Because of a circularity that defies customary logic and linearity, critics have often seen in Samuel Beckett’s work an absurdity they believe to be modern and expressive of the world we live in. It is true, of course, that the author has given manifold and striking expression to alogical circularity, so that the unassuming ditty (originally a German children’s song) hummed by Didi in Waiting for Godot may well be considered emblematic of the author’s entire work as it teasingly begins again whenever one expects it to end and, indeed, cannot be brought to any logical ending.¹ In Molloy the protagonist’s assertion that the first lines of his report were its beginning but are now nearly its end conjures up a similar mood of unending circularity bordering on the absurd.² In the year of the celebration of Beckett’s seventy-fifth birthday, we might do well, however, to ask whether this mood is exclusively modern and meant to reflect merely the chaos known to us. It would seem to me rather that it is informed by a conception of man that Beckett’s works and those of other contemporary authors share with the literature preceding both the rediscovery of Aristotle’s Poetics and the neoclassical emphasis on rationality and individuality. Not unlike authors of the Middle Ages, Beckett conceives of the individual sub specie aeternitatis, and in Waiting for Godot this vision is brilliantly dramatized when blind old Pozzo, having
fallen over decrepit Lucky, is unable to get up. His cries for help are reluctantly answered by Didi and Gogo, whose efforts end in their own loss of balance, though they reply to Pozzo's inquiry as to who they are: "We are men." Nameless and faceless, mankind is groping to get on its feet, and the same medieval notion of the insignificance of the individual is later epitomized by Pozzo when he proclaims: "One day we were born, one day we shall die, the same day, the same second. . . . They give birth astride of a grave, the light gleams an instant, then it's night once more" (57). Such a conception of man does not call for clearly outlined literary protagonists or psychological explanations. Nor is it concerned with personal confrontations or social problems. The focus is rather on mankind and its unchanging structures and needs within the universe. The individual is but the transitory and ephemeral link in Nature's unending chain of birth, life, and death.

Quite obviously, such a vision of man and the universe affects the function and form of literary dialogue. When it is not employed to develop plot or reveal individual character, dialogue becomes ludic. It is not surprising, therefore, that the verbal exchanges of Beckett's characters often seem absurd to those who approach them with attitudes that conform to neoclassical expectations. But when Didi and Gogo wonder, for instance, whether they should leave, end it all, go on, or come back tomorrow, they engage in conversational patterns of the kind we might encounter in any medieval French farce:

E: Where shall we go?
V: Not far.
E: Oh yes. Let's go far away from here.
V: We can't.
E: Why not?
V: We have to come back tomorrow.
E: What for?
V: To wait for Godot. (59)

In his study of French farce, Robert Garapon has referred to such dialogue, which reveals no facts and follows no logical pattern, as "un jeu de paume," and the verbal exchanges of

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Beckett's characters resemble, indeed, quite frequently verbal ballgames—although the effect may be, on occasion, highly lyrical and poetic. Beckett's own consciousness of this ballgame effect of dialogue is quite apparent. "In the meantime," Gogo suggests on one occasion, "let us try and converse calmly, since we are incapable of keeping silent" (40). Vladimir—musing why it is that of the four Evangelists "only one speaks of a thief being saved"—prods Estragon, who had remained silent: "Come on, Didi, return the ball." (9) In Endgame, of course, Clov's question "What is there to keep me here?" is answered by Ham with "The dialogue" (58). But in Beckett's work such ludic dialogue may also assume the form of medieval flyting, that is, of half-playful, half-serious insults. On one occasion when Didi and Gogo have nothing to do and nowhere to go, as they wait for Godot, they begin to quarrel just to pass the time away. They are close to getting into a fist fight, when Gogo suggests: "That's the idea, let's abuse each other." Stage directions indicate that they turn, move away from each other, and begin to insult each other, one outdoing the other until Didi is utterly vanquished and Gogo calls him "Critic!" so that Gogo concedes: "Now let's make it up!" (48). In all likelihood, such flyting had its origin in more ancient "slanging matches" that, in the view of Johan Huizinga, may well represent the very origin of theater. The exaggerated insults that rival tribes engaged in would have led to violent war, had there not been in existence a tacit understanding that they were meant to be an impersonal game of one-up-manship—a liberation of pent-up emotions in a spirit of make-believe, not unlike that of "playing the dozens" known to black communities. It is interesting in this respect that the iambos, the meter of Greek tragedy, is thought by some to have meant derision, suggesting that theater and the exchange of insults have been linked from time immemorial. In the commedia dell'arte such slanging matches were standard in the lover's pursuit of his beloved and her playful or serious rejection of him. Eugène Ionesco recently used them with great skill in his play Macbett (based on Shakespeare's Macbeth) to give expression to the snowballing effect of murder, as he has his conspirators reach
the tragicomic frenzy of hatred in the course of their verbal exchanges. Beckett availed himself of such tragicomic playfulness mainly in order to be able to discuss questions as serious as those of man's place in the world and his relationship to God, without sounding pompous or transgressing the limits of theater as entertainment and stage business.

In his early works, ludic dialogue and flyting permitted Beckett, above all, to juxtapose the sacred and the profane in a mood of the seeming absurdity known to the Middle Ages. Thus Vladimir and Estragon, wondering whether man is tied to God (or is it Godot?), have an answer suggested to them that is as ambivalent as it is ironically farcical when Pozzo appears upon the stage led by Lucky, to whom he is tied (or who is tied to him?) by a rope. In The Absolute Comic, I have discussed at some length the significance of medieval parodies that, in similar manner, juxtapose the sacred with the profane and whose popularity is attested to by the large number of Latin manuscripts still extant. Their spirit was caught remarkably well by Nietzsche in Thus Spake Zarathustra, which contains a travesty of a Mass, not unlike those celebrated during the medieval Festival of the Ass. A brief sampling of it will convey the flavor of such parody in all its carnivalesque irreverence that laughingly turns the world upside down:

And the litany sounded thus;

Amen! And glory and honour and wisdom and thanks and praise and strength be to our God, from everlasting to everlasting!

—The ass, however, here brayed Ye-A.

He carrieth our burdens, he hath taken upon him the form of a servant, he is patient of heart and never saith Nay; and he who loveth his God chastiseth him.

—The ass, however, here brayed Ye-A.

He speaketh not: except that he ever saith Yea to the world which he created: thus doth he extol his world. It is his artfulness that speaketh not: thus is he rarely found wrong.

—The ass, however, here brayed Ye-A.

Uncomely goeth he through the world. Grey is the favourite colour in which he wrappeth his virtue. Hath he spirit, then doth he conceal it; every one, however, believeth in his long ears.
Nietzsche's travesty, though used by him in the spirit of satire, would seem to be sacrilegious, unless we recognize that it belongs to that—usually more lighthearted—medieval tradition. It is in this same tradition that James Joyce parodied the litany, the liturgy, and the Lord's Prayer and that his work abounds in ludic travesties such as the following: "Haloed be her eve, her singtime sung, her rill be run, unhemmed as it is uneven." Or: "Oura Vatars that arred in Himmal," with its exuberant fusion of different languages, real as well as invented. Or: "Ouhr Former who erred," a sheer play on sound. Rabelais had indulged in such exuberant and irreverent playfulness in his Gargantua and Pantagruel, and in his seminal study Rabelais and His World, Mikhail Bakhtin points out that one of the book's protagonists, Panurge, seeking advice from Friar John as to whether he should marry or not, couches his words in praise of the male sexual parts in the form of a litany repeated 153 times. Rabelais used Christ's last words on the cross "sitio" (I thirst) and "consummatum est" (it is finished) in a literal sense as if they referred to food and drink, and such mingling of the sacred and the profane was so readily accepted and enjoyed in the author's time that he did not expunge it from his 1524 edition, which had to pass severe censorship. It would be difficult but also idle to ascertain whether Beckett consciously adopted the spirit of this tradition, or whether it was simply germane to his own concerns. We know, of course, that, like Joyce, he had been a student of Romance literatures and that his early poetry was cast in the Provençal and medieval French forms of the troubadours tradition: the enueg, the planh, and the alba. This "modern minstrel," Harvey wrote, "chooses titles for seven of his thirteen poems directly out of the troubadour tradition. . . ." There can be no doubt, at any rate, that in his theater and fiction Beckett perpetuates or reinvents medieval juxtapositions of the sacred and the profane—both in a sense of playfulness and of profound seriousness.

There is, for instance, the narrator of Beckett's Watt, identified as Sam somewhere toward the middle of the novel, who conveys to us that, one day, in the garden of his pavilion (it seems to be part of a mental institution), he espied Watt, whom
he had previously and intimately known at another place. Watt was walking toward him but was walking backward. As Watt grotesquely advances—perpetually falling into the thorny shrubbery and painfully extricating himself from it—he turns his face toward Sam, who perceives him both as an image of Christ bearing a crown of thorns and as his own mirror image. The identity thus evoked between a religious image of Christ as painted by Bosch and hanging in London’s Trafalgar Square, on the one hand, and the half-crazed representative of mankind Watt, who is the grotesque mirror of Sam himself, on the other, would border on the sacrilegious, were we not conscious of the fact that Watt advancing backward and perpetually falling is also a figure of medieval farce, of carnival, and of what I have designated with the Baudelairean term "the absolute comic." Beckett maintains the ambivalence of that absolute comic so that, through laughter and tears, he can seriously probe the meaning of human existence without assuming the part of the philosopher. Beckett’s ability and determination to pursue such serious questions under the guise of farce make themselves felt everywhere in his work and prove themselves perhaps most strikingly in a scene of the second novel of his trilogy, Malone Dies. There Macmann (Son of Man) is grotesquely caught in the rain, far from shelter, in an open field. Dressed like a scarecrow, he lies down on the ground in the posture of one crucified as the “rain pelted down on his back with the sound . . . of a drum. . . . The idea of punishment came to his mind, addicted, it is true, to that chimera and probably impressed by the posture of the body and the fingers clenched as though in torment. And without knowing exactly what his sin was he felt . . . that living was not a sufficient atonement for it. . . .”

But it is above all in Lucky’s speech, that torrent of seeming madness, that Beckett’s mingling of the sacred and the profane and even the scatological assumes truly medieval aspects. In the manner of participants in medieval farce, Lucky turns traditional patterns of reasoned discourse and theological debate into farce. Yet the seriousness of his concerns becomes apparent when we strip his speech of its carnivalesque elements.
He then seems to suggest something like "given the existence . . . of a personal God . . . with white beard . . . outside time . . . who from the heights of divine . . . aphasia loves us dearly with some exceptions for reasons unknown . . . and suffers with those who . . . are plunged in torment . . . it is established beyond all doubt . . . that man . . . fades away" (28–29). A number of critics more or less agree on such a reading. Yet nothing could better illustrate the half-serious, half-playful travesties of medieval carnival and their ridicule of theological and scholarly pomposity that takes itself too seriously than Lucky's speech. It is clearly patterned after a medieval French sermon joyeux, a burlesque sermon of the kind preached in churches during carnivalesque celebrations and that later became part of the threesome that made up French traditional theatrical performances: the sermon, the sottie, and the mystère or farce. Rhetorically, the sermon joyeux was a coq-à-l'âne, a discourse defined as disjointedly passing from one subject to another without logical transition of any sort. "Sauter du coq à l'âne" meant literally "to leap from the rooster to the donkey," and the expression may well have its origin in animal debates. Although the sixteenth-century French poet Marot is credited with the invention of a poetic genre by that name, the concept is clearly much older. In the form of a coq-à-l'âne, sermons joyeux often travestied sacred texts by speaking of food, drink, and sex as if they were discussing theology or vice versa. The aim of the sermon joyeux was, on occasion, satire, but the genre was usually expressive of a sheer joy in verbal fantasy, often starting with Latin invocations, such as "in nomine Patris, et Fili et Spiritus Sancty. Amen." It jumbled together disparate notions and languages and did not hesitate to address itself in the same phrase to Bacchus, Venus, and the Christian God. In its grotesque references and its play on sound rather than meaning, the genre represented a triumph of carnivalesque fantasy, both in exuberance and in irreverence toward all that was taboo. Unfortunately, the examples extant of such sermons joyeux are not easily accessible to the modern reader because of their generous mixture of medieval French with an oddly gallicized Latin, so that the genre is, perhaps, most easily illustrated
by a sampling from Molière’s *Don Juan*. This is how Don Juan is lectured to by his servant Sganarelle:

... I can keep quiet no longer ..., but I must open my heart to you and tell you that I think as a faithful servant should. You know, master, the pitcher can go to the well once too often, and ... men in the world are like the bird on the bough, the bough is part of the tree and whoever holds on to the tree is following sound precepts; sound precepts are better than fine words; the court is the place for fine words; at the court you find courtiers, and courtiers do whatever’s the fashion. ... A good pilot needs prudence; young men have no prudence ... ; old men love riches; riches make men rich; the rich aren’t poor; poor men know necessity and necessity knows no law. Without law men live like animals, which all goes to prove that you’ll be damned to all eternity.17

Lucky’s mock sermon abounds, from its start, in scholarly references to authorities that bear names as grotesque and even obscene as Puncher and Wattman, Testew and Cunard, Fartov and Belcher, Peckham Fulham Clapham, Steinweg and Peterman, and Essy-in-Posy. Lucky’s elaborate proof of the existence of God is put in question because it is based on the findings of these authorities. Nor do we derive assurance from the childish picture he evokes of a God with white beard, or from the animal-like sounds—quaquaquaqua—with which he accompanies the word God and which in French pronunciation become obscene references to the body and its elimination. A similarly irreverent effect is achieved by Lucky’s stuttering profering of “Acacacademy” and “Anthropopopometry.” Such phrases as “labors left unfinished,” “for reasons unknown,” together with heaven, hell, flames, and fire conjure up a world presided over by a god as inscrutable as he is unpredictable, while the phrase “it is established beyond all doubt” ridicules the foolish and arrogant certainties of certain scholars. Like a medieval fool, Lucky truly leaps from topic to topic, as he turns the world mockingly upside down. But while he engages in *fatrasies*, the farcical play with words known to the French Middle Ages, he raises serious questions concerning man and his place in the universe—the same questions, in fact,
that were raised by Didi and Gogo at the beginning of the play, namely, whether there is a God who loves man dearly and knows why he saved only one of the two sinners, or whether man's notion that "time will tell" is as absurd as the certainty of some that knowledge can be "established beyond all doubt." Such questions can be dealt with, after all, only in the ludic mode of the coq-a-l'ané. For whosoever raises them—be he medieval or modern man—will be listened to only if he plays the role of the fool.

Seen in this light, the play's title cannot but be recognized as one of the half-serious, half-playful bilingual combinations so often encountered in medieval French literature—regardless of what immediate experience might have suggested to Beckett the name Godot. It represents clearly a juxtaposition of the sacred with the profane as it links the Anglo-Saxon word God with the French suffix -ot that abases and makes laughable any name it is attached to, such as Pierre/Pierrot, Jacques/Jacquot, Charles/Charlot. Such "absurdity" is not an inadvertent reflection in Beckett's work of the chaotic universe we live in but rather a conscious tool in the hand of an author who sees man sub specie aeternitatis, who ridicules the desire of most of us, expressed for centuries in literature, to envision himself—not unlike Hamm in Endgame—as the center of the universe, of an author realizing that he can speak of what is most serious only in the manner of farce and the absolute comic. I am tempted to impute to Beckett a passage from Plato quoted by Huizinga: "Though human affairs are not worthy of great seriousness it is yet necessary to be serious. . . . God alone is worthy of supreme seriousness, but man is made God's plaything. . . . What then is the right way of living? Life must be lived as play, playing certain games, making sacrifices, singing and dancing, and then a man will be able to propitiate the gods, and defend himself against his enemies, and win in the contest."18

7. See *The Absolute Comic*, pp. 33–34.
12. Ibid., p. 86.
16. See *The Absolute Comic*, pp. 64, 78.