

HAROLD SCHWEIZER



On

Waiting

THINKING IN ACTION

On Waiting

This is a quite remarkable book, a pleasure to read. Not only is it clear and informative but also by turns witty, melancholic and insightful. The book is astonishingly erudite, but wears this learning so lightly and so charmingly that it is both easy and gripping to read.

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HAROLD SCHWEIZER

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Waiting

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This is a book about waiting. It is not a philosophy of time, nor a historical survey of cultural attitudes toward waiting, nor a nostalgic contemplation of an idyllic past when we might have waited more patiently (though that is likely). I approach the subject of waiting from a broadly phenomenological perspective. How do we wait? What happens when we wait? What kind of experience is waiting? Is it an experience of time? If so, what kind of time is it that we experience in waiting? Why does waiting get such a bad rap? In attempting to answer such and similar questions, I consult an eclectic range of texts, mostly literary, some philosophical, as well as a number of artistic images. Although the terminology established in Chapter two, which offers a Bergsonian theory on waiting, is taken up in the following chapters, I hope to use my theoretical terms lightly enough so that each chapter can also be read on its own.

My observations include various scenes of waiting – the famous French philosopher Henri Bergson waiting for a lump of sugar to dissolve in a glass of water, seven-year-old Elizabeth waiting in Elizabeth Bishop’s poem “In the Waiting Room,” Kate Croy waiting for her father in Henry James’s novel *Wings of the Dove*, Penelope at her loom waiting for Odysseus, the parents of a little boy waiting for his recovery from a coma, and a number of other “waiters” – painters,

poets, and philosophers among them – as they exemplify particular aspects and qualities of waiting: its mental and bodily dimensions, the relationship between waiting and writing, waiting in narrative prose and lyric poetry, the enchantments of waiting, the gendered implications of waiting, how we wait when we read, how we wait when we linger, how we wait for death. I examine the waiter's experience of the endurance of objects, her disquieting sense of her own material embodiment of time, why we pace, why we compulsively consult our watches when we wait. I discuss waiting with and without purpose, the distracted gaze of the impatient waiter, the lingering gaze of the patient waiter, the different kinds of waiting that one performs with expectation and with hope.

I wish to express my gratitude to friends and colleagues who have helped me to bring this waiting to an end. John Rickard's and Richard Kahn's comments were encouraging in the early stages of this project and so were Pauline Fletcher's responses to my readings, especially of Henry James. In the later stages of this project, Michael Drexler, Gary Steiner, and especially Saundra Morris each offered invaluable critical feedback. Thanks also to my exceptionally efficient graduate assistant, Dan Heuer, who spent a good amount of time waiting in front of my office door. I owe much gratitude to Katryn Sandler for her extensive, careful work on bibliographical matters and for her clear-sighted and extremely valuable comments on the entire manuscript.

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One

Waiting, one says, is boring.

Thomas Mann, *The Magic Mountain*

WHY WAIT?

The subject of this book – waiting – recalls St. Augustine’s remark that “I know well enough what time is as long as nobody asks me what it is.”¹ Waiting is as resistant to description and analysis as time or boredom.² Although central to the idea of narrative from Homer to Hollywood, waiting is a temporal region hardly mapped and badly documented. As the literary critic Hugh Kenner observed, there had never been a play about waiting before *Waiting for Godot*. Since then, to my knowledge, only three novels have appeared: Maurice Blanchot’s *L’Attente l’oublie* (1962), Fumiko Enchi’s *The Waiting Years* (1980), and Ha Jin’s *Waiting* (2000).

Obscured by its ordinariness as much as by its alleged uselessness, waiting seems to be almost universally denigrated. “It is difficult to enjoy people for whom we have waited too long,” observes Adam Phillips in his book *On Kissing, Tickling, and Being Bored*.³ “Waiting is horrible,” exclaims Clytemnestra in Jean Giraudoux’s *Électre*.⁴ The envious man of *ressentiment* in Nietzsche’s philosophy “lingers at the door”; “compelled to wait,” he gives it “flattering names,” such as patience or virtue.⁵ Although insisting that “haste is the enemy of art,” Jeanette Winterson concludes, “We feel that poetry should do more than tell us that somebody is waiting in the hall.”⁶

In our frantic world of instant messaging, instant credit, instant gratification, the question “why wait?” or the promise “no wait!” seem to appeal to universal agreement. Nobody, we say proverbially, likes to wait. Lacking the charms of boredom or desire,⁷ waiting is neither interestingly melancholic nor despairingly romantic. Between hope and resignation, boredom and desire, fulfillment and futility, waiting extends across barren mental and emotional planes. Those who wander in it or through it find themselves in an exemplary existential predicament, having time without wanting it.

Although waiting rooms, train stations, airports, or hotel lobbies are merely to be passed through, I shall argue in this book that waiting is not simply a passage of time to be traversed. Although time is supposed to function like a door or a hall through which we pass unawares, in waiting, the door jams and the hall is endless. The hour does not pass. The line does not move. Time must suddenly be endured rather than traversed, felt rather than thought. In waiting, time is slow and thick. Waiting is more than merely an inconvenient delay. It is more than a matter of time. Waiting has its rewards, as I want to argue here, though these seem perhaps as inconceivable as a visit to a door or a train station. And yet, we might think of waiting also as a temporary liberation from the economics of time-is-money, as a brief respite from the haste of modern life, as a meditative temporal space in which one might have unexpected intuitions and fortuitous insights. Waiting, as the French activist and philosopher Simone Weil advocates, must be relearned as a form of attention.⁸

TIME IS MONEY

Let me sketch a context for these observations and claims by going back to the beginning of time, so to speak, namely

to the mathematician Isaac Newton. In his *Principia* (1687), Newton distinguishes between “absolute, true, and mathematical time,” which “flows equably without relation to anything external,” and “relative, apparent, and common time . . . , which is commonly used instead of true time.”⁹ The ever-increasing precision of chronometrical time in the Western hemisphere since the eighteenth century has reinforced the authority of Newton’s “true and mathematical time”; time has become a point of reference according to which lives are set and adjusted like clocks. Soon enough, Newton’s mathematical time seemed not a human invention but a divine law: “Thus regulated to keep ‘God’s time,’ ” as Graham Burnett writes, “virtuous spirits can make their way through the world and remain ‘true’ to a distant and divine standard”¹⁰ – so true and divine that the adaptation to synchronized time has arguably led to the West’s economic predominance in the world. “Through the techniques by which time is measured,” writes Sylviane Agacinski, “and through its assimilation as a market value, we can witness the Western hour’s hold over the entire world.”¹¹

But the economic and technical advantages of synchronized time exact their own price. The money economy changed modern life to “evaluating, weighing, calculating and reducing of qualitative values to quantitative ones,” as the German philosopher and sociologist Georg Simmel wrote at the beginning of the twentieth century:

The mathematical character of money imbues the relationship of the elements of life with a precision, a reliability in the determination of parity and disparity . . . in the same way as the general use of pocket watches has brought about a similar effect in daily life.

Rather than becoming masters of their own time, the bearers of pocket watches were mastered by it. But thereby, Simmel explains, they were ideally adapted to modern metropolitan life, which required “detailed and definite arrangements and measurements.”¹²

The beginning of the twentieth century is marked by the concept of time as the organizing principle, as Richard Beardsworth sums up. The “logics of modernity require a ‘reduction’ of the experience of time”; “experience is immediately affected today by economic determination.”¹³ The experience of waiting is not exempt from these determinations. A case in point is sociologist Richard Larson’s observation that

What really matters is the cost of one’s waiting experience, not just in money but in frustration, anger and other stresses. If they understood this principle, industries like fast-food chains, banks, and airlines could reduce their customers’ anxieties, better manage their own budgets, and even save lives.¹⁴

The challenge for these industries is to assign an exchange value not just to the time of waiting but also to the experience of waiting. Frustrations, anger, and anxieties, too, have their price and must be appeased and remunerated not, it seems, for the sake of the person who waits, but for the budgets of the industries. The lives that might be saved appear to be the lives of customers not of people. Like time, they have become commodities. “Money culture recognizes no currency but its own,” as Jeanette Winterson puts it; “Money confuses time with itself.”¹⁵ What is lost when time is money is the content of time itself, but it is a content that seems inconceivable without economic determinations or measurements by

clocks. And yet, it is just such an inconceivable content of time – inconceivable because immeasurable – that marks the faces and bodies of the passengers of Honoré Daumier's image of *Un wagon de troisième classe* (see Figure 1.1).

UN WAGON DE TROISIÈME CLASSE

To place the passengers in Daumier's image into a train compartment implies its own ironies considering that train schedules necessitated the synchronizing of time in the nineteenth century. The class and social distinctions that are reinforced through such synchronizing are here also on display in the marginal social position and low economic status of the person who waits. Time is synchronized only for those who have pocket watches.

Daumier's passengers seem to have fallen out of the divine standards set by Newton's true and mathematical time. Their bodily gestures and facial expressions convey their habitual,



Figure 1.1 Honoré Daumier, *Un wagon de troisième classe* (Oskar Reinhart Collection)

mechanical resignation to their “third class” status. If they do not display the frustrations, anger, or anxieties that characterize waiting in the age of fast-food chains, banks, and airlines, they wait in a time unrecorded in the industries’ ledgers. Daumier’s passengers find themselves with a currency – time – that is worthless. Nobody wants it. They cannot exchange their time; they spend it receiving nothing in return; they would kill time if they could.

If Daumier’s passengers strike us as hopelessly from a bygone era, the superficiality of such an impression would belie the fact that waiting is still assigned to the poor and powerless so as to ritualistically reinforce social and political demarcations. The word “wait” or “waiting” occurs numerous times, for example, in Martin Luther King’s “Letter from Birmingham Jail.” “For years now,” he writes, “I have heard the word ‘Wait!’ It rings in the ear of every Negro with piercing familiarity. This ‘Wait’ has almost always meant ‘Never.’ ”¹⁶ The poor will always be with us; the poor will always wait. Their time is not money. Daumier’s passengers don’t travel. They just wait to arrive.

THE LIGHT OF SPEED

“What will we wait for when we no longer need to wait to arrive?” asks social theorist Paul Virilio: “we wait for the coming of what abides” (Virilio’s italics) – and what abides will be the unceasingly available instant that no longer has to be waited for.¹⁷ For Virilio, post-modernity is characterized by an ever-accelerating contraction of duration: we no longer live in linear time but in the “light of speed.” The light of speed is not the speed of light but rather the light that speed emits as, for example, when images flash across a screen. We don’t wait for them. Laptops, Blackberries, cell phones, iPhones are to

deliver information without making us wait. In a recent issue of *Newsweek*, Robert J. Samuelson even deplores the extinction of the comma that once indicated a pause. “[T]he comma’s sad fate is,” he writes, “a metaphor for something larger: how we deal with the frantic, can’t-wait-a-minute nature of modern life. . . . We don’t have time for that. No pauses allowed.”¹⁸

In a culture where “the light interval overrides the classical intervals of extension and duration,” where “the old pendulum movement and clockwork mechanisms, as well as the throbbing of quartz watches, are thus giving way to the movement of the [camera’s] shutter . . .,”¹⁹ we no longer need to wait. “With acceleration,” Virilio declares, “there is no more here and there, only the mental confusion of near and far, present and future, real and unreal. . . .”²⁰ What happens no longer happens as an event arriving in time; it happens in its evanescence, in its momentary coming to light, in its flashing up.

My litany of “no-longer’s” and “no-more’s” relegates the passengers in Daumier’s *Un wagon de troisième classe* to a time manifestly before Virilio’s transportation revolution. They still wait to arrive. For them, as for those for whom Martin Luther King speaks, waiting almost always means never. And for those of us who still use commas, speed is still a function of time. Waiting in Virilio’s futuristic modernity will now seem paradoxically longer because of the speed by which it has to be accomplished. The indignities of waiting in a culture of the instant, in other words, are also the discomforts of being out of sync with modernity, with the “light of speed,” the “habit of velocity,” “the moment of the gaze.”²¹ If technological acceleration increasingly compresses space, for the person who waits, space tediously expands and time slows

down. If acceleration of social change leads to a contraction of the present, in waiting the present is painfully prolonged. If the acceleration of the pace of life intensifies experiences,²² waiting seems only to diffuse them. In short, the temporality of modernity is sudden, instantaneous, like the movement of the camera's shutter, while in the experience of waiting, space and time expand to flat, tedious dimensions. The acceleration of time in modernity, in other words, has greatly accentuated the tediousness of waiting. Waiting seems neither modern nor post-modern – modern having its roots in the Latin *modo*, meaning “just now,” which is manifestly not what waiting is.

By the divine standards of time's exactitude, by the diviner economics of its consumption, by the light of speed, waiting must seem a temporary aberration, an anachronism, an embarrassment. The person who waits is out of sync with time, outside of the “moral” and economic community of those whose time is productive and synchronized or whose time need not – in the habit of velocity – be experienced at all. The waiter's enforced passivity expels him from the community of productive citizens; his endurance of time estranges him from the culture of money and speed.

The denials of waiting and the distractions by which it can be forgotten – the magazines in waiting rooms, the entertainment on television, the computer games, the snacks, the cigarettes – amount to a lucrative industry. Ann Barr Snitow writes in her article “Mass Market Romance: Pornography for Women is Different”: “While the heroine waits for the hero's next move, her time is filled by tourism and by descriptions of consumer items: furniture, clothes, and gourmet foods.²³” What is to be avoided at all cost – pun intended – is the experience of waiting.

WAITING FOR GODOT

What has been so enduringly scandalous about Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* is that it is a play about waiting. But that is perhaps already claiming too much. The play is not about anything, not strictly speaking about waiting, certainly not about *Godot*. Rather, the play enacts, performs, requires waiting. One will have to wait, as Vladimir taunts the audience halfway through the first act: "Charming evening we are having. . . . And it's not over. . . . It's only beginning." Thus, we enact the play as well when we watch it. We, too, do nothing but wait, being "settled numbly in our ritual of waiting," as Hugh Kenner puts it.²⁴ And we know what to expect: *Godot* will not come. "One knows what to expect," says Estragon; "No further need to worry," says Vladimir; "Simply wait," says Estragon.²⁵ But Beckett's critics, as we shall see, greatly worried about *Godot*.

Only a rarified circle of avant-garde artists received the play with enthusiasm when it came out in 1953; the general public, especially in the United States, reacted with "bewilderment and distaste."²⁶ One of the play's early American reviewers summarizes the play as a dialogue between "two tramps who inform each other and the audience at the outset that they smell. It takes place in what appears to be the town dump. . . ." The same reviewer doubts that she had "seen a worse play," and charges that *Godot* only demonstrates how "certain intellectuals are capable [of] embracing obscurity, pretense, ugliness and negation. . . ."²⁷ Even Norman Mailer, otherwise given to progressive tastes, calls admirers of *Godot* "intellectual snobs of undue ambition and impotent imagination."²⁸ In one of the first reviews of the play, avant-garde novelist Alain Robbe-Grillet declares (with tongue in cheek), "such waiting interests no one." For a conventional audience,

he claims, Beckett's play "does not possess, as waiting, the slightest stage value. It is neither a hope, nor an anguish, nor even a despair. It is barely an alibi."²⁹ Echoing Robbe-Grillet, Robert Champigny comments in a PMLA article of the 1960s:

In Beckett's play, it is waiting that shows existential reality; not waiting for this or that, but waiting; not Time as a form of cognitive thought, but the wait as lived, out of time; not hope or desire or fear, but undifferentiated waiting. This wait is the basic way to live what-has-to-be-lived, the gerundive aspect of existence. Thus, there can be neither optimism nor pessimism, since life must be lived, and that is all. If life makes no sense, it is because life *is* sense.³⁰

But Champigny's ascetic reduction of waiting to "what-has-to-be-lived" might inadvertently present Vladimir's and Estragon's waiting as the kind of valiant stoicism that they quite ostensibly spurn. And yet, "all those noble, affirmative elements with which philosophy adorns that existence that Hegel already called 'foul' (*faul*)," as Theodor Adorno writes,³¹ are perhaps impossible to resist. Foul or not, life as mere waiting, as simple endurance, is hard to fathom without filling it with tourism and furniture, without assigning it some "Godin . . . Godet . . . [or] Godot," as Pozzo (owner of a pocket watch) proposes.³² How, then, to think about waiting – waiting as such – just waiting? How can one "simply wait"?

Although Joyce, Proust, Woolf, and Eliot had each introduced "the gerundive aspect of existence" in their own ways more than three decades earlier, the novelty of *Godot*, as Hugh Kenner points out, was that nobody had ever written a play about waiting before, even though waiting, of course, had always been a necessary part of narrative or dramatic

development. But that was instrumental waiting, waiting with a purpose, waiting for a denouement, a disaster, a death, for example. The kind of waiting an audience witnessed and shared in *Agamemnon*, Kenner goes on, was directed towards an end, “the inevitable,” which was foretold and expected – Agamemnon’s death, Orestes’ revenge.³³ Electra, who finds waiting “terrible” in Giroudoux’s play, asks despairingly, “waiting for what?” but the object of her waiting is thus already announced, the play will reach its closure in the coming of Orestes. We, on the other hand, know – even first audiences knew – that Godot would not come. What then is the difference in waiting between these two, shall we say, traditions? The difference can’t be in the fact that Orestes will come and that Godot will not, for either of those endings is inevitable.

The novelty of waiting in *Godot* is not, I suggest, in how we pass through waiting but how we are in it, not in the expectation of the end of waiting but in the quality of waiting as such. If we wait differently in *Godot* than we wait either in clock time or in *Agamemnon*, it is because we “simply wait.” Waiting in *Waiting for Godot* is without the preposition “for.” And yet, as I have said, it is difficult to conceive of waiting in *Waiting for Godot* without invoking, conceptualizing, indeed expecting Godot – even the Godot who won’t come, even the Godot under erasure. For, how can we wait without invoking Godot as a makeshift remedy for the endlessness of waiting? How, in other words, could we wait in *Waiting for Godot* without waiting for Godot?

Not surprisingly, rather than the experience of waiting as such, the identity of Godot quickly became the focus of critical attention and led to an industry of interpretive over-determinations – even though, as Kenner points out,

such waiting as we share it in *Godot* is utterly ordinary: “. . . everyone, everywhere, has waited, and wondered why he waited.”³⁴ Vladimir seems to confirm this seemingly universal ordinariness of waiting: “We are no longer alone, waiting for the night, waiting for Godot, waiting for . . . waiting”; he stammers to name an indeterminate, objectless waiting from which Godot has suddenly, in the ellipsis of his sentence, been dropped. “All evening,” he goes on, “we have struggled, unassisted. Now it’s over. It’s already tomorrow.”³⁵ That would be nice, we think. But it’s not over, it is tomorrow, and they are still waiting.

When we say that in *Godot* we just wait, we mean that waiting has been emptied of all practical, philosophical, or theological resonance. Beckett’s genius is simply to make waiting nothing more than time, just as Henri Bergson’s comparable genius, as I will claim in this book, is to make time nothing more than duration. What Vladimir and Estragon wait for is perhaps only to get to – and to get us to – this literalism of waiting, to experience their waiting first and foremost, and perhaps ultimately, as nothing other than the endurance of time. For this is not waiting for something that would validate, cancel, or fulfill waiting. This is the kind of waiting we fear that waiting – or living – might amount to: just waiting.

They just wait. Nothing is left but time. They have become time passing, vessels of time, time’s bodily manifestations. We are “empty *personae*,” as Theodor Adorno puts this, “through which the world can truly resonate.”³⁶ It is this emptiness of substance and yet this resonance of time that hovers in Vladimir and Estragon’s gestures. They are waiting. How long, one might vainly ask, are they waiting for Godot? How long until the curtain falls? How long until Godot comes? But

even if Godot had come, they would have kept on waiting. “Personally I wouldn’t even know him if I saw him,”³⁷ says Vladimir. When the curtain falls they will keep on waiting: “. . . behind this veil of gentleness and peace night is charging,” says Pozzo, “[Vibrantly], and will burst upon us [Snaps his fingers] pop! like that! [His inspiration leaves him] just when we least expect it.”³⁸ But Pozzo’s apocalyptic fantasy fades instantly. What we least expect is that they – that we – just keep on waiting.

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