The representation of senescence and loss in Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* and *Endgame*

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ABSTRACT The representation of senescence and loss in Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* and *Endgame*

Samuel Beckett's plays *Waiting for Godot* and *Endgame* were both published after the Second World War, in a period dominated by the model of the *pièce-bien-faite*. Drawing fruitful inspiration from Jean-Paul Sartre and the avant-gardes (Genêt, Adamov, Ionesco), Beckett offers an unconventional form of drama, which radically breaks with the past, focusing on the purgatorial condition of those who find themselves in the "nether region" – neither young nor yet dead, suspended in an in-between state characterized by uncertainty and existential greyness. This essay examines how in *Waiting for Godot* and *Endgame* Beckett conceives old age as a grey zone, a transitional stage from which it is impossible to escape, as we were all born, to some extent, to endure the pain and infirmities of decline.

KEYWORDS Old age, memory, time, dementia, vulnerability.

Samuel Beckett's plays *Waiting for Godot* and *Endgame* were both published after the Second World War, in a period dominated by the model of the *pièce-bien-faite*. Drawing fruitful inspiration from Jean-Paul Sartre and the avant-gardes (Genêt, Adamov, Ionesco), Beckett's is an unconventional form of drama, which radically breaks with the past, introducing a new type of dialogue which does not seem to lead in a precise direction, with no apparent aim other than filling in the silence and passing the time. According to Theodor W. Adorno, this was a result of the fragmentation of empirical reality, in a world subjected to the enigmatic forces of irrationality. If Ezra Pound's Imagist motto was to "make it new", in his representation of ageing and aged characters Beckett subversively "makes it old", proposing an innovative form of theatre by focusing on the purgatorial condition of those who are neither young nor yet dead, suspended in an in-between state characterised by uncertainty and existential greyness. This essay examines how in *Waiting for Godot* and *Endgame* Beckett conceives old age as a grey zone, a transitional stage from which it is impossible to escape, as we were all born to endure the pain and infirmities of decline.

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Growing old while waiting

Beckett wrote *Waiting for Godot* between October 1948 and January 1949, the period between *Malone* and *The Unnamable*, as if to take a break from the rigours of prose writing. The French première in 1953 was a critical and popular success, but the UK première in 1955 was initially poorly received, with the exception of Harold Hobson and Kenneth Tynan, reviewers for *The Sunday Times* and *The Observer* respectively. However, the tragicomedy was soon hailed as one of Beckett's masterpieces, and its dramatic value became apparent in the wider international literary panorama of the time. The two-act play opens in the evening on a country road with a single tree: the scenery is extremely bare, and words resound in a metaphysical space. The protagonists, Vladimir and Estragon, are two tramps waiting for Godot, who will never come, in a play in which nothing seems to happen – twice, as the Irish critic Vivian Mercier famously noted in her 1956 review[1]. Over the course of two days, they waste their time arguing, fighting boredom, fooling around, repeating the same actions and even contemplating the idea of suicide without actually committing it. They do all of this *while* waiting, in a state of stasis better suggested by the French title of the play, *En attendant Godot*. The following analysis shows that the focus of the play is not on the mysterious presence of the one who does not appear in the end, but on the tension created by the very act of waiting, which corresponds to the characters' own ageing and increasing impairment.

The play begins with Estragon "trying to take off his boot" with both hands, "panting", and then "giv[ing] up, exhausted", before resting and then trying again (11). His shortness of breath and physical fatigue are associated with the diminished vigour of old age, reinforced by his apparent resignation to fate, as he declares that he will give up again: "Nothing to be done" (11). This statement seems to comment on the impossibility of changing the course of life and preventing the physical and mental deterioration caused by the inexorable march of time. Not only does Estragon suffer from sore feet, he also has a weak left lung (40), and is debilitated by the need for proper sleep, as he is beaten at night by a disturbing, unidentified group of people. He lacks the physical strength both to remove his boot, and to fight off his attackers. His friend Vladimir, who appears on stage after him, also shows signs of physical deterioration. In fact, in addition to moving with "short, stiff strides" (11), he suffers from kidney failure, for which he uses garlic (18), and at night he is troubled by urinary problems (55). Vladimir speaks nostalgically of "all these years" (11) when they have never been apart, since they have been (growing old) together for what feels like "a million years" (12), and he adds that they were among the first visitors to the Eiffel Tower (12). When Estragon asks Vladimir how long they have been together, Vladimir replies: "I don't know. Fifty years perhaps" (51), a notion Estragon confirms later in the play when he says: "That's

1. "The Uneventful Event", *The Irish Times*, February 18, 1956.

been going on now for half a century" (61). Therefore, although their age is not specified, they must be at least in their late sixties, and possibly older.

The theme of physicality, and even more so that of the body in old age, is of central interest in the theatre, where the physicality of the actors precedes the words, since many performances do not require dialogue. In Beckett's theatre in particular, bodies are never perfect and healthy, but rather in decline, affected by some form of impairment and often marked by old age. The ageing body shows the passage of time, and it is possible to speak of the poetics of decay, which sometimes manifests itself in disability. Parker-Starbuck and Mock emphasise how each actor's physicality brings a different result to the stage, even when playing the same role: "Theatre is not simply an art of bodies but an art of bodily possibility" (2011, 212). Instead, Eli Rozik points out that physicality is an integral part of theatre as an art form, while Erika Fischer-Lichte affirms that every body brings its own meaning to the stage (2006, 111).

In Beckett's theatre, the body is "genuine raw material" (Chabert 1982, 23): in a process of metamorphosis, the Irish playwright uses it as a sculptor uses clay. Merleau-Ponty speaks of the body as *Körper* or mere object, and as *Leib* or "the lived body", a subject that is experienced (Stanton B. Garner Jr. 1993, 449). Beckett's staged bodies correspond to the notion of *Leib*, and the representation of the body actually provides Beckett with an excuse to reflect on deeper issues. In her study *Beckett and Decay* (2009), Katherine White points out that the author's main concern is to depict the decline that ultimately leads to death. In his obsession with physical and mental decay, the playwright represents a process that can be defined as "dying on" (White 34). There are three aspects to this process: ageing, disability, and death. The next section of this essay will focus specifically on the ways in which Beckett represents Vladimir and Estragon's old age, showing how their relationship is similar to that between an old, disabled person suffering from dementia (Estragon) and his carer (Vladimir) in a relationship of symbiosis (Casey 2017).

In *Waiting for Godot*, uncertainty dominates the perception of time and space, both unknowable dimensions. As Casey poignantly points out, these characteristics mean that the public can identify with the state of disorientation and mental confusion typical of Alzheimer's disease. Vladimir and Estragon try to make sense of their existential chaos through a series of routines and behaviours that require memory, which they lack. In the play, three out of four characters have this problem, and in fact Vladimir is the only one who is more aware of what is going on. In general, almost all of Beckett's characters have difficulty articulating thoughts and speech. Beckett's interest in psychoanalysis and mental illness is well documented (Barry 2016), and he drew inspiration from the patients of the Bedlam asylum. As Casey confirms, Estragon's cognitive problems resemble those of the early or intermediate stages of Alzheimer's, and Vladimir has a role similar to that of a carer, in his case witnessing the gradual deterioration of his friend's condition.

In the early stages of dementia, people with this problem may find it difficult to carry out even the simplest daily activities without outside help. Insomnia, diso-

rientation, confusion, paranoia, aggression, agitation, hallucinations, inability to concentrate, anxiety and depression are just some of these problems. Estragon has many of these symptoms, which worsen over time. His cognitive difficulties are clearly evident in his memory lapses:

> ESTRAGON: We came here yesterday.
> VLADIMIR: Ah no, there you're mistaken.
> ESTRAGON: What did we do yesterday?
> [...]
> VLADIMIR: Why ... [*Angrily*.] Nothing is certain when you're about.
> ESTRAGON: In my opinion we were here.
> VLADIMIR: [Looking round.] You recognize the place?
> ESTRAGON: I didn't say that. (16)

Estragon does not remember meeting Godot, or Pozzo and Lucky. He is disoriented and unaware of changes (however small) in his environment. Like Vladimir, he has an altered sense of time. The dimension of time and space is a blurred zone for them, where nothing is certain, as evidenced by the fact that they cannot remember what day Godot said he would come: "Sunday? [...] Or Monday? [...] Or Friday?" (17). The two protagonists cannot remember where they have to wait (15) or what they did the day before (17), and even wonder if the person they are waiting for is really called Godot (22). Estragon's memories resemble hallucinations and he exhibits paranoid behaviour, increasing fatigue and discouragement. His mental abilities vary according to boredom, fatigue, external stimuli and interpersonal dynamics.

Beckett said that *Waiting for Godot* was a play about a symbiotic relationship, the relationship of living with each other. According to Ruppert (2012), all human relationships are based on the contrast between dependence and autonomy. Given his vulnerability, Estragon needs Vladimir's comfort and care, and Vladimir needs Estragon to give his own life meaning despite the gravity of the situation. Although he is aware of his friend's cognitive decline, Vladimir often scolds him, hoping that Godot's future arrival will be a distraction that will bring hope. The verbal interactions between them show Vladimir trying to keep the conversation going while Estragon struggles to respond to his stimuli, often responding in a repetitive way with truncated expressions. Salisbury and Code (2016, 219) have noted how Beckett found a language capable of expressing the gradual dissolution of the self. The dialogues between Vladimir and Estragon show the former struggling to keep the interaction going: "Come on, Gogo, return the ball, can't you, once in a way?" (5). In relation to Alzheimer's patients, Casey emphasises that conversation can sometimes be tiring and uncomfortable for their carers (2001, 241). Beckett himself spoke of the play's painful silences as "pouring like water into a sinking ship" (Haynes and Knowlson 2003, 145). Death would be a liberation for Estragon, but Vladimir delays its arrival by waiting for Godot, thanks in part to the rituals that help pass the time.

Vladimir is waiting, and so are the people with dementia and their carers in the nursing homes.

Oonagh (2007) reports on interviews with Alzheimer's patients, showing that waiting for someone to visit them brings a glimmer of light into their daily lives. In old people's homes, the patients and their carers spend a lot of time waiting, a time that seems to go on forever. They wait for moments of clarity, comfort, or expressions of affection from those around them. Mitchell (2005) talks about the stoic attitude of some older people to waiting: in these circumstances they exercise the virtue of patience, of grinning and bearing it. However, sometimes waiting can make them feel abandoned, or worse, punished (Mitchell 2005), and this affects their self-esteem, turning waiting into a kind of sadistic game. In Estragon's words, "Nothing happens, nobody comes, nobody goes. It's awful" (2006, 34). According to Casey, even the barren landscape in which the play is set can remind the audience of an old people's home, where there is nothing to do and the patients suffer in silence, relegated to the sidelines.

Sometimes reassuring routines can ease the pain of waiting. Research into dementia shows that activities learned instinctively in the past, such as singing or dancing for instance, can be remembered even in the most advanced stages of dementia, bringing comfort to older people (Wray 2010). Habits and routine are important because the repetition of behaviour is reassuring and helps to pass the time. How to spend the days is indeed a constant dilemma: Vladimir: "That passed the time." Estragon: "It would have passed in any case." [...] Estragon: "What do we do now?" (41). At the end of the second act, it is clear that Godot is not coming, and Estragon feels as if trapped: he cannot go on (live?), but he must go on. O'Shaughnessy (2010) highlights that in those couples where a partner has Alzheimer's disease, the carer oscillates between acceptance and uncertainty, feeling powerless against the inevitable decline associated with ageing. People with dementia, like their partners, can feel lost and alienated. They can no longer think about the future or plan ahead, but have to live from day to day. Casey speaks of a relationship of parasitic symbiosis between patient and caregiver, as the following exchange between Vladimir and Estragon illustrates:

> VLADIMIR: You again! (*Estragon halts but does not raise his head. Vladimir goes towards him.*) Come here till I embrace you.
> ESTRAGON: Don't touch me!
> (*Vladimir holds back, pained.*)
> VLADIMIR: Do you want me to go away? (*Pause.*) Gogo! (*Pause. Vladimir observes him attentively.*) Did they beat you? (*Pause.*) Gogo! (*Estragon remains silent, head bowed.*) Where did you spend the night?
> ESTRAGON: Don't touch me! Don't question me! Don't speak to me! Stay with me!
> VLADIMIR: Did I ever leave you?
> ESTRAGON: Let me go.
> VLADIMIR: Look at me. (*Estragon does not raise his head. Violently.*) *Will you look at me! Estragon raises his head. They look at each other, then suddenly embrace, clapping each*

other on the back. End of the embrace. Estragon, no longer supported, almost falls) (49-50).

The dialogue quoted above contains the feelings of anger, resentment, frustration and exhaustion associated with taking care of someone. Estragon, who is becoming increasingly vulnerable, is put in a difficult position by Vladimir's constant stimuli, who scolds him for his limitations and loses his patience. Estragon begs for pity: "(*Weary*) Don't torment me, Didi" (57) and withdraws into himself, while Vladimir complains that caring for his friend causes him fatigue and anxiety.

Lucky and Pozzo, the second pseudo-couple in the play, represent in their master-servant relationship a kind of projection of how the bond between Vladimir and Estragon might develop in the future. Pozzo goes blind, while Lucky goes mute. Lucky "looks tired" (26), has a "running sore" on his neck (26) caused by the rope around it, is losing saliva from his mouth (26), is tired and his eyes are protruding from his skull (27). All these signs of physical decay mark Lucky as a weak and aged character, as is revealed later on in the play when Pozzo talks about his almost sixty years of devoted service. (33) His description emphasises how "*white hair falls about his face*" (33), and Vladimir defines him as "an *old* and faithful servant" (33, emphasis added). This confirms that Beckett imagined all four of his characters to be of advanced age.

Returning to the symbiotic relationship between the elderly and their carers, even between Vladimir and Estragon, there are moments of love and compassion:

> *Estragon sleeps. Vladimir gets up softly, takes off his coat and lays it across Estragon's shoulders, then starts walking up and down, swinging his arms to keep himself warm. Estragon wakes with a start, jumps up, casts about wildly. Vladimir runs to him, puts his arms around him. There... there... Didi is here... don't be afraid...*
> ESTRAGON: Ah!
> VLADIMIR: There ... there ... it's all over.
> ESTRAGON: I was falling –
> VLADIMIR: It's all over, it's all over (62).

In research on ageing cited by Casey (2017), Gates affirms that the relationship between older people and their carers is characterised by some shared memories and others forgotten, moments of joy mixed with deep suffering, a sense of closeness and a fear of loneliness (2000, 55). Post (2013) talks about how people with Alzheimer's need care and affection, tenderness, closeness and reassurance from fear, which is exactly what comes through in the dialogue between Vladimir and Estragon quoted above.

According to Beckett, incoherence, uncertainty, chaos and anxiety characterise not only old age but human existence in a broader sense. *Waiting for Godot* allows the audience to reflect on the incomprehensible and inscrutable nature of our existence, and the mechanisms we use to combat the uncertainty of the future. As Vladimir puts it, "All mankind is in us" (72). Despite the fear, frustration and seem-

ing futility of his help, Vladimir does not abandon Estragon. Even when he loses his patience, he does not ghettoise him or treat him with an air of superiority. In *Waiting for Godot*, Beckett helps us to better understand the disorientation, despair and loneliness associated with old age, shedding light on the state of disintegration of mental and physical faculties and making us empathise with that time of life when, in his view, ties are broken and hopes are dashed.

"The Dictatorship of Time"[2]: age and disability in *Endgame*

Beckett wrote *Endgame* in French between 1953 and 1957, completing it at the age of fifty-one after a long period of literary gestation following his attempt to return to the English language. This complex play is characterised by the apparent simplicity of the plot, which is performed by four physically disabled characters. Hamm is old, blind and confined to a wheelchair, while his servant son Clov, the youngest on stage, has a limp. The latter's premature old age is evident in his strained movements, his attachment to his daily routine and his resignation. Hamm cannot stand, while Clov cannot sit, so in a way their disabilities complement each other. The group is completed by Hamm's elderly relatives, Nagg and Nell, whose legs were amputated after a cycling accident. They live "bottled" in two dustbins, where nature has trapped them like the "waste" of society. Nagg and Nell in their ash bins show that society treats human life past its prime as disposable.

John Fletcher points out that, with the exception of Nell, who is "beyond caring" (102), all the other characters are waiting for something: Hamm for his painkiller, Nagg for someone to give him his "pap" and change his sand, and Clov for Hamm's death (102). Beckett was not interested in the body as a whole, but as Elizabeth Barry affirms, "the condition of old age in Beckett is an amplification of the general one" (2016, 213), showing the futility and suffering of human existence. The ageing body in Beckett's plays obeys to the "dictatorship of Time" (White 2009, 10) and, like a machine that loses its function, develops various forms of disability. Quayson wonders whether this theme allows the playwright to sublimate his own grief, whereas for Beckett, according to White, the body is "a constant source of discomfort, pain and indignity" (2009, 19).

The four protagonists of *Endgame* are of advanced age and their bodies show signs of increasing disability. Nagg's desperate plea "Me pap!" (96) characterises his late stage of life as tragically close to childhood in its total dependence on others for care. At the same time, old age is also portrayed as a return to primary needs: "Guzzle, guzzle, that's all they think of", comments Hamm (96). The son's attitude towards his two elderly parents, especially his father, is surprisingly merciless. This is not only evident in the brutal tone with which he answers. The fact that they have run out of food is certainly related to the theme of exhaustion that runs through Beckett's barren cosmos. But Hamm's disrespectful tone also shows his lack of

2. Definition quoted from White 2009, 22.

compassion for his father, who is at that stage of life when the roles of parent and offspring are reversed. When Nagg asks for his pap for the third time, after coldly inquiring about the condition of his "stumps" (96), Hamm sadistically orders Clov to give him a dog biscuit (97). In Nagg's sensory exploration of the food through touch and smell, Beckett underlines some of the contingencies of old age, as the audience realises that the man has lost his teeth and the biscuit is too hard for him. Unsurprisingly, however, there is no sign of sympathy: on the contrary, Hamm orders Clov to "[b]ottle him" again (97).

The emphasis on the decay associated with old age is also clear when Clov, after relegating Nagg to the dustbin once again, exclaims "If age but knew!", using a twisted cliché based on the idiom "If youth but knew, if age but could!". Hamm's harshness reflects "the harshness and decline of the whole universe, where everything is on the way out" (Murray 2007, 444). There is also a stark contrast between the idea of the past blossoming and the present withering, as Hamm desperately exclaims: "But we breathe, we change! We lose our hair, our teeth! Our bloom! Our ideals!" (97). It is all part of the natural, inexorable course of life, Beckett bitterly admits through the voice of his characters.

Hamm's ruthlessness towards his old father is also evident when he sarcastically insults him as "[a]ccursed progenitor!" and "[a]ccursed fornicator!" (96) in the erudite tone of the *raconteur*. This recalls not only Beckett's concept of "birth astride of a grave" (83), linked to Schopenhauer's idea of life as suffering already explored in *Godot*, but also the view that procreation itself is a form of evil because it produces new, meaningless pain. In the two dustbins they are locked in, Nagg and Nall cannot touch, let alone kiss, and it seems that their "[t]ime for love" (99) is over. Nagg even asks Nell to give him "a scratch" on his back, but since her movements are restricted, she would have to "rub" herself painfully against the edge (101). The old couple are not only maimed, but also subject to the ravages of time. Indeed, Nagg is toothless, as mentioned, while both he and his wife are hard of hearing and their eyesight has failed (99).

Furthermore, Nagg's and Nell's speeches are broken and meaningless due to memory loss, clear evidence of their cognitive decline. Their speeches are characterised by repetition and an apparent lack of meaning, showing that not only are their actions aimless, but so are their words. They are alive but not really living, but despite their sense of meaninglessness and sadness, they feel the need to go on. The feeling of loneliness worsens their condition, as does their ageing son Hamm, who tells his servant that one day, he will be blind, like him. Hamm goes on with his gloomy speech: "Yes, one day [...] you'll be like me, except that you won't have anyone with you, because you won't have had pity on anyone and because there won't be anyone left to have pity on" (110). The lack of compassion that characterises both the relationship between Hamm and Clov and that between Hamm and his father is, on the one hand, deeply intertwined with selfishness and mercilessness, as already suggested, but is also linked to the search for human comfort and the desire to still be needed, which is particularly relevant in old age, that stage of

life when people increasingly fear that their existence is becoming aimless. In a rather lengthy monologue, Nagg explains to his son how he hopes that "the day will come when you'll really need to have me listen to you, and need to hear my voice, any voice. [*Pause*.] Yes, I hope I'll live till then, to hear you calling me like when you were a tiny boy, and were frightened, in the dark, and I was your only hope" (119-20). In the play, the old father longs for care and attention from his ageing son, who responds only with his brutal manners.

Similarly, the father-son relationship that binds Hamm to Clov (there are hints in the play that even if he is not his real father, he has treated and welcomed him as one), is evident when Hamm's apparent cruelty seems to lessen, as when he begs Clov's forgiveness (98), or when he asks if his servant will kiss him goodbye before he leaves (114). The reason why Clov has been faithful throughout was (perhaps) "compassion" (Hamm, 129), yet he leaves Hamm without "words...to ponder...in [his] heart" (131), again showing a similar lack of tenderness. Clov's final, eloquent speech, about feeling (prematurely) too old to change his ways, is characterised by a sombre, poetic tone as he sees the end finally in sight:

> I ask the words that remain – sleeping, waking, morning, evening. They have nothing to say. [*Pause*.] I open the door of the cell and go. I am so bowed I only see my feet, if I open my eyes, and between my legs a little trail of black dust. I say to myself that the earth is extinguished, though I never saw it lit. [*Pause*.] It's easy going. [*Pause*.] When I fall I'll weep for happiness' (132).

Earlier in the play, the theme of Clov's sterility was also alluded to through the image of the seeds he had planted but which had not sprouted (98). "Something is taking its course", he repeats several times (98, 107), adding that he sees his "light dying" (98). Life is seen as nonsense, or worse, a curse on humanity: "You're on earth, there's no cure for that!", Hamm repeats twice (118, 125).

The fear of mental derangement in this dark world, where everyone and everything is declining and we are but ageing survivors, is made explicit by Hamm when he speaks of "a madman who thought the end of the world had come. He was a painter – and an engraver." Hamm used to visit him in the asylum, and when he showed him "the rising corn" and "the herring fleet" outside the window, the man ran away in horror. "All he had seen was ashes" (113). This image may remind the Italian reader of Eugenio Montale's 1925 poem 'Forse un mattino andando in un'aria di vetro' ('Maybe one morning, walking in dry, glass air'):

> Maybe one morning, walking in dry, glass air,
> I'll turn and see the miracle occur –
> nothing at my back, behind me there
> the void – with a drunkard's terror.
>
> Then, as if on a screen, hills houses trees
> will all at once encamp for their usual ruse.
> But too late: and I will walk on, unspeaking,

among the men who don't turn, with my secret.
(Translated by Geoffrey Brock, in Sonzogni 2009, 24)

Montale explores the terror of the void, or the fear that the whole course of life may be an illusion, shared by artists – and madmen – a concept that also underlies Beckett's view of the derangement characteristic of old age, which in some cases may be a portal to a higher dimension. Elsewhere in *Endgame*, Clov fearfully contemplates whether he might be on the verge of madness.

Frailty – both physical and psychological – is accompanied in Beckett's play by the "electricity of the atmosphere" between the four characters: none of them has become "sweeter-tempered by their handicaps" (Fletcher 2000, 108). There is little élan of affection, mutual attachment is hampered by awkwardness, and there is "little tenderness in this decaying", ageing "universe" (Fletcher 108). In this chaotic cosmos, where God does not exist, time never passes, and yet the characters fear that it might. Outside the closed, claustrophobic, four-walled space is the "other hell" (104), in a scenario that mirrors the conditions of those suspended between life and death, that *grey area* of life that corresponds to the hell of the Second World War (when Beckett joined the French Resistance) and the Cold War that followed. Moreover, it is important to remember that before and during the literary gestation of *Endgame*, Samuel Beckett was working through the traumatic loss of both his mother May, who died in 1950 (his father had died in 1933), and his old brother Frank in 1954.

In *Endgame* Nell "dies in her trashcan [...] and is unmourned" (Murray 2007, 443), Nagg falls silent, supplies are exhausted, and there is a strong sense of an apocalyptic ending that, to quote the Irish poet Ciaran Carson, leaves the audience with "a fusillade of question marks"[3]. Is Clov really leaving Hamm? Is Hamm dying? Is the same ritual being repeated over and over again? Or is it all part of a game? Asked about all these possible interpretations, Beckett cryptically replied that the key word was "perhaps" (Fletcher 109). As bleak as the playwright's portrayal of life and the hardships and inconveniences of old age may be, there is still humanity in the limbo in which we all float.

In *Samuel Beckett and Disability Performance*, Hannah Simpson offers some elements for further speculation on disability in *Endgame*. In particular, she refers to several performances of Beckett's plays by actors with various forms of disability. Two of these are briefly mentioned here: Robert Rae's 2007 Scottish production of *Endgame*, which featured actors in wheelchairs, and the 2012 *Endgame Project*, directed by Joe Grifasi, which featured actors with Parkinson's disease. Both productions aimed to shed light on experiences such as reduced mobility, speech impediment, stuttering and lack of memory. It may be argued that the directors took too much liberty in their choices at the expense of fidelity to the text, but it is equally true that they emphasised some elements already present in the plays.

3. From Ciaran Carson's poem 'Belfast Confetti' (1987, 31).

In his production of the play, Rae opted for an inclusive direction, with Nabil Shaban and Garry Robson as Hamm and Clov. All four characters were disabled in different ways. As Shaban himself pointed out in a 2017 interview with Simpson, their condition was a metaphor for something else: alienation, anger, despair and futility. This allowed the audience to reflect on existence and how limitations express frustration and anxiety. According to Quayson, the disabled body creates "subliminal fear and moral panic" in the viewer, disrupting the notions of wholeness of the able-bodied (2007, 19). Thus, for the sake of our argument, it becomes clear that there is a deep connection between this kind of representation of disability and that of old age, as both imply a lack of acceptance, admiration, erotic interest and even indifference. The disabled actor Shaban wondered whether Beckett was using disability to elicit an emotional response. It is certainly true that the disabled (old) body is emblematic of social anxiety, vulnerability and decline (Garland-Thompson 1997, 6), and it embodies a form of alterity, in contrast to the 'able-bodied', that generates anxiety and "spectatorial disquiet".

Similarly, Joe Grifasi's *Endgame Project* was a 2012 New York production, featuring actors Dan Moran and Chris Jones as Hamm and Clov, who both suffer from Parkinson's disease. Symptoms of the disease include memory lapses and speech problems, loss of bodily functions and chronic pain (Hamm often asks for his painkiller). Beckett was familiar with these symptoms, but he felt a particular urgency in depicting physical decline. Physical disability allowed him to portray vulnerability on stage, giving a sense of constant threat, precariousness and the ever-present end. So, Moran and Jones's greater difficulty in playing their roles as disabled characters was a resource, despite the tension and the anxiety it created in their performance. This artistic choice really emphasised Beckett's idea that life is about carrying on playing despite the approaching end.

Conclusion

This essay has offered an examination of Beckett's depictions of old age in two plays, *Waiting for Godot* and *Endgame*, which both deal, albeit in different ways, with forms of stasis, confinement and disability. Beckett's interest in the body, especially the old body, never wavered in his work. He put the ageing body on stage in twenty-three out of his thirty-two plays, so to ignore age in our readings of his work is to miss a crucial part of his artistic vision, for he emphasised "the futility of being born into bodies that are doomed to fail" (Swanson 2015, 232). The pain and exhaustion experienced by the characters is linked to their growing vulnerability, and their impairment reinforces the notion of this "grey" realm of life, where nothing seems to happen, or at least the days are endlessly postponed. The decline experienced by the four couples is both physical and mental, and follows the inexorable exhaustion of the entire universe, a state from which it is impossible to escape. Infirmity, repetition, doubt, failure, frustration and redirection are all part of the process, in a form of representation that is anti-naturalistic and that Michael

Davidson's defines as 'invalid modernism', an aesthetic of the disabled, alienated body and the alienated mind. Indeed, the relationship between Vladimir and Estragon reminds the audience of dementia and symbiosis, while the disabled Hamm and Clov are tragicomically co-dependent (Davidson 2019, 85).

Uncertainties about time are also sporadically associated with sudden moments of nostalgia for the past, when the body was stronger and suffered less. According to his biographer James Knowlson, Beckett conceived of old age as a period of (inevitable) reflection. After his 70th birthday, he began to see this period in his life as an opportunity for enlightenment. However, the feeling that time was ticking away, that friends were dying and that fate was unravelling the thread of life, and the awareness that his own health was also slowly deteriorating, gradually led to despair and depression. If in his youth Beckett saw old age as a time of freedom, later he associated it with lack of time and vital energy. The old and embittered ageing characters he portrayed in *Godot* and *Endgame* encourage theatre scholars to look at these works through a combination of gerontological and disability studies, as these plays helped to lay the foundations for the playwright's later depictions of the *tiers temps* of life, a stage of decay that some of us are doomed to experience, and which he made universal through his artistic masterpieces.

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