatic forms whose function has been (a) to counterpoise a protagonist to the power of fate and (b) to redeem or condemn her through this juxtaposition with fate.[[50]](#endnote-50)

Let us examine the neutralization of comedy first. In comedy, although fate thwarts human intervention and knowledge, the audience ultimately experiences reassurance because fate conspires in favor of the well-intentioned fools who stand in for humankind as such. This convention, in which the structure of the cosmos promises the achievement of happiness and concord *via* human folly, has an elective affinity with a religious theodicy. Here the divine plan for the world is so well-designed, or salvific power so irresistible, that a history of human error can become the sequence through which divine redemption appears. How does *Godot* envelop these assumptions? *Godot* inspires laughter even though it is twice repeated, as if it were the one taboo in an otherwise lawless society, that laughter is “prohibited” (WG 9, 14). The play’s absurdity retrieves the antiquated comic genre of farce (whose nadir was in the seventeenth century); the characters’ near-complete haplessness, directionlessness, and self-ignorance make it impossible for them to have a sustained character motivation with which the audience can successfully identify or which can move the plot forward. In this sense, *Godot* is a farce with no protagonists. But just because of these characteristics, the play cannot be a comedy, since the genre’s conventions require a protagonist who eventually gets what she wants. Traditionally, the source of a comedy’s humor is the foreknowledge that the obstacles impeding the protagonist’s desire shall be proven trivial by the denouement (“the happy ending”). In *Godot*, the “protagonists” wait for a happy resolution that, as the play’s title already anticipates, the audience will not see. Moreover, nothing that they do can possibly bring the anticipated resolution about. To laugh in response to *Godot*, then, is to laugh at the characters’ entrapment and powerlessness – which, in addition to the antiquation of comedy as a genre, may explain why Vladimir and Estragon insist that laughter is prohibited.[[51]](#endnote-51)

Tragedy, on the other hand, embraces the progressive conception of hope. In tragedy, the hero resists fate by determining her own end in opposition to that prescribed to her by the cosmos. The rising action of the play results not from a series of accidents annulled by the denouement, but from the escalation of the protagonist’s intentional acts and fate’s responses. Here human agency assumes a causative power defining the directionality of the drama’s events. Even if fate has the last word, the conventional plot of a tragedy – its reshaping of mythical time into a directed progression – promises that human striving can transform nature to be susceptible to human purposes. To paraphrase Kant from the teleology sections of the Third Critique: tragedy promises the ultimate hospitability of a seemingly indifferent nature to free moral action (§85, 440-42). In *Godot*, however, this classical convention does not obtain, either. *Godot* shares the tragic elements that fate is stacked against characters who lack self-insight and who are ultimately powerless to overcome it. However, its characters do not have heroic features, nor do they have one great flaw—with the possible exception that they cannot constitute themselves as consistent subjects. Neither do they muster all their powers to struggle against fate. The audience, then, cannot successfully identify with the protagonists: *Godot* not onlyhas no heroes; it does not even have stable egos. The audience cannot experience the catharsis of the natural order restored. It cannot draw courage or meaning from the heroic, if Sisyphean, human struggle against the inexplicable vicissitudes of life. And, finally, it cannot take the play as a promise that free action can shape the cosmos so that it is suitable to moral ends.

Neither a tragedy nor a comedy, then, but possessing elements of both, *Godot*’s ‘non-genre’ reflects formal conventions in a state of suspension. This non-genre results from the decay of the background intuitions necessary for tragedy or comedy to function: the assurance of a cosmos that can be made intelligible (as in tragedy) or the assurance that there are moments of consolation where fate works in one’s favor (as in comedy). In this “mongrel tragicomedy,” fate has been transfigured into the inert fact of meaningless suffering. Through its suspension of generic assumptions, *Godot* defamiliarizes the audience’s relation to the play, making it impossible to extract assurance that the characters will be either redeemed or condemned. Tragedy and comedy can no longer animate or synthesize the conceptions of redemption and reconciliation that made these genres sources of consolation for most of western cultural history.

**(III.) Conclusion: Is that all there is to hope?**

Nevertheless, despite the decline of progressive-tragic and religious-comic assurances, *Godot* does not license conclusions like Esslin’s (1973) that “hope, the habit of hoping, that Godot might come after all is the last illusion that keeps Vladimir and Estragon from facing the human condition and themselves in the harsh light of fully conscious awareness” (37). For one thing, we have seen that “fully conscious awareness” is not even remotely available to Didi and Gogo—so it can’t be true that Godot is the last illusion preventing clear and distinct perception. For another, the “habit of hoping” is grounded on a needfor hope that none of the characters can successfully suppress. I have argued that this need is ineliminable. Our response to it should follow the Kantian lead: the danger of illusion it introduces must be reflected on—not explained away. Finally, the play does not simply declare waiting and hoping to be a delusional activity. To be sure, it very well could be delusional. But our non-waiters who try to suppress hope, Pozzo and Lucky, are no less susceptible to delusion. Indeed, in *Godot*, the audience is asked to identify their own condition with that of Vladimir and Estragon, i.e., with the “powerless and oppressed parts of human beings,” to quote Beckett’s description of his approach to characterization (Adorno 2018, 54).[[52]](#endnote-52) What we find discomfiting about Vladimir and Estragon we can also recognize in ourselves, including our proclivity to false consolations. But there is something charming about these characters, too, particularly when we compare them to Pozzo, who clownishly takes himself to be a person worthy of esteem. Didi and Gogo do not tend to think of themselves as better than their shortcomings[[53]](#endnote-53) – indeed their frailties give them distinctiveness – and it is because of this recognition (however dim) that they do not grant themselves sovereign freedom to improve their situation. What is more, this self-understanding allows them to depend on each other and have some form of companionship; to maintain the thought that both they and the world ought to be different; and, finally, to support some of the conditions necessary for that change.

In these respects, identifying with Vladimir and Estragon gives the audience an image of hope under today’s conditions. Without knowing how the world (including our own selves) will get better, we can entertain that it is possiblethat things will change, and, moreover, know that we are responsible for maintaining that belief. This is so even if – in insisting on this point despite contradictions from experience – we look as foolish as Vladimir and Estragon waiting for Godot. Between Pozzo, the despairing clown, and Didi and Gogo, the hoping fools, it is probably better to be the latter.[[54]](#endnote-54) The false consolation of illusory despair is, I would say, even worse than the consolation of illusory hope.

*Waiting for Godot*, then, does not capitulate to despair. Rather, it gives us an image of a transformed concept of hope: one which, like experience itself, has become fragmentary, internally contradictory, and uncertain. This is not a straightforwardly bad development, either, since the progressive and religious conceptions of hope have proven to be illusory consolations. It may always have been ideological to station hope on certain foundations, and perhaps there is a silver lining in the situation captured by the play, namely, that it is impossible to attempt that responsibly anymore. This does not imply that the characters can hope without illusions: Godot may not exist, he may exist though “not for us,” or he may be an eviler Pozzo who enslaves children (a child appears at the end of both acts) rather than old men (WG 33, 59).[[55]](#endnote-55) All of those possibilities are open, but none of them are confirmed. Vladimir and Estragon can thus maintain the expectation that something different might be possible, that tomorrow might be different from today (WG 35). And, in fact, this thought is no mere logical possibility, either. There are – fallible and evanescent, to be sure – signs in the play that Vladimir and Estragon are not delusional about Godot. Vladimir recalls seeing the same tree between Act I and Act II, though he grows doubtful (WG 39), and he is convinced, momentarily, that he has found Estragon’s lost boot (WG 44-5).[[56]](#endnote-56) These placeholders allow him to maintain that this could be the appointed meeting place for Godot. Moreover, the shepherd boy who appears at the end of both acts claims to deliver a message from “Mr. Godot” (WG 33, 59). All these indications attest to Godot’s existence as something stronger than a logical possibility, even if they do not furnish much confidence.[[57]](#endnote-57) And, much more important than whether the person Godot exists or not, the consciousness that things could changeallows for differences between *Godot*’s characters. All of them are broken and in many ways deplorable. But there are moments of qualitative differentiation: Vladimir tries to track distinctions between days, he persuades Estragon to keep their appointment with Godot, and Estragon attempts to dry Lucky’s tears with a handkerchief (WG 22). Sympathy with another’s suffering would be impossible without some sort of awareness of the difference between I and thou, [[58]](#endnote-58) and differences become impossible to detect without the consciousness that ‘difference is possible.’[[59]](#endnote-59)

But is this, after all, really a convincing image of hope today? If we take stock of the hope that I claim *Godot* presents, we do not have much more than a tenuous consciousness of the possibility that things could get better. Our experience, mediated by the need for hope, provides us ambiguous warrants for hope that require us to defuse their ideological and consoling function – and even then, even if we are epistemically responsible, signs of hope’s possibility all disappoint in *Godot*’s envisaged universe. Further, given how ascetic Adorno’s idea of hope is, one might suppose that the tepidness of this conception stems from the Adornian orientation of my reading.[[60]](#endnote-60) Then the interpretation pursued here could be objected to in at least two ways. The first objection would be to accept the interpretation of the play but deny that *Godot* sponsors a form of hope appropriate to the present; the second would be that *Godot*’s image of hope is misconstrued by the Adornian frame. Since readers have already come this far with me, I propose we primarily consider, in closing, the second objection. Could a different philosophical interpretation of *Godot* provide a more compelling account of hope’s status today?

This alternative interpretation would still need to account for the ambiguity of how hope’s possibility is indicated (e.g., it would need to be able to show how the same signs pointing to Godot’s existence also point to his non-existence), it would need to do justice to the decline of traditional vindication strategies for hope (e.g., the decline of the progressive and religious conceptions), and it would need to explain hope’s intrinsic relationship to disillusionment (as opposed to, say, a state of hope impervious to empirical disconfirmation). Should the interpretation fail any one of these criteria, it might furnish a concept of hope, but it would not be one consonant with *Godot*.

Such an interpretation could, arguably, be sourced from one of Adorno’s interlocutors and influences, Ernst Bloch.[[61]](#endnote-61) Bloch dedicated his intellectual career to a materialist philosophy of hope responsive to the despair prevalent in 20th-century societies. As Gerhard Richter argues compellingly, Bloch develops a notion of hope that “must be unconditionally disappointable” (qtd. in 2006, 52). Indeed, the authenticity of hope today is indexed by this susceptibility to disappointment, for hope is a category of “danger” (Bloch and Adorno 1989, 15) and “chance” (Bloch 1998, 341), an attitude that seeks to realize still undecided potentials in conflict with the status quo (see Bloch 1988, 198-200). For Bloch, hope is the subjective correlate of “real possibility” (1988, 196), which is an ontological category designating the future’s openness to utopian transformation.[[62]](#endnote-62) Strictly speaking, we hope for the actualization of real possibilities, and just because real possibilities are not yet determined to be – and because they contradict the reified status quo – they tend to go unactualized. Hope is, then, inextricably linked with disappointment.[[63]](#endnote-63) Nevertheless, this very link makes hope inextinguishable (see Richter 2006, 52); even deep discouragement still contains hope implicitly within it. Thus, the capacity to perceive the “real possibility” of utopian transformation can be damaged or transformed, but never uprooted.[[64]](#endnote-64)

A Blochian interpretation of *Godot* could emphasize the undecidability of the play’s portents of change by arguing that the signs that Godot exists, or the indications of Didi and Gogo’s moral sensitivity, are fledgling perceptions of the real possibility of transformation. At the same time, it could criticize the characters’ propensity to conceive Godot (the future, difference) merely as a mechanical repetition of the present. This interpretation could serve as a foundation for arguing that the beginnings of transformative praxis in *Godot* can be located in the somatic compassion the characters experience and their (sometimes) militant commitment to the possibility that Godot will arrive. In this way, the play could emblematize the central contradiction of the present for Bloch, namely, the dialectical entwinement of the reproduction of a reified totality (“pure negation” [Bloch 1988, 200]) and the irrepressible ontological urge toward novelty (“the Novum” [201]). This interpretation, one could argue, not only more profoundly grounds the utopian dimensions of the play; it also provides a more concrete criticism of Vladimir and Gogo’s passivity. By contrast, an Adornian interpretation – which is limited by Adorno’s negativism and his critique of “actionism”[[65]](#endnote-65) – is not licensed to ground utopian possibility in the “false whole” (Adorno 2005, 50) or to criticize the main characters’ inaction as such.

Moreover, at the level of aesthetic theory, a Blochian interpretation can more freely claim that *Godot* provides an image of hope today, since art, in general, is “not only mere appearance, but a meaning, cloaked in images…*of what is real*,” where “the Real” is the process of utopia’s creation (Bloch 1988, 214-5). Adorno’s aesthetics, meanwhile, throws up numerous stop signals to reading off utopian figures even from so-called “authentic” artworks—not to speak of the trash produced by the culture industry.[[66]](#endnote-66)

The ostensible advantages of turning to Bloch’s philosophy of hope owe to his ontology. Only because Bloch conceives hope and the Real as, respectively, subjective and objective features of Being as such can he present such an emphatic interpretation of *Godot*. The appeal of this strategy is undeniable, but it falls short of the play in two crucial ways. First, it violates the fragmentation of positive conceptions of hope. Bloch’s *Principle of Hope* is a metaphysics that borrows elements from both the progressive and religious conceptions: from the progressive, it posits in Being a latent tendency toward utopian development, and from the religious, it posits an invincible subjective susceptibility (akin to faith) to revelations of real possibility. These claims are incompatible with the drastic situation represented in *Godot*, where subjective capacities have atrophied and perspicacious tendencies toward emancipation have all but disappeared. On Blochian premises, the problem of hope as *Godot* presents it is not, in fact, conceivable. Second, this reading does not do justice to the ambivalence of the need for hope in *Godot*. Didi and Gogo *may* receive some experiential benefits over Pozzo and Lucky because they have not succumbed to total despair. But the tentativeness of this “may” is essential: the need also makes the protagonists suffer, and it exposes them to pathological tendencies like identification with the aggressor. A philosophical interpretation of *Godot* needs to lay hold of this ambivalence and show how the same psychological feature is both pernicious and (possibly) promising. Otherwise, we risk falsely heroizing characters who, by Beckett’s lights, instead incarnate the “powerless and oppressed parts of human beings.”

A similar objection should be raised to Bloch’s aesthetic theory. In *The Principle of Hope*, Bloch distinguishes between “great” and false art by claiming that great art contains an “exploding crack” (Bloch 1988, 218) that reveals the constitutive “false autarky” (217) of the artwork, thus breaking the “rounded-off satisfaction” (218) of aesthetic immanence through the explosion of the work’s utopian “openness” (219). As we saw above, *Godot* questions its status *qua* art as mere consolation, but it leaves this question unresolved; it remains possible that even genuinely self-critical art is mere illusory satisfaction. *Godot* bans aesthetic reassurance. This feature of the play is also better addressed by Adorno’s aesthetic theory.[[67]](#endnote-67)

My response to the provocation of Bloch’s philosophy of hope is admittedly brief; more importantly, however, I have bracketed the question of whether Beckett’s artworks should orient our conceptualizations of hope today. A final word, then, on the justice of this orientation. Hope has always been a source of conflict in the history of philosophy. Nietzsche, inspired by the myth of Pandora’s Box, considered it the worst of all evils;[[68]](#endnote-68) Freud thought it a dangerous phantasy of infantile omnipotence. After the events of the 20th century – and knowing the imbrication of our ideas of goodness and rightness with structures of domination – it would be irresponsible to conceive hope without taking these warnings seriously. Hope could not only be unjustified; it could also be complicit with what is wrong. This is the situation that *Godot* captures so magnificently and is a key source of its inexhaustible interpretability. Any conception of hope that cannot face up to this is, on my view, a false consolation, and this is why a weakened, uncertain, fallibilistic form of hope is thrust upon us.

The fragmented hope that is our cultural inheritance can no longer reassure us or offer consolation. Nonetheless, as we wait for Godot, signs of hope’s possibility can help us to critically orient our conduct and thinking. We may not be able to hope the same way that we used to, but we may also be able to better see through the swindles that tell us this world is enough. Despairing and hopeful at once, acting on the defeasible assumption that things might be different, that things might get better—that is the only kind of hope that *Godot*, and our lives today, will authorize.

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1. See Critchley (2004), 23, 165-6; Adorno (2019), 240; Cavell (2002), 115-117. The exception to this interpretive caution among Beckett’s most famous philosophical readers is Badiou (2003), who argues that Beckett has a rigorous and rationally reconstructible method. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. I will abbreviate references to *Waiting for Godot* throughout as “WG.” Beckett characterized art as a “desecration of silence” in a conversation with Adorno. See Adorno (1997), 134. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. On Beckett’s principle of formal construction as a configuration of fragments, see Locatelli (1990); Murphy (2006), 236-7; Worton (2006); Bates (2017), 23, 202; Phillips (2006); and Francis (1965), 261. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. There is a vast literature on this subject. Here is a selection of references: Critchley (2004); Conti (2021); Cavell (2002), 228; Nosthoff (2018); Mundhenk (1981); Francis (1965); Esslin (1973); Bryden (1998); and Marasco (2015). [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. This is arguably the debate that consumed the first and second generations of English-language Beckett scholarship, since it maps onto the question of whether Beckett is an existentialist nihilist. Esslin (1973) is the most influential advocate of this reading. For historicist readings of Beckett as a critic of modernity, see Bernstein (1990); Marasco (2015); Gans (1982); Critchley (2004), 182; Mundhenk (1981); Phillips (2006); Zuidervaart (1993), 153-5; Benzer (2012); and States (1978), 20. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Here, too, there is much to cite, and the following is not comprehensive. For a monograph on the concept of freedom shared by Adorno and Beckett, see Leeder (2017). For the greatest English-language scholar of Adorno’s aesthetics’ reading of their relationship, see Bernstein (1990). For an integration of Adorno’s appraisal of Beckett into an excellent account of Adorno’s aesthetics, see Zuidervaart (1993). For a more recent account of Adorno’s aesthetic modernism with a chapter on Adorno’s treatment of Beckett, see Hammer (2015). Also recommended is MacDonald (2018), which has a section dedicated to Beckett that elaborates Adorno’s approach to literary interpretation and his social ontology of literature. Pickford (2006) does something similar. For Adornian readings of Beckett informed by inverse- or negative-theological premises, see Conti (2021) and Nosthoff (2018). Critchley’s (2004) treatment of Adorno’s interpretation of Beckett is brief but sophisticated (175-185). Benzer (2012) argues for the sociological relevance of Adorno’s treatment of Beckett; his article includes an interesting discussion of Adorno’s understanding of death in Beckett’s works. Rabaté’s (2016) wide-ranging study features a chapter inspired by Adorno’s treatment of Beckett, though the core of the discussion transpires from 134-142. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Marasco writes eloquently about Beckett’s relationship to despair: “[Beckett’s work] does not exist apart from the catastrophic situation it presents. Beckett is not the source for a politics that puts an end to objective despair. Instead, he is best understood in terms of a radical aesthetic that can do justice to it [i.e., to objective despair, where this Kierkegaardian phrase means an historically insuperable incapacity on the part of individuals to hope on rational grounds or find secure footing for a meaningful existential project]” (Marasco 2015, 106-7). [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. A sample: Bernstein (1990), 187; Esslin (1973), 37, 64; Critchley (2004), ix; Mihàlyi (1966), 277; Kolve (1967), 107; Bryden (1998); Jones (1974). [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. See, e.g., Mihàlyi (1966), 277; Rabaté (2016), 155. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. “The gesture of hope is to hold onto nothing of what the subject intends to hold on to, of what it expects will endure” (Adorno 2000, 392). Although Zuidervaart (1993) does not attend specifically to *hope* in Beckett’s art, he makes a similar claim worth quoting here: “Metaphysical meaninglessness becomes the meaning of [Beckett’s work] because its aesthetic meaninglessness acquires meaning as a determinate negation of the dramatic forms that used to affirm metaphysical meaning” (155). [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. For discussion of Beckett’s relationship to Kant, see Myskja (2002), Murphy (2006), 229, and Rabaté (2016). Rabaté’s archival research reveals that Beckett was quite familiar with Kant’s philosophy: Beckett studied Kant as a student and took notes (often sardonically) on Kant’s moral philosophy, with particular attention paid to Kant’s conception of the highest good in the *Critique of Practical Reason*. Beckett also purchased Kant’s complete works in German in 1938 (Rabaté 2016, 98-9). [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. Kant’s considered position, to be sure, is that hope is conducive to virtue but is not *transcendentally* necessary for moral action. The moral law alone can motivate right action; otherwise our autonomy would be compromised (Kant 1998,6:4). [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. For the most thorough treatment of a “need of reason” in Kant, see Grier (2006). Despite Grier’s pathbreaking work, my impression is that there remains much more to say about this category in Kant scholarship as well as in scholarship on continental philosophers inspired by Kant, like Adorno. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. See Grier (2006), 124. [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. See also Chignell (2014), 116. [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. This is the subjective ground of Adorno’s dictum from *Minima Moralia* that “The whole is the untrue.” [*Das Ganze ist das Unwahre*.] (Adorno 2005, 50). [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. This ambivalence in Kant and Adorno is one of the major criticisms they face in common. Hegel, of course, criticizes Kant for projecting the Absolute into a “beyond” where it can have no significance to our understanding of practical or theoretical matters (Hegel 1977 and 2019). Habermas, for his part, criticizes Adorno for falling into a despairing aestheticism in which normatively redeeming and normatively deficient features of modernity cannot be distinguished (Habermas 1987, 366 [Vol. 1]). [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. For an argument connecting Vladimir to Lenin, see Erickson (2007), 262. Brecht also aligned Vladimir with Lenin in his notes on the play; for discussion, see Bradby (2001), 168. [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
19. See also Adorno (2019): “The last absurdity is that the peacefulness of the void and the peacefulness of reconciliation cannot be distinguished from one another” (266). [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
20. The same endlessly iterative timeline structures *Endgame*:

    “HAMM: But that’s always the way at the end of the day, isn’t it, Clov?

    CLOV: Always.

    HAMM: It’s the end of the day like any other day, isn’t it, Clov?

    CLOV: Looks like it” (Beckett 1957, 53). [↑](#endnote-ref-20)
21. This motif is explicit at several points in the play’s dialogue; here is one such point:

    “POZZO: I don’t seem to be able … (*long hesitation*)…to depart.

    ESTRAGON: Such is life” (WG 31). [↑](#endnote-ref-21)
22. For an analysis of *Godot* as a kind of “negative theology” traced through unsatisfying panaceas, see Phillips (2006) and Conti (2021). [↑](#endnote-ref-22)
23. Julia Bates’ impressive monograph contains a substantial and illuminating discussion of the thinking cap’s biographical roots in Beckett’s life: Bates (2017), 43-47. [↑](#endnote-ref-23)
24. *S*ee, for example: *Godot*, 16, 18, 21, 28. [↑](#endnote-ref-24)
25. There is some literature on the centrality of Hegel’s “master-slave” dialectic in *Godot* (cf. Anders (1956), Harding (1993), and Gans (1982), 8-10. Adorno notes, along the same lines, that Godot’s theme is the continuation of the master-slave dialectic despite its objective antiquation given humanity’s capacity to satisfy universal material needs (Adorno 1997, 250). [↑](#endnote-ref-25)
26. In *Molloy*, the narrator comments on the consoling power of explanation: “My reasons? I had forgotten them. But I knew them, I must have known them, I had only to find them again and I would sweep, with the clipped wings of necessity, to my mother [who may be dead, but is nonetheless the destination of the narrator’s odyssey—*author’s addendum*]. Yes, it’s all easy when you know why, a mere matter of magic” (Beckett 1958, 23). [↑](#endnote-ref-26)
27. The phrase comes from Anna Freud originally, although it is the Frankfurt School, and Adorno in particular, who made the concept of social-theoretical interest. See Adorno (1968). [↑](#endnote-ref-27)
28. See Gans (1982), 4-5, for discussion of *Godot*’s dramatization of “failure.” [↑](#endnote-ref-28)
29. See Calderwood (1986), 365-8. [↑](#endnote-ref-29)
30. The scholarly literature on Adorno’s interpretation of Beckett has given a thorough treatment of the claim that Beckett’s works negate the artwork’s simulation of reconciliation. Yet this scholarly treatment has tended to focus narrowly on Beckett’s negation of the *aesthetic* forms that reconcile and distort the conflictual dimensions of our historical reality. This focus has occasionally crossed into an ascetic purism that isolates aesthetic forms from the ‘non-aesthetic’ concepts and images that compose them, thus reifying the semblance of art’s autonomy. Even Jay Bernstein, arguably our greatest Adorno commentator, overshoots the mark in his essay on Adorno and Beckett: “[Art is] a praxis which transforms without external societal effects” (Bernstein 1990, 179). According to such readings, art’s apparent resemblance to its social context should be understood as art’s wholesale refusal of that context. Consequently, the interpreter is prohibited from inferring specific social-theoretical claims from the work—with the exception of the exceedingly general claim that ‘society, because it is incompatible with aesthetic rationality, is bad.’ This conclusion is not only theoretically dissatisfying, since art is indeed a dimension of social reality. It also runs counter to Adorno’s intentions in *Aesthetic Theory*: If thought is in any way to gain a relation to art it must be on the basis that something in reality, something back of the veil spun by the interplay of institutions and false needs, objectively demands art, and that it demands an art that speaks for what the veil hides” (Adorno 1997, 18).

    Robinson (2018), in his quite interesting book, perceives a similarly misleading characterization of art’s autonomy in “New Formalism’s” uses of Adorno (see 8-9). That art, because of its semblance of autonomy, has *indirect* effects on other social practices can be readily conceded. But it, again, seems hyperbolic to claim that, just because the rationality of other social practices is resistant to the rationality of aesthetic practices, that art has *no* impact on those practices (or vice-versa). Form is how art synthesizes the manifold of the material worked up by history; a good interpretation of an artwork’s form should alsoattend to the prismatic appearance of that manifold in the work. Zuidervaart (1993) makes this point well: “Artworks in the modern world are also cultural and sociohistorical objects whose production and reception unavoidably involve prelinguistic stances toward truth and falsehood. These stances do not have to be spelled out in claims and propositions in order to be stances on the truth or falsehood of some cultural practice, social pattern, or historical tendency” (252). If “artistic production and reception” facilitates renewed or transformed ethical and theoretical stances on practices besides itself, then it seems inexact, at best, to say that art has *no* external societal effects. For helpful discussion of art’s autonomy in Adorno’s social theory, see Hulatt (2016), MacDonald (2018); Pickford (2020); Kaufman (2006), 360-362; Goehr (2006), who dubs Adorno a “critical formalist” (239-241); and Hammer (2015), 180-207. [↑](#endnote-ref-30)
31. See Zuidervaart (1993): “Artworks in the modern world are also cultural and sociohistorical objects whose production and reception unavoidably involve prelinguistic stances toward truth and falsehood. These stances do not have to be spelled out in claims and propositions in order to be stances on the truth or falsehood of some cultural practice, social pattern, or historical tendency. They can take shape in works of art, not as a "message" or "idea" somehow separate from these works, but as their import, as that which in the work the work is all about. Philosophical truth talk does not simply impose truth claims on the work or reconstruct the work in philosophy's image. Rather, to use Adorno's language, philosophical truth talk extrapolates from the work that which in the work the work is all about. What gets extrapolated exists independently from its extrapolation, but not in separation from the work from which it is extrapolated” (296). [↑](#endnote-ref-31)
32. See Endnote “vii” above for the relevant quotation and definition of the term from Marasco (2015). [↑](#endnote-ref-32)
33. See Jütten (2019) for an insightful differentiation of ‘rational’ versus ‘radical’ conceptions of hope. Jütten convincingly shows that Adorno’s conception of hope is a species of radical hope that is nonetheless conversant with rational conceptions of hope, especially Kant’s. [↑](#endnote-ref-33)
34. e.g., Husserl (2014), §81. c.f. Adorno’s (2019) interpretation of *Endgame*: “for Beckett’s characters…time can be lost because time would contain hope” (242). For commentary on the problem of time in *Godot*, see Schechner (1966), Calderwood (1986), 368, Brooks (1966) 295-298, States (1978), 81, Ellsin (1973), 31-2. [↑](#endnote-ref-34)
35. Although some have argued that the presence of a few leaves on the tree in Act II promises a different, better future: Francis (1965), 260-1; States (1978), 60; Webner (1968), 5. This, of course, may well be, although it is just as plausible that the tree with leaves should be taken to be a *different* tree from the seemingly dead one from Act I. This, indeed, is what Estragon attempts to persuade Vladimir of (WG 39). The audience is not in a better epistemic position to know that there is an identity of the *mise-en-*scene in Acts I and II than the characters. [↑](#endnote-ref-35)
36. cf. *Molloy*: “All the things you would do gladly, oh without enthusiasm, but gladly, all the things there seems no reason for your not doing, and that you do not do! Can it be we are not free? It might be worth looking into” (Beckett 1958, 34). [↑](#endnote-ref-36)
37. Compare this with Adorno’s observation in *Negative Dialectics*: “The ephemeral traces of freedom which herald its possibility to empirical life tend to grow more rare; freedom comes to be a borderline value. Not even as a complementary ideology does one really dare to set it forth; the powers that be, by now administering even ideology with a firm hand, clearly have little faith in the continuing propagandistic appeal of freedom. Freedom is forgotten” (Adorno 2000, 274). [↑](#endnote-ref-37)
38. For a book-length treatment of Beckett’s determinate negation of freedom – which amounts, on her interpretation, to its negative-dialectical salvaging – see Leeder (2017). [↑](#endnote-ref-38)
39. There is a danger in too definitely specifying the referent of a metaphor in Beckett’s work. Metaphor slides metonymically for Beckett, as many commentators have noted. Nevertheless, this formal feature can be acknowledged without claiming that we can make no sense at all of a metaphor’s reference. The interpretive task, as I see it, is to account simultaneously for the instability of reference and the fact that one can find recurring patterns of metaphorical reference. [↑](#endnote-ref-39)
40. On Beckett’s knowledge of Kant’s account of the highest good, see Rabaté (2016), 98-99. [↑](#endnote-ref-40)
41. For discussion of Pozzo’s class status, see States (1978), 48ff; Gans (1982), 8-10; Mihàlyi (1966), 277. [↑](#endnote-ref-41)
42. Blindness recurs in Beckett’s work. In *Endgame*, in a clear (albeit parodical) reference to Oedipus’s anagnorisis, Clov and Hamm blindfold themselves (Beckett 1957, 93). Molloy refers frequently to his “bad eye” and to his “less bad eye,” although he cannot remember which is which; further, he measures the clarity of his vision by the intensity with which seeing the world compels him to look away from it (Beckett 1958, 70). [↑](#endnote-ref-42)
43. For discussion of the audience being interpellated into the world of the performance, see Begam (2007) and Calderwood (1986), 372. [↑](#endnote-ref-43)
44. For helpful discussion of Estragon’s wish to hide, particularly as it bears on the religious significations of *Godot*, see Bryden (1998), 130, and Kolve (1967), 111. [↑](#endnote-ref-44)
45. Bryden (1998) is the authoritative text on the idea of God in Beckett’s *oeuvre*; her reading of *Godot* argues that its key religious thematic is the thwarted appeal to the possibility of repentance and divine mercy. She connects this theme with another one recurring throughout Beckett’s works: the unpredictability and unreliability of God’s wrath or mercy (115-117, 127, 130). The philosophical significations of “God” as the ideal of pure reason, the transcendent Other, and the ground of all possibility are notably absent from her otherwise careful study. States (1978) argues, interestingly but circuitously, that the play “converts theology into mythic poetry” (44) and refers to “a hidden God” (60). Also notable is the literature connecting Beckett’s work with negative theology, particularly the work of D.Z. Philipps (see, e.g., Phillipps 2006), but see also Conti (2021) and Nosthoff (2018). Conti and Nosthoff both connect a reading of Adorno as a negative or “inverse” theologian to their interpretations of Beckett. Another notable interpretation of *Godot*’s religious signification is Webner (1968). [↑](#endnote-ref-45)
46. In the parable (one of Christ’s eschatological teachings), Christ speaks of the division of humanity on Judgment Day into the damned (the goats) and the saved (the sheep). [↑](#endnote-ref-46)
47. Kolve (1967) argues that *Godot* appropriates the form of two antiquated religious dramatic genres: the Medieval morality play and the *Corpus Christi* play (which depicts Holy Saturday’s experience of despair) (126). [↑](#endnote-ref-47)
48. For insightful discussion of the ideas of neutralization and rationalization as they bear on both aesthetics and metaphysics, see Bernstein (1990, 2001), Zuidervaart (1993), Hammer (2015), and MacDonald (2018). [↑](#endnote-ref-48)
49. Ruby Cohn was the first to connect this early dismissal of the non-genre of tragicomedy with Beckett’s play: Cohn (1962), 211-225. The phrase “mongrel tragicomedy” is from a 1579 essay of Sir Philip Sidney’s. [↑](#endnote-ref-49)
50. It would be impossible to encompass all the secondary literature on the meaning of *Godot*’s genre of “tragicomedy.” For some of the most pertinent, however, see: Adorno (2019), 238-9; Hammer’s chapter on Beckett (2015); Cohn (1962), 211-225; States (1978), 60-2; Berlin (1986), 62; Francis (1965), and 260-264. [↑](#endnote-ref-50)
51. Cf. Adorno on laughter in *Endgame*: “Humor itself has become silly, ridiculous…Even the jokes of those who have been damaged are damaged” (Adorno 2019, 252). Critchley offers a provocative and ostensibly countervailing interpretation of laughter in Beckett: “[H]umour is this very experience of…the evaporation of a certain philosophical seriousness and interpretative earnestness. Humour does not evaporate in Beckett; rather laughter is the sound of language trying to commit suicide but being unable to do so, which is what is so tragically comic…It is humour that resists direct translation and can only be thematized humourlessly…Adorno discusses Beckett’s humour in a later piece, “Is art lighthearted?”, claiming that given (and it is no tiny premise after all) “the complete disenchantment of the world,” art can neither be lighthearted nor serious, neither tragedy nor comedy, not even tragi-comedy, which was of course how Beckett described *Godot*” (Critchley 185). Here Critchley contrasts his interpretation of the comic dimensions of Beckett’s work to Adorno’s, but I am not so sure that the contrast is warranted. Adorno’s point is that given the obsolescence of the progressive and religious conceptions of hope, there is no longer a perspective from which suffering and absurdity might be redeemed or resolved. Historically, this perspective has been a *sine qua non* of comic affects – otherwise we are laughing *at* suffering and absurdity. Thus, humor is not extinguished in Beckett but is rather exposed as yet another potential false consolation simulating reconciliation where there is none: what has evaporated is its grounding in the possibility of reconciliation. This is what Adorno (1997) means in this passage from *Aesthetic Theory*: “Beckett’s plays pass historical judgment over these categories [tragic and comic] as such, faithful to the historical innervation that there is no more laughing over the classics of comic theater except in a state of renewed barbarism” (340). On this reconstruction of the meaning of Beckettian humor, I take it that Critchley and Adorno would agree. See also Coulson (2007). [↑](#endnote-ref-51)
52. See Coulson (2007), who writes that “If we laugh at the work of Beckett…it is not as subjects that we do so but as things whose muteness explodes in the echo of our reconciliation” (163). [↑](#endnote-ref-52)
53. Molloy repeatedly conceives of his own nature as (literally) “shit”: mere, undesirable existence (Beckett 1958, 12). Tracking this motif, Adorno claims that Beckett’s work presents human nature (in general) as what it became in the death camps, when the value of a human being was “liquidated” and became a “mere specimen” (Adorno 2000, 400). [↑](#endnote-ref-53)
54. Adorno (2000) makes a similar point, quoting Nietzsche, in *Negative Dialectics*: “No formula describes metaphysics as faithfully as Zarathustra’s ‘Pure fool, pure poet’” (404), and “*Aux sots je préfère les fous.* Folly is truth in the form which men are struck with as amid untruth they will not let truth go” (ibid.). [↑](#endnote-ref-54)
55. There has been some discussion in the secondary literature of whether Pozzo is Godot. See States (1978), 60-70, for a particularly provocative interpretation, arguing that Pozzo is in fact the closest approximation we have to God in the play. [↑](#endnote-ref-55)
56. For another of Bates’ illuminating discussion of Beckett’s material referents, see her (2017) treatment of boots (53-55). [↑](#endnote-ref-56)
57. For illuminating discussions of this kind of possibility, suspended between ‘logical’ and ‘real’ possibility, see MacDonald (2019) and Bernstein (2001). [↑](#endnote-ref-57)
58. On evocations of intersubjective recognition and love in *Godot*, see Francis (1965), 262-5; Webner (1968); Nosthoff (2018), 48-53. [↑](#endnote-ref-58)
59. As evidenced by Pozzo and Lucky’s respective blindness and deafness in Act II: they can no longer acknowledge the possibility that experience might present something of interest for them. (Note also the allusion to *The Odyssey* here: Pozzo as Odysseus tied to the mast and blindfolded; Lucky the shipmate with his ears stopped up with wax.) [↑](#endnote-ref-59)
60. See Jütten (2019) for a reconstruction of Adorno’s negativist, ascetic, and “radical” concept of hope. [↑](#endnote-ref-60)
61. I am grateful to an anonymous referee for the recommendation that I counterpoise Bloch’s conception of hope to Adorno’s. Recently, de Vries (2022) and Roessler (2022) have published interesting and intricate articles comparing Adorno and Bloch’s accounts of hope and utopia. Both stress the substantial overlaps on this question between these two titans of mid-century Marxist philosophy, although Roessler and de Vries also note that Adorno’s utopianism does not depend on the “grand metaphysical speculation” (Roessler 2022, 239) and “ontology” (de Vries 2022, 124) of Bloch’s philosophy. As I will argue, I take this latter difference to be crucial. [↑](#endnote-ref-61)
62. Discussing Bloch’s modal metaphysics is beyond the purview of this paper, but he defines real possibility in contrast to “formal possibility” and “factual-objective possibility” (1988, 224-241). Formal possibility refers to what is conventionally called logical possibility, while factual-objective possibility presupposes a reified contemplative consciousness of objects. Real possibility, on the other hand, “is everything whose conditions in the sphere of the *object itself* are not yet fully assembled; whether because they are still maturing, or above all because new conditions – though mediated with the existing ones – arise for the entry of a new Real. Mobile, changing, changeable Being…has this unclosed capability of becoming” (1988, 196). “Unclosed capability of becoming” is an alternative definition of real possibility. [↑](#endnote-ref-62)
63. Jameson (1971) emphasizes that hope (at least as it is configured today under oppressive conditions) is *constitutively* disappointed because “the future is always something *other* than what we sought to find there, something ontologically excessive and necessarily unexpected” (137). [↑](#endnote-ref-63)
64. “Even disappointed hope wanders around agonizing, a ghost that has lost its way back to the cemetery and clings to refuted images. It does not perish through itself, but only through a new form of itself” (Bloch 1988, 195). [↑](#endnote-ref-64)
65. This is the term Adorno used to criticize existentialism as well as the student movements of 1968-9. The criticism, *in nuce*, is that both movements fetishize action in response to the objective decline of transformative praxis in late capitalism. In psychoanalytic terms, actionism is a pathological defense against the consciousness of one’s own impotence. For a thorough treatment of this category, see Freyenhagen (2014). [↑](#endnote-ref-65)
66. See above, especially the beginnings of Section II. [↑](#endnote-ref-66)
67. See, e.g., this passage from Adorno’s *Aesthetics* lectures: “Nor do we find [in Beckett’s works] any compositional approach that points beyond this ugliness and has a kind of affirmative meaning in relation to it; rather, the aesthetic element here lies in the power to endure those utmost experiences captured in the images of ugliness without glossing over them” (Adorno 2018, 109). [↑](#endnote-ref-67)
68. See Nietzsche (1996, §71). [↑](#endnote-ref-68)