

## Lucky in Savannah: Beckett avec Lacan

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### Abstract

In the spirit of praxis, I connect Lacanian theory with the practice of making a video. *Lucky in Savannah*, which is an experimental adaptation of “Lucky’s speech” from Samuel Beckett’s (1954/1984) masterpiece, *Waiting for Godot*—“[t]he prototype of a modernist text” according to Slavoj Žižek (1991). For Žižek (2017), Beckett—rather than Shakespeare—is “a kenotic writer, a writer of utter self-emptying of subjectivity, of its reduction to a minimal difference” (p. 300). Will Greenshields (2017) argues that Žižek goes further than Lacan, and even performs an anti-Žižekian move when choosing Beckett over Joyce: “While for Joyce the beginning and end were so close as to be indistinguishable...for Beckett there is such a thing as a beginning, a bare minimum, and if the truly revolutionary act is to be achieved, one must return to it” (p. 13). For these reasons, it is certainly worthwhile to consider Beckettavec Žižek and others (cf. Greenshields, 2017; Moder, 2015). In my video, I employ a Beckettian aesthetic informed by Lacanian psychoanalysis, which leads me to the following question: Is Lucky’s speech an example of “full speech” *par excellence* (Lacan, 1953), or is it a Real manifestation of the *sinthome* as “the meaningless letter that immediately procures jouissance, ‘enjoyment-in-meaning,’ ‘enjoy-meant’” (Žižek, 1991)?

### Keywords

Žižek; Beckett; Lacan; Experimental Film; Psychoanalysis

Žižek (1991) characterized *Waiting for Godot* as “[t]he prototype of a modernist text” (p. 89) because of how it shows that the Other is incomplete (Greenshields, 2017, p. 1). More than two decades later, Žižek (2017) described Beckett as follows: “If ever there was a kenotic writer, a writer of the utter self-emptying of subjectivity, of its reduction to a minimal difference, it was Beckett. The gap that separates Beckett from Joyce is the gap between the two Reals” (p. 300). Clearly, what Joyce was for Lacan, Beckett is for Žižek.

Žižek’s choice has to do with the fact that “Beckett extends the *incompleteness* of the Other” (Greenshields, 2017, p. 8, emphasis in original) beyond the work itself; in other words, there is no hope because Godot (the Other) exists neither inside nor outside of the text. As Žižek (2017) puts it: “the ‘true’ Beckett constituted himself through a true ethical act, a *cut*, a rejection of the Joycean wealth of enjoy-meant, and an ascetic turn toward a minimal difference, toward a minimalization, a ‘subtraction,’ of the narrative content and of language itself” (p. 301, emphasis in original).

Following Žižek’s (2017) logic, *Waiting for Godot*, as an early text, is a variation on Joyce, hence, functions as a Lacano-Žižekian transitional object. As a *sinthomatic* text, it radically blurs the line between the sacred, “*their* Lord” (Beckett, 1954, p. 29, emphasis added), and the profane. Beckett (1954, pp. 28-29) accomplishes this blurring, which is a transversal political act, through Lucky’s numerous neologisms that are variations on expletives (e.g., “Feckham” → fuck him or “Cunard” → jerk) and partial objects (e.g., “Testew” → testicle, “Possy” → pussy, “Fartov” → fart, “Belcher” → belch, etc.).

I have always found Lucky, and not Godot, to be the most intriguing character in Beckett’s (1954) masterpiece. While many interpret the play to be about the absence of God, what if it is not a variation on the Nietzschean theme that ‘God is dead’ but really about God’s stupid presence as the negativity around which Lucky knots his nonsensical signifiers. After all, Godot “is just a name for nothingness, for a central absence” (Žižek, 1991, p. 89).

To put it differently, what Estragon and Vladimir were 'waiting' for got delivered to them in the form of Lucky's one and only speech. However, Lucky's unconscious act went unnoticed because the truth of his speech is a driven truth, which circles around God as *objet a*, or as a lost object-cause of desire. Lacan (1966/2006) writes, "a letter always arrives at its destination" (p. 30), which implies that the master signifier 'Godot' arrived at its unconscious destination, but neither the characters nor the audience have consciously registered this arrival because of the *objet a*'s formless form, hence, the title of the tragicomedy.

Consequently, who is this Lucky, who is not so lucky? After all, he is a seemingly mute slave, who gets violently abused by his tyrannical master Pozzo. How lucky can he really be? Perhaps, he is lucky to be alive, but even so, what is the significance of being alive as a slave in a dead world? Also, how are to interpret his monologue (pp. 28-29), his only speech throughout the play? Lacan provides us with two possible keys for analyzing Lucky's speech. We can think of it in terms of "full speech" (Lacan, 1966/2006, p. 206), or we can consider the type of *jouissance*, or enjoyment, that he and his listeners, which includes us, derive from what sounds absurd or nonsensical.

The act of having a hat put on his head thrusts Lucky to both think and speak. According to his master Pozzo: "He can't think without his hat" (Beckett, 1954, p. 27). Is this not a great illustration of the subject's division between false being and unconscious thinking? In other words, the hat in the world of the play functions (like dreams for Freud) as the royal road to the unconscious. The hat (perhaps functioning as the Thing) allows Lucky to think and to speak both freely and fully. For Lacan (1966/2006), "what is at stake is not reality, but truth, because the effect of full speech is to reorder past contingencies by conferring on them the sense of necessities to come, such as they are constituted by the scant freedom through which the subject makes them present" (p. 213). Lacan (1966/2006) later adds, "full speech is defined by the fact that it is identical to what it speaks about" (p. 319).

Beckett (1954) chose not to punctuate Lucky's speech to maintain its ambiguity; in other words, Beckett was careful not to pin down Lucky's nonsensical signifiers in any concrete way in an effort to prevent the possibility for an Imaginary

(mis)understanding. However, in order to adapt the speech to video,<sup>1</sup> I had to punctuate it in terms of beats as well as emphasize certain words (see Appendix). I also divided the speech into three sections, which is akin to the analyst's interpretation. In the first section, Lucky sees the beginning, the evolution, and the end of the universe, from nothingness to the Big Bang to the evolution of life and back to nothingness again. At which point, he realizes that God does not exist. In the second section, Lucky considers the consequences of God's absence: that humans are lonely with no one to save them, which is why they seek distractions from the truth. In the third section, Lucky visualizes the planet's decline into disorder, which is also the destiny of the whole universe.

To put it another way, Lucky's particular truth (his suffering as a slave) is also a universal truth (entropy), and it is in this sense that Lucky is free. He is free because he knows, and consequently, he enjoys because he knows, and so do we. This Sisyphean aspect of *jouissance*, which is tied to absurd (or unconscious) knowledge, or the knowledge of non-meaning is what Lacan referred to as "jouis-sense, 'enjoyment-in-meaning,' [or] 'enjoy-meant'" (as cited in Žižek, 1991, p. 79). Žižek (1991) calls it "idiotic enjoyment" and ties it to the *sinthome*, or "the meaningless letter" (p. 79). The meaningless letter *par excellence* in the play is, of course, none other than the master signifier 'Godot' itself. But many of the letters uttered free associatively by Lucky have a similar function of exploding master signifiers through a seemingly infinite signifying chain that is full of *jouissant* repetitions.

In this sense, one can characterize Lucky's speech, and perhaps his psychic structure, topologically in terms of Möbius strip. According to Greenshields (2017), "the universal or generic truth that Beckett provides is that of the subject *qua* formal structure" (p. 10, emphasis in original). Lucky is an exemplar Beckettian subject, who "is found in neither the 'mind'...nor the big Other, instead subsisting as an impossibly thin plane between the two" (Greenshields, 2017, p. 10). Greenshields (2017) adds that "for Beckett the imperative was always to *begin* again, to reduce the subject to a nothing not in order to produce a pessimistic theatre of the absurd but to provide the groundless ground of a *true* act" (p. 12, emphasis in original) and concludes that "for Beckett there

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<sup>1</sup> <https://vimeo.com/264117445>

Password: Beckett

is such a thing as a beginning, a bare minimum, and if the truly revolutionary act is to be achieved, one must return to it” (p. 13).

Given these points, what is the significance of a ~~woman~~ playing Lucky instead of a man in my video? Does it signal a shift from phallic *jouissance* to Other *jouissance*? Also, what is the meaning of Savannah as the stage, or the groundless ground, for Lucky’s true act? Savannah is, needless to say, the former British colonial capital of the Province of Georgia and the oldest city in the US state of Georgia. Perhaps, these remarks leave us with the question of not only sexual difference, but with the more critical question of colonial difference.

## References

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## Appendix

### My Punctuation of Lucky’s Speech (Beckett, 1954, pp. 28-29)

I

Given the existence / as *uttered forth* in the public works of *Puncher* and *Wattmann* / of a personal *God* quaquaquaqu / with white beard *quaquaquaqu* / outside time / without extension / who from the heights of divine apathia / divine athambia / divine

aphasia / *loves us* dearly / with some exceptions / for reasons unknown but time will tell / and *suffers* like the divine *Miranda* with those who / for reasons unknown but time will tell / are *plunged* in torment / *plunged* in fire / whose fire flames / if that continues and who can doubt it / will *fire* the firmament / that is to say *blast* heaven to hell / so blue / still and calm / so calm / with a calm which even though intermittent is better than nothing / but not so fast //

## II

and considering what is more / that as a result of the labours left *unfinished* / crowned by the *Acacacademy of Anthropopometry*, of *Essy-in-Possy*, of *Testew* and *Cunard* / it is *established* beyond all doubt / all other doubt than that which *clings* to the labours of men / that as a result of the labours *unfinished* of *Testew* and *Cunard* / it is *established* as hereinafter / but not so fast / for reasons unknown / that as a result of the public works of *Puncher* and *Wattmann* / it is *established* beyond all doubt / that in view of the labours of *Fartov* and *Belcher* / left *unfinished* for reasons unknown / of *Testew* and *Cunard* / left *unfinished* / it is *established* what many *deny* / that man in *Possy*, of *Testew* and *Cunard* / that man in *Essy* / that man in short / that man in brief / in spite of the strides of alimentation and defecation / is seen to *waste and pine* / *waste and pine* / and concurrently / simultaneously / what is more / for reasons unknown / in spite of the strides of physical culture / the practice of sports / such as / tennis, football, running, cycling, swimming, flying, floating, riding, gliding, conating, camogie, skating / tennis of all kinds / dying, flying / sports of all sorts / autumn, summer, winter, winter / tennis of all kinds / hockey of all sorts / penicilline and succedanea / in a word / I resume / and concurrently / simultaneously / for reasons unknown / to *shrink and dwindle* / in spite of the tennis / I resume / flying, gliding / golf over nine and eighteen holes / tennis of all sorts / in a word / for reasons unknown / in *Feckham, Peckham, Fulham, Clapham* / namely, concurrently, simultaneously / what is more / for reasons unknown, but time will tell / to *shrink and dwindle* / I resume / *Fulham, Clapham* / in a word / the dead / loss per head / since the death of *Bishop Berkeley* / being to the tune of one inch / four ounce per head / approximately / by and large / more or less / to the nearest decimal / good measure / round figures / stark naked / in the stockinged feet / in *Connemara* / in a word / for reasons unknown / no matter what matter / the facts are there //

### III

and considering what is more / much more grave / that in the light of the labours  
*lost* / of *Steinweg* and *Peterman* / it *appears* / what is more / much more *grave* / that in  
the light / the light / the light of the labours *lost*, of *Steinweg* and *Peterman* / that in the  
plains / in the mountains / by the seas / by the rivers / running water / running fire / the  
air is the same / and then the earth / namely the air / and then the earth / in the great  
cold / the great dark / the air and the earth / abode of stones / in the great cold / alas /  
alas in the year of their *Lord* / six hundred and something / the air, the earth, the sea,  
the earth / abode of stones / in the great deeps / the great cold / on sea, on land, and in  
the air / I resume / for reasons unknown / in spite of the tennis / the facts are there, but  
time will tell / I resume / alas / alas on / on / in short / in fine / on / on abode of stones /  
who can *doubt* it / I resume / but not so fast / I resume / the skull / to *shrink and waste* /  
and concurrently / simultaneously / what is more / for reasons unknown / in spite of the  
tennis / on / on the beard / the flames, the tears, the stones, so blue, so calm, alas /alas  
on / on the skull / the skull, the skull / the skull in *Connemara* / in spite of the tennis / the  
labours / *abandoned* / left *unfinished* / *graver* / still abode of stones / in a word / I  
resume / alas, alas *abandoned* / *unfinished* / the *skull* / the skull in *Connemara* / in spite  
of the tennis / the skull / alas, the stones / *Cunard* (mêlée, final vociferations) tennis ...  
the stones ... so calm ... *Cunard* ... *unfinished* ...