

NAMES IN SAMUEL BECKETT'S WAITING FOR GODOT*

Martha O'Nan

State University of New York
College at Brockport

When Beckett was directing the rehearsals for the 1974-75 production of Waiting for Godot in Berlin, he answered an actor's question about the name Belcher by saying it meant "to belch." That apparently straightforward definition brought about the statement in the May 25, 1978, program notes for the BAM Theatre Company that "with one blow the mysticism about Beckettian names is destroyed."¹ Yet to say that Belcher means "to belch" is to say nothing, is to leave the word undefined, is to go around in circles and return to the initial problem as did the drinker when he answered the question of Saint-Exupéry's Little Prince about what he was doing by saying "I drink."

Is the critic to believe that Belcher is only a person who belches and "ejects wind or gas spasmodically from the stomach through the mouth" (Webster's Third New International Dictionary, 1976 ed.) as Beckett seems to suggest, or contrary to Beckett's definition is Belcher a person who no longer belches immoderately just as persons with names such as Blower, Hooker, Miller, Singer, Shaver, Thrasher, Weaver no longer blow, hook, mill, sing, shave, thrash, and weave excessively, if at all? In the imaginary world is Beckett such a precise biographer that he writes his characters' true stories by

one word, their name, whereas in the real world any name given ("Blower," "Hooker," etc.) is accepted as a happy "alias" and few complain like Beckett's character, the Unnamable, about names "foisted" on them?

Beckett, himself, has had his own name interpreted literally in a French caricature depicting him with a large, hooked beak, or bec. The caricature may be onomastically correct and follow Beckett's belief that his family name was "'Becquet,'... French Huguenots [sic] who moved to Ireland for economic and religious freedom."² If names in Waiting for Godot are on the pattern of Beckett (beak) and Belcher (belch), then the critic has been given a definition through the repetition of the same word and has received no insight into meaning. Thus, the critic should seek the meaning of the names under which Beckett exhibits his characters and take advantage of the English and French meanings of these names in order to find the characters' dominant traits.

In Waiting for Godot, the list of characters has only five names: Estragon, Vladimir, Lucky, Pozzo, and a boy. There is a sixth character, Godot, who never appears on stage, and in an early version there were two additional noisy sounding characters, Bim and Bom.³ After twenty-five years, Waiting for Godot has become a modern classic and, over these years, the names of several characters have been analyzed--particularly Godot, most often equated with "God." God is described in Waiting for Godot as "a personal God quaquaquaqua with white beard" and appears to be unforgivable for having made the world as it is.⁴ Godot is probably derived from Goddot, a corruption of God wot (God knows) and used "to emphasize the truth of a statement" or "to imply that something is unknown to the speaker, and probably to every other human being" (Oxford English Dictionary, 1970). "God" is not suggested

in the French title, En attendant Godot, where the repetition of ã in en, ten, and dant and o in Godot produces the effect of more than one can swallow. By itself, Godot has a childish sound because of its diminutive, pejorative suffix and singsong sound appropriate for teasing or a child's game. The French title suggests children waiting for a sort of bogie who never comes, while the English title meaning "waiting for God knows what" has the mood of frustration.

Two bums or tramps, Vladimir (known as Didi) and Estragon (known as Gogo), are waiting for Godot. They are not quite alike and their differences are emphasized by Beckett in his description of their exchange of jacket and trousers:

Vladimir is going to wear striped trousers which fit him, with a black jacket, which is too small for him: the jacket belonged originally to Estragon.

Estragon on the other hand, wears black trousers which fit him, with a striped jacket which is too big for him: it originally belonged to Vladimir.

In act two, Vladimir is going to wear a striped jacket and black trousers and Estragon a black jacket and striped trousers.⁵

In a way, the exchange of clothes in the first act may make them "Digo" and "Digo" or "Godi" and "Godi;" --that is, part of each other--but in the second act, each is wearing his own clothes and they are themselves but as inseparable as ever. Gogo's real name, Estragon (tarragon, a plant grown for its pungent, aromatic foliage and used in cooking), is appropriate for the vegetable-like character, Estragon, who has nothing to eat except turnips and an occasional carrot. Pointing to a plant habitat, Beckett said that "Estragon is

on the ground, he belongs to the stone."⁶ Estragon then foreshadows "the earth abode of stones," the third part of Lucky's monologue (p.29). But the lowly Estragon is brought even lower by the name, Gogo, a nickname given to describe accurately some shortcoming.

Gogo means in French "a credulous person," "easy to deceive," and "a sucker" and comes from the name of a comic character popularized in the early nineteenth century by Frédéric Lemaître and caricatured by Daumier. Another aspect of gogo is its relationship to the music and dance performed in nightclubs and used in the expression gogo girls. This use comes from the name of a French nightclub, Whiskey à gogo (whiskey in abundance) and is similar to a place mentioned by Gogo when he tortures Didi: "An Englishman having drunk a little more than usual proceeds to a brothel. The bawd asks him if he wants a fair one, a dark one or a red-haired one" (p. 12). Didi shouts "STOP IT!" Later Gogo says to Didi: "The best thing would be to kill me, like the other" (p. 40). Gogo and Didi know each other's story and like Sartre's characters in Huis clos punish each other by naggingly reminding the other of a painful past. Hell, defined by Beckett in 1929 in his first printed work as "the static lifelessness of unrelieved viciousness,"⁷ is ever-present in the unrelenting memory of Gogo who not only harasses Didi by reminding him about the person murdered in a nightclub but has a name, Gogo, associated with a nightclub.

The word gogo could be from the English verb, go, used in the indirect imperative frequently by Gogo in "let's go" to which Didi answers, "We can't." "We're waiting for Godot." The direct imperative of go is used by Didi to address the sleeping Gogo: "Gogo!... Gogo!...Gogo!..." (p. 11). Had Didi believed that Gogo could go,

O'Nan 5

he would have said "go" and not "go, go," where reduplication suggests that the order can not be executed because the road goes nowhere and nothing can be done. Gogo, credulous in believing that he can wait or go and tortured by the remindful Didi, is like a plant or stone which can not move on its own and for which the imperative mood is a useless part of grammar.

Also waiting for Godot is Vladimir whose parents, one can imagine, may have looked for a name in a cyclopedia of names and found "Vladimir. Saint. (Called Vladimir the Great. . . .) b.c. 956, d. July 15, 1015 Great prince of Kiev, Russia." This name suggesting ruler of peace and of the world should serve to elevate the goals of namesakes, but a more detailed account of Vladimir the Great reveals that he killed his brother by treachery, had four wives and eight hundred concubines, waged many cruel wars, sacrificed a Christian father and son to the gods (these two were the last to suffer martyrdom in Russia), warred against Greece and said he would become a Christian if he won, then refused to have the condition of becoming Christian part of the marriage contract with the sister of the Greek emperors, became ill and blind, and finally was convinced by his Greek wife to become a Christian, whereupon he recovered his sight.⁸ Ironically, the name of Vladimir the Great and Saint falls on the shoulders of Beckett's Vladimir, a character so weak that others call him Didi, even though he addresses himself as Vladimir. His own insistence on Vladimir indicates aspirations and agrees with Beckett's statement that "Vladimir is oriented towards the sky. He belongs to the tree."⁹ "Tree" in almost any sense (tree which grows, a gallows or cross on which Christ was crucified, the tree in the Garden of Eden, the tree of Porphrey) is "oriented towards the sky" but does not reach it. Vladimir's friends probably knew that their friend (and men) could not live up to being a Vladimir who as ruler of

O'Nan 6

peace and the world really never had existed, and therefore they sarcastically and correctly appraised him as Didi, a child-like person. Didi appears to be an almost universal name for a baby or things related to a baby. In English, didie (diddy, diddie, or dydee) is babyish for "diaper." In Beckett's own country, Ireland, diddy is a nipple, a woman's breast.¹⁰ In the Kongo, Didi is an intimate nickname for a baby.¹¹ In French slang, didi means "finger" or "toe."¹²

A different approach to didi may be taken through di and its connection with the French verb, dire (say), which has several forms pronounced di. The character Didi in the French version uses this verb endlessly: "je me dis" (I tell myself), "il a dit" (He [Godot] said), "je ne dis pas ça" (I didn't say that), "il a dit Godot" (he said Godot), "dis-nous la vérité" (tell us the truth), and so on. Di then might mean "say" and compounded in didi means "say-say." To tune in to this childish wisdom, Gogo sometimes says, "Dis, Didi" (Say, Say-Say).

Didi takes himself very seriously, thinks of himself as Vladimir and quite naturally believes Godot's messenger, a boy, who addresses him as "bright" and "illustrious"--that is, as Mr. Albert. Didi falls easy victim to Godot's messenger, who is polite and who knows no more about Godot than Didi and Gogo. The word boy has an obscure origin and may come from East Frisian boi (boy) or the Dutch boef (knave) or be baby talk for Old English brōther.¹³ In the French version of Waiting for Godot, the word for boy is garçon, which originally may have meant "churl," "ill-bred fellow," or "valet."¹⁴ There is little in the origin to suggest that a person called "boy" or "garçon" should be accepted as a messenger from Godot (God), but Didi and Gogo hang on to his every word--even put

words in his mouth--and believe that they have an appointment with Godot on a country road, near a tree, as evening approaches.

Other people whom Didi and Gogo see are Pozzo and his slave, Lucky whose clothes appear to be handed down from his master: "Lucky's shoes are the same color as Pozzo's hat, his checked waistcoat matches Pozzo's checked trousers, as his trousers do Pozzo's jacket."¹⁵ Lucky is driven on stage by Pozzo cracking his whip and saying: "I am Pozzo! . . . PPPZZZ!" (p. 15). Pozzo makes it very clear that he is important and of godly lineage. He is Atlas, son of Jupiter, and has plenty of slaves like Lucky. Jupiter or Zeus was the "father of gods and men," according to Homer. Now Zeus had children: Athena, Apollo, Artemis, Ares, Aphrodite, Hermes, Persephone, and others. But Atlas? Which of Zeus' wives bore Atlas? None. Then Atlas (Pozzo) can not be the real son of Jupiter. Furthermore, when Pozzo states that he is Atlas, son of Jupiter, there is the implication that the supposed father-son relationship is cordial. But in Greek mythology, Atlas fought against his "cousin" Zeus (both being grandsons of Uranus) in the great war between the Titan dynasty and the Olympians. Atlas was among the defeated and punished. But no punishment is suggested in Pozzo's haughty, deceitful self-description: Atlas, son of Jupiter.¹⁶ "Atlas," "Jupiter," and "Pozzo" are meaningless names to Didi and Gogo who in the beginning of the play thought that Pozzo was Godot.

It would be useless for Pozzo to explain to them who he really is. Besides, such an explanation is not in keeping with his long-established habit. Probably many times, he has exulted in saying that he is Atlas, son of Jupiter, or even, the son of God. He does not say that "the great dragon was cast down, the old serpent, he

that is called the Devil and Satan, the deceiver of the whole world." He does not admit having connections with Adam or Cain. He does not explain that pozzo is the Italian word for "well," "mine shaft," and "dungeon for slaves." He never associates pozzo with the bottom of Dante's hell where there is "un pozzo assai largo e profondo" (Inf. XVIII,5) and a "pozzo scuro" (Inf. XXXII, 16). He does not brag about kinship with Hades or Pluto. He does not connect himself in any way with the revolt of the Titans against Zeus, the fall of Atlas, the rebellion of the angels against Jehovah, or with the fall of the rebel archangel. Yet, he has been a deceitful adventurer down through long centuries of man's existence. So why should he now say that he is Lucifer, Beelzebub, Pluto, Hades, or Satan? That never was customary with him. And beginning late in the nineteenth century, he began to look like almost any man as he did in The Brothers Karamazov.

In the modern fashion, Pozzo no longer has his horns, tail, and cloven hoofs. He has magnanimous gestures, glasses, pipe, watch, bowler, and heart trouble. But inwardly, there is something bitter--perhaps memories of his ancient defeat by Zeus and his fall from being the highest and most perfect of angels. There is something which makes him speak sneeringly of Godot as "Godet. . . Godot . . . Godin . . ." (p. 19). Godin with its -in(É) sound is the height of a sneer. The trilogy, Godet, Godot, Godin recalls Foriot, Moriot, Loriot, used by Balzac's disdainful Duchesse de Langeais as she tried to recall the lowly name of Goriot. This is Pozzo, master of many slaves and of Lucky, who is exhausted from playing his historical, ironical role in which he is both deceiver and deceived. To remain with Pozzo is to stay in a hell which has something from all hells--especially those of the Odyssey, the Bible,

Dante's Inferno, Spenser's Faerie Queene, and Sartre's Huis clos. In Pozzo's hell, there are ditches ("bolge" in Dante); beatings; noises; murky twilight; foul smells; and eating without ever reaching satisfaction. The tree is important for the setting (the Golden Bough in the Aeneid). There is a river (Gogo had drowned himself in the Rhone); in myths, the journey to the Other-world is nearly always over a river or sea. Even the famous dog, the three-headed, serpent-tailed Cerberus, may be the dog about which Vladimir sings in a song based on the German children's song: ¹⁷

A dog came in the kitchen
And stole a crust of bread.
Then cook up with a laddle
And beat him till he was dead.

Then all the dogs came running
And dug the dog a tomb--(p. 37)

This song in the context of Waiting for Godot may state that Cerberus was damned to guard the infernal regions for having stolen a crust of bread and, if so, is quite an attack on divine and human justice. Typical of hell, too, is the fate of the damned person to carry eternally his story. In Waiting for Godot, the most detailed eternal story is Lucky's monologue, "The Net."

Thoroughly "brainwashed," Lucky, unlike Descartes, has as his cogito: I do not doubt. "Beyond a doubt," he accepts everything "for reasons unknown" (pp. 28-29). In his philosophical monologue, he stutters when he reaches key words. For example, the several meanings of the word, "academy," are not lost in Lucky's pronunciation "Acacacacademy" (p. 28). There are august academies of men of science,

letters, and arts. There are academies or brothels. There are academies to give thieves their proper schooling as the one in the Middle Ages in Paris where the pocket of a dummy, suspended on a cord and covered with thousands of little bells, had to be "picked" by the "candidate" for the "Master's" without sounding one of the bells.¹⁸ At least one more meaning is emphasized in "Acacacademy" and that is caçare (to void excrement). A more difficult word for Lucky to pronounce is "Anthropopometry" (p. 28) because it not only has "anthropometry" (the study of human body measurements especially on a comparative basis) but also "popo" which suggests "rump" and also "po," a word used in the expression, "full as a po" and meaning "extremely drunk." The importance of kakakaka and popopo is revealed by Beckett's insistence on an "exact, rhythmical rendering" of these words during the 1974-75 Berlin production.¹⁹

After stuttering, Lucky begins to prove his philosophy by citing authorities: Belcher, Peterman, Clapham, Fulham, et al (pp. 28-29). These are not always proper nouns in the English language. Often, they are very common nouns: "belcher" is a "hard drinker of beer" and, in the language of thieves, "a ring"; "peterman" is "one who uses unlawful means to catch fish in the Thames" or "one who specializes in stealing bags from carriages" or perhaps "a stone man" (Peter from Petrus) to fit in with Beckett's idea of "earth abode of stones"; "clapham" is found in the expression "he went out a-wenching and got a clap" (gonorrhoea); "fulham" is used in "high fulham," a die loaded for a cast of 4, 5, or 6, and in "low fulham," a die loaded for a cast of 1, 2, or 3.²⁰ Lucky may have had some experience with low and high fulhams, for the name "probably came into English as a gambling term" (Webster's New Third International Dictionary, 1976 ed.). Lucky wants to be

certain and speaks of the philosophical city, "Essy-in Possy" (p. 28), magnificent in contradiction: esse (in actual existence) and in posse (in potentiality). His philosophy has fragments containing their own destruction and attacks on various philosophies from "six hundred and something" to the age of "all sorts penicillin" (p. 29).

Lucky's monologue with its leitmotiv, "it is established beyond all doubt," has become his comfortable way of thinking. "Habit," Beckett wrote, "is a compromise effected between the individual and his environment, . . . the guarantee of a dull inviolability, the lightning-conductor of his existence. Habit is the ballast that chains the dog to his vomit."²¹ But habits such as trusting one's luck have been with man for a long time. Memories (stories) of good luck, bad luck, fill folklore and recall Zeus who gave man a casket containing Good Luck. Among Greek goddesses is Tyche (Chance), the Romans had Fortuna, and we have Luck and characters such as Lukey in the cartoon, Snuffy. Lucky (Fortune, Chance) has a long story in the service of Pozzo (the dungeon for slaves of Lucifer, Beelzebub, Pluto, Hades, and Satan). Pozzo, the boy (knave), and Godot (God) have long been giving confusing messages to Gogo (tarragon, a credulous person, sucker, victim of gogo girls, a person who can not go anywhere, and who is "on the ground" and "belongs to the stone") and to Didi (a babyish character who can not live up to his name, Vladimir, whose conversation is dominated by "I said, he said" and who "is oriented towards the sky" and "belongs to the tree"). In these personal names there is something more, for example, than Belcher means "to belch," there is something of man's million years, there is something primitive, ritualistic in the hierarchy of Godot, Gogo, Didi, the Boy, Pozzo, and Lucky as they wait or are awaited.

NOTES

*This paper as revised incorporates some valuable suggestions made at the June 1978 Conference on Literary Onomastics made by professors L.R.N. Ashley, Leonard Bloom, Elizabeth R. Rajec, Jesse Levitt, and Walter P. Bowman.

¹Program, "Samuel Beckett's Production of Waiting for Godot," Brooklyn Academy of Music, BAM Theatre Company with the Goethe House, New York, 25 May 1978, n. pag.

²Deidre Bair, A Biography: Samuel Beckett (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1978), p. 4.

³Ibid., p. 670.

⁴Samuel Beckett, Waiting for Godot (New York: Grove Press, 1954), p. 29. This English edition was "translated" by Beckett from the French En attendant Godot which was published in 1952. All page numbers will be from the English edition and will be given in the text. Among various studies which deal with God and Godot in Beckett's work are: Richard N. Coe, "God and Samuel Beckett," in Twentieth Century Interpretations of Molloy, Malone Dies, The Unnamable (Englewood Cliffs, N. J. : Prentice-Hall, 1970), pp. 91-113; Ruby Cohn, Samuel Beckett: The Comic Gamut (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1962). One of the most detailed studies of the name, Godot, is Jesse Levitt, "Names in Beckett's Theater: Irony and Mystification," Literary Onomastics Studies, 4 (1977), 49-63.

⁵Program, "Samuel Beckett's Production of Waiting for Godot."

⁶Ibid.

⁷Samuel Beckett, "Dante...Bruno..Vico..Joyce," in Our Examination Round His Factification for Incamination of Work in Progress (New York: New Directions, 1961), p. 22.

⁸Clarence L. Barnhart and William D. Halsey, The New Century Encyclopedia of Names (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1954). J. Fr. Michaud, Biographie universelle (Paris, 1854: rpt. Graz, Austria: Akademische Druck-u. Verlagsanstalt, 1966). See Kindlers Literatur Lexikon (Zurich: Kindler Verlag, 1973) for details of a tragicomedy, Vladimir, by Feofan Prokopovic (1681-1736).

⁹Program, "Samuel Beckett's Production of Waiting for Godot."

¹⁰Michael Traynor, The English Dialect of Donegal (Dublin: The Royal Irish Academy, 1953).

¹¹Ungina Ndoma, "Kongo Personal Names of Today: A Sketch," Names, 25 (1977), 98.

¹²Géo Sandry and Marcel Carrère, Dictionnaire de l'argot moderne, 7ième éd. (Paris: Mireille Ceni, 1957), p. 332.

¹³The Oxford English Dictionary states: "Boy Forms boi, boize, bay, bey, boie, boy. [ME boi, boy, of obscure origin: app. identical with E. Frisian boi, boy "young gentleman"; considered by many to be identical with Du. boef (buf), 'knave', M du boeve, prob. (according to Frank) adopted from MHG buobe (in mod. G. bube 'knave', dial, 'boy, lad'). It has been proposed to explain bo-y as dim. of bo,

and thus short for bobo the W. Ger type of buobe, bube. The latter is actually found in MHG only from about the 14th c. Its Teutonic standing is doubtful. (The original sense being uncertain)]. Webster's Third New International Dictionary, 1969, states: "[ME; akin to Fris boi boy and prob. to OE Boia, Bōfa (masculine proper name), OHG Buobo (masculine proper name), MHG buobe boy; all perh. fr. prehistoric W Gmc words derived by baby-talk fr. the W Gmc word corresponding to OE brōther. More at brother.]"

¹⁴Paul Robert, Dictionnaire alphabétique et analogique de la langue française (Paris: Le Robert, 1966).

¹⁵Program, "Samuel Beckett's Production of Waiting for Godot."

¹⁶Martha O'Nan, "Lucky" in her Role of Mind in Hugo, Faulkner, Beckett, and Grass (New York: Philosophical Library, 1969), pp. 23-35. Beckett stated that "Jupiter's son is wrong" in Program, "Samuel Beckett's Production of Waiting for Godot."

¹⁷Edith Kern spoke of this German song in "Presidential Address 1977," PMLA, 93 (May 1978), 365.

¹⁸Henri Sauval, Histoire et recherches des antiquités de la ville de Paris (Paris: Moette et Chardon, 1724), I, 513.

¹⁹Program, "Samuel Beckett's Production of Waiting for Godot."

²⁰The following works were followed for definition of slang and thieves' words: Eric Partridge, A Dictionary of Slang and Unconventional English (New York: Macmillan, 1950); John S. Farmer and W. E. Henley, Slang and its Analogues: Past and Present (Printed

Waiting for Godot: A Tragicomedy in Two Acts by Samuel Beckett

Available on [Amazon](#)