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Citizenship, Pain, and Disability in Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*

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Abstract: Citizenship is popularly associated with able-bodiedness, both physically and cognitively. However, disability studies over the last few decades has revealed the extent to which the idea of the nation as composed of able-bodied constituents is little more than fantasy, one that can create or galvanize barriers to full political and social participation. Part of this task has involved re-evaluating key works of canonical literature through the lens of disability. In the following paper, I apply this approach to Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* and argue that Beckett's play disrupts not just the fantasy of a nation composed of able-bodied citizens but the language of able-bodiedness itself, which has implications for how we conceive of citizenship and participatory politics. While impairment has been critiqued in Beckett before, the extensive examples of pained and impaired characters in his works have often been subsumed under broader philosophical themes, such as existentialism, nihilism, or Cartesian dualism, and rarely linked to issues of citizenship, politics, or the social and built environment. I explore how Beckett's approach to theatrical and linguistic performativity contributes to how he staged the experience of pain and disability that has implications for how we conceive of and practice citizenship.

Keywords: Samuel Beckett; citizenship; disability; disability studies; cultural studies; drama; postmodernism; criticism and theory

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1. Introduction

Archetypes of citizenship regularly traffic in language and imagery that represent the ideal citizen as able-bodied, positioning disability as a disqualifying condition for full civic participation or a weakening social contract that threatens to undermine the nation and its constituent citizenry. As Nancy J. Hirschmann and Beth Linker put it, disability reveals "how membership and belonging are understood in societies [as] invariably built on an imagined constituency of nondisabled persons" (Hirschmann and Linker 2014, p. 3). Part of the problem is that the very concept of citizenship in the westernized world has developed alongside various exclusionary political trends that emphasize either a specific expression of bodily normativity or principles of universality and *dis*embodiment. Historically, the "burden of corporeality", Bruce Burgett suggests, "falls unequally on those persons with bodies marked as non-white, nonmale, and/or economically dependent", while those persons whose "bodies vanish at the boundary between private and public life" are marked as citizens (Burgett 1998, p. 14). In this way, the body functions to naturalize political and social inequalities and in turn disqualify persons from public life based off perceived differences in race, sex, gender, or ability.

Significant progress has been made over the last few decades to improve the lives of persons with disabilities and legally codify accessibility requirements. Concurrent education campaigns have likewise improved public perceptions of disability, and people with disabilities now benefit from social programs and infrastructure redesigns that were achieved through the political activism and advocacy of disabled persons. However, the struggle for representation and accessibility remains in several jurisdictions, and the

experience of disability can still contrast with its contemporary depiction. Citizenship and disability share this common feature in that both are occasionally reduced to an aesthetic divorced from their ethical, political, or psychological reality. Popular imagination still regularly employs able-bodiedness as an expression of virtue and the "culture of masculine fitness and autonomy" (Davidson 2019, p. 86) that is so often wed to nationalist movements is arguably coded into mainstream artistic production. Even with marked improvements in disability rights, disabled persons are still occasionally presented as convenient markers in the able-bodied imagination for denoting a range of conditions or feelings that may have very little to do with the actual experience of disability, including as a marker for political otherness. In terms of literature, the canon remains well populated with works that only recently have been re-assessed with disability in mind, Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, the subject of this paper, being one of them.

Beckett populates his works with disabled people whom Michael Davidson characterizes as "'inválid' members of society whose outlier status is marked by atypical bodies or non-traditional forms of cognition" and who "unseat what we presume are normative versions of national, gendered, and racial identity" (p. 12). Davidson suggests that Beckett in turn "challenges liberal theories of autonomy and independent agency by creating scenes of 'abject dependency'" (p. 22). In other words, by staging characters who are impaired and co-dependent, Beckett offers a rebuke of ideals of participatory democracy that are predicated on a vision of the human condition that is decidedly independent and nondisabled. Across nearly all his works, the material and bodily conditions of Beckett's characters are recurringly spotlighted, conditions which are often messy, repulsive, sore, sensitive, confusing, or in a perpetual state of oozing and decay. They appear to constitute the sort of "eccentric corporeality" (Burgett 1998, p. 14) that disqualifies persons from full citizenship. I use citizenship here in its more capacious definition. I follow Isaac West who in their exploration of transgender and legal identity defines citizenship as the "communicative negotiation of the actual or perceived rights, obligations, and privileges among members of a collective" (West 2014, p. 6) rather than more narrowly in the sense of republican, liberal, communitarian, cosmopolitan, and so forth, where tangible differences can emerge between types of affiliation and where historical and national differences can further nuance the question of citizenship's definition. These more specific types of citizenship are harder to identify in Beckett and not relevant for my analysis. Admittedly, my interest still lies with citizenship as a political or legal membership in a state or nation insofar as "official forms of citizenship [. . .] are conferred onto certain bodies and not others" and thus illustrative of deeper cultural and affective logics at work in denying disabled persons equitable levels of political recognition, but as West reminds us, "categories of state recognition are not materialized in a self-executing manner; instead they are articulated by a practice of citationality that my appear to be extradiscursive when in fact they are materialized in and through their rhetorical recirculation and rehearsal of pervious iterations of these signs and symbols" (West 2014, p. 7). "Rehearsal" is of course an apt word for an analysis of citizenship and theater, and my analysis will touch on the performative elements of both impairment and political activity. For now, I want to underline that West's definition of citizenship emphasizes articulation as a central component of its practice, which explodes the potential avenues of expression across an extensive and diverse discursive plain. It is the perceived failure to articulate in familiar or accepted ways that marks some persons as noncitizens or partial citizens and which in turn makes certain acts of articulation potentially profound and subversive in their attempt to stake political and social space for persons deemed nonbelonging.

In the case of *Waiting for Godot*, unable to negate their bodily facticity, Beckett's characters wallow on the periphery of social inclusion and public life that would render them automatic citizens, transforming their rather mundane bodily acts and seemingly meaningless banter as almost radical and revolutionary. The play stages the antithesis of the participatory citizen or neoliberal subject in the form of Vladimir and Estragon, who are forced to pass the time doing nothing and who seem utterly dependent on each

other for survival. The character of Lucky likewise appears as a member of an oppressed underclass whose cognitive and physical condition has been exploited by Pozzo, who provides meagre scraps that would pass as philanthropy under neoliberalism. In both cases, the centrality of "proper" articulation and meaning making is continuous with a bodily performance that is marked as abnormal within a discourse of able-bodiedness. Hannah Simpson (2021b) suggests that "bodily impairments in *Waiting for Godot* are so bluntly visible" that they can help distinguish characters from one another, which contrasts with the "fascist choreography of mass spectacles of the de-individualised, predictably formed and functioning citizen bodies" (p. 165). Beckett mocks the "fascist health rhetoric" that had developed during the regimes of Vichy France and Nazi Germany through Vladimir and Estragon, whose occasional insistence on healthy lifestyle choices (e.g., exercise, removing one's boots regularly, eating vegetables) are comical in the face of the existential crisis that befalls them (Simpson 2021b, p. 166). Taken together, the frank presentation of impairment and the coded subversion of able-bodiedness as a fascistic ideal positions *Godot* as a play that "enacts an overlooked form of contemporary resistance to exclusionary bodily aesthetics", Simpson argues (p. 168).

Simpson's mention here of fascism is apropos and suggests that the staging of the pained and disabled in *Godot* goes deeper than mere analogy. Biographer James Knowlson has suggested a likeness between the dialogue in *Godot* "concerning carrots, radishes, and turnips" and Beckett's exchanges over food scarcity with his wife Suzanne under the Nazi occupation of Paris in 1941, during which both were militants of the French resistance (Knowlson 1996, p. 278). The apparent influence of Beckett's life under fascism on his playwrighting leads Terry Eagleton to claim, firstly, that Beckett's characters are "vulgar materialists, too busy keeping biologically afloat to indulge in anything as grandiose as subjectivity" (Eagleton 2006, p. 68), and that secondly, "Beckett's art maintains a compact with failure in the teeth of Nazi triumphalism, undoing its lethal absolutism with the weapons of ambiguity and indeterminacy" (p. 70). Beckett "pits the fragmentary and unfinished" against "fascism's megalomanic totalities", Eagleton writes (ibid), suggesting that Beckett's larger target is not just fascism but any system of thought that aspires to grand narratives, expansive ideological structures, or commitments to an authoritarian-style wholeness. The minimal and impoverished lifestyle that Beckett lived under fascism accords with a similarly diminished or depleted artform that Beckett wields against totalitarianism in all its forms, not just politically, but artistically and linguistically as well. Fascism in this context represents a broad, pernicious, and in some cases unseen force that contours all aspects of life, and which is also latent in post-war ideology. Simpson identified the able-bodied aesthetic of Nazi Germany and Vichy France as an expression of fascism that Beckett's characters in *Godot* subvert, and this arguably constitutes one among many examples of how the play unmakes the totalizing gestures of westernized epistemology, subjectivity, and politics. Rather than being subsumed into a repressive ideology of human capability, Beckett's characters disrupt the normative expression of able-bodiedness that underwrites visions of the ideal citizen. The prospect of some peak human condition unencumbered by any form of impairment emerges as absurd in the face of obstinate bodily processes that cast subjectivity itself as a frivolous luxury—or as Eagleton might put it, the ambition of reaching the zenith of human capability is absurd when Beckett's characters are "too busy keeping biologically afloat." Characters like Vladimir and Estragon are not extraordinary either—their pains and impairments are quotidian and unexceptional. As such, reading Beckett can force us to revise what we take the supposedly "natural" capabilities of a citizenry to be in a political state that demands certain levels of physical, emotional, intellectual, and psychological participation.

Even though Simpson suggests that bodily impairment in *Waiting for Godot* is "bluntly visible", an assessment that is likewise true of *Endgame*, interpreting disability in Beckett has been a fraught affair. The visual presentation of disability has conflicted with its linguistic performance and symbolic import. Scholars like Ato Quayson, David Mitchell, and Sharon Snyder have criticized the way disability is used in literature as a literary, analogical, or

symbolic device that erases the experience of disability itself in the process (see for example Mitchell and Snyder's Narrative Prothesis [2000] and The Biopolitics of Disability [2015]). By reducing disability to a handy metaphor, the nuanced dimensions of disability as a social, political, psychological, or physical experience become obscured or removed entirely from purview. Beckett's broader approach to analogy and figuration across his literary and dramatic output does not straightforwardly position him as a writer that committed this sort of "metaphorization of disability", as Yael Levin terms it (p. 158). While Beckett's characters are overburdened with specific pains and impairments that abrogate any attempt at self-negation, they are likewise incumbered with a language that cannot adequately convey those same pains and impairments (or indeed all private experiences), disrupting seamless interpretation of his characters as disabled. Dermot Moran suggests Beckett's characters "frequently detach from their pains and emotions in order to comment on them in a dry, analytic manner" (Moran 2006, p. 97) in a way that positions them as Cartesian subjects attempting (and failing) to negate their bodily facticity. As a result, the language to express pain and impairment emerges as unstable and prone to error, obfuscating in turn the capacity to communicate disability, although this is simultaneous with a theatrical space where a fascistic form of able-bodiedness is being undermined. Because Beckett also subverts clean distinctions between theatrical and non-theatrical space, the language that his characters struggle to use on stage is the same as our own and the resulting implications of their efforts at conveying pain and impairment are indicative of daily life.

Experiences of disability can involve an indifferent or hostile public discourse that assumes the objects of reference for both pain and impairment are apparent and well signposted, when they are in fact invested in criteria for expression modulated through different modes of communication and assessment, such as politics, medicine, law, or art. Reading Beckett can therefore involve confronting an obstinate language and a deficient set of public criteria for communicating and assessing the experience of disability. It can also then reveal the inherent instability, if not absurdity, of an "imagined constituency of nondisabled persons" (Hirschmann and Linker 2014, p. 3) that underwrites visions of the nation and its citizenry. In arguing that *Godot* puts pressure on the capacity of language to convey our private experiences in a way that impacts ideals of citizenship, I begin by briefly outlining how Beckett approaches language in his novels and theatrical work. In the second section, I focus on the pain utterance in *Godot* and how it functions in line with Beckett's broader preoccupation with linguistic performativity. From there, I outline my approach for reading disability in Beckett and the implications this has for a language of able-bodiedness that is built on unstable referents.

2. Beckett's Approach to Language

Ato Quayson suggests the status of pain in Beckett lacks "intersubjective recognition and identity", or the "absence of a structure of interlocution" that would allow Beckett's characters to reflect on their pain in a meaningful way (Quayson 2007, p. 62). Pain expressions appear as an indistinguishable part of Beckett's subversion of linguistic performativity and traditional theater. Indeed, Quayson argues that in much of Beckett's work, not just *Godot*, "pain is not part of the overall structure of interlocution within which it would gain coherence as a phenomenological fact linked directly to disability" (p. 81). Instead, there is a "discursive absence of pain" which has "allowed Beckett's characters to historically not be considered as disabled", resulting in an unsettled form of representation wherein disability permeates the text or performance while being simultaneously absented as a site of interpretation (Quayson 2007, pp. 83–84). In other words, while various pains and impairments may be apparent, audiences and scholars alike have not always or consistently engaged with these as examples of disability in the sense of impairments that are aggravated by a hostile social or built environment. While many characters still claim to be in pain or voice evident expressions of discomfort, these moments obscure rather than reveal markers of disability by being analogized to larger existential themes or universal anxieties of bodily degradation, positioning Beckett's characters as mere "philosophical ciphers" (Quayson

2007, p. 84). In other words, the pain expressions that are supposedly indicative of impairment are instead dislodged from the material conditions that the characters portray, erasing the presence of the disabled body in the process.

Quayson does not fault Beckett for this obfuscation of disability but instead suggests an absence of critical attention on disability has resulted from audiences and scholars assimilating impairment to a "variety of philosophical categories in such a way as to obliterate the specificity of the body and to render it a marker of something else" (p. 56). While impairment in Beckett has been addressed before, it has scarcely been approached as a marker of disability, instead understood as an example of existential anguish or inconsequential injury—separate from the sort of impairment that Quayson focuses on, namely physical or cognitive deficiencies that are aggravated by a hostile social or built environment (p. 2). Quayson suggests this approach constitutes some unjustified interpretative manoeuvring by which disability is ignored or subordinated by scholars even when the "physical manifestation of disability is perpetually on stage" (p. 64), such as in *Endgame* where the two primary characters both exhibit obvious forms of impairment. Part of the issue, as Simpson (2021a) succinctly puts it, is that the "lived reality of disability should not be reduced to a metaphorical expression of the able-bodied imagination" (p. 29), thus casting added attention on reductionist representations that do not properly account for the material conditions of impairment.

In the time since Quayson wrote of this scholarly lapse in 2007, there have been fruitful reappraisals of Beckett through the lens of disability, with continued emphasis on how his works serve as case studies for analyzing the overlap between ethics and aesthetics. Levin, for example, sees the impasse between disability and Beckett studies as resolvable through Beckett's staging of the body as a substrate overburdened with the material effects of mental and physical impairment, to the point that this "stylization of excess and accumulation serves to release disability from existing stereotypes and predetermined moral judgment" (p. 171)—what Levin terms "Beckettian exhaustion." Beckett avoids an ableist aesthetic by subverting "models of achievement and failure" (Levin 2018, p. 171) where impairment is a condition to be overcome or where suffering is casted as a necessary experience towards some higher philosophical end. Simpson (2021a) has focused on new productions of Beckett's plays featuring disabled actors, suggesting these performances prompt "re-evaluation of the previously undetected indicators of disability (or of embodied experiences that resonate with particular disabilities) in Beckett's scripts" (p. 27). For example, Simpson explores a 2018 production of *Waiting for Godot* at the Hackney Showroom (dir. Sam Curtis Lindsay and Daniel Vais) that featured a cast of professional actors with Down syndrome (Simpson 2021a, p. 38). Simpson suggests that this production emphasized several physical and cognitive disabilities that Estragon and Vladimir embody, in turn revealing how these disabilities are perceptible at the level of the text.

Crucially, Quayson's analysis approaches the status of pain and disability as "equivalent" in Beckett's texts (p. 55). On the one hand, pain and disability are not identical, and not every experience of disability should be viewed through the prism of mental or physical pain, which can unjustifiably frame disability as a condition that one must invariably "suffer" or as a condition in need of remediation or correction. On the other hand, pain expressions vex easy readings of Beckett's works as representative of disability. His characters often embody both conditions simultaneously—they are both impaired and in pain, or they may develop a painful injury that then becomes an impairment, such as with Moran in the novel *Molloy,* whose leg injury evolves into chronic impairment. Unraveling the issue of pain expressions in Beckett thus invariably intersects with the portrayal of disability.

Part of the issue that Quayson addresses, I suggest, falls on Beckett's nuanced subversion of the language of pain and disability. Familiar or traditional methods for conveying pain fail to have their intended effect or galvanize the inherent difficulty of expressing an interior state of feeling, causing a disjunct between the visual presentation of impairment and the articulation of pain utterances (or, more technically, the way pain utterances func-

tion as linguistic performatives). Beckett displayed an interest in the failure of language to function as an adequate mode for representing the world and used the theater to galvanize what he saw as the weak foundations of our linguistic systems. Richard Begam places Beckett in an "anti-representionalist tradition" that includes J.L. Austin and Ludwig Wittgenstein, and which finds its origins in the Vienna Circle (Begam 2007, p. 139) (for a more in-depth analysis of this topic, see Begam's "Beckett and Postfoundationalism" in Beckett and Philosophy [2002], edited by Richard J. Lane). Beckett, in turn, through his literary output "questioned the idea that the primary function of philosophy, and more generally of language, is to give us a picture or representation of the world" (Begam 2007, p. 140), resulting in the undoing of some "transcendental realm" where stage performances take place and where the everyday functions of language are suspended (Begam 2007, p. 159). This is evident well before Beckett ever staged *Godot.* In a German letter he wrote to Axel Kaun in 1937, he writes (translation by Martin Esslin):

> It is indeed becoming more and more difficult, even senseless, for me to write an official English. Andmore and more my own language appears to me like a veil that must be torn apart in order to get at the things (or the Nothingness) behind it. Grammar and Style. To me they seem to have become as irrelevant as a Victorian bathing suit or the imperturbability of a true gentleman. A mask. Let us hope the time will come, thank God that in certain circles it has already come, when language is most efficiently used where it is being most efficiently misused. As we cannot eliminate language all at once, we should at least leave nothing undone that might contribute to its falling into disrepute. To bore one hole after another in it, until what lurks behind it—be it something or nothing—begins to seep through; I cannot imagine a higher goal for a writer today. (Beckett 1984, pp. 447–49)

Beckett quite explicitly endorses the artistic project that contributes to language's methodical destruction and unmasks the "Nothingness" that potentially resides behind it. Part of the strategy for initiating such a project involves the 'efficient misuse' of language. Even though Beckett wrote of this a full decade before he completed a dramatic work, the strategy is evident in Beckett's more experimental texts, like *How It Is,* but also more subtly in *Godot* where a sizable portion of the dialogue involves linguistic hiccups that reveals the inherent imprecision of language. For example, Vladimir's seemingly simple question about the Bible in Act One is quickly understood by Estragon in terms of his thirst:

VLADIMIR: Do you remember the Gospels?
ESTRAGON: I remember the maps of the Holy Land. Coloured they were very pretty. The Dead Sea was pale blue. The very look of it made me thirsty. (Beckett 1994, p. 5)

A moment later, Estragon appears to be unfamiliar with Jesus or fails to register who Vladimir means by "saviour":

VLADIMIR: It'll pass the time. (*Pause*.) Two thieves, crucified at the same time as our Saviour. One—
ESTRAGON: Our what?
VLADIMIR: Our Saviour. (p. 6)

The repetitive question–answer dynamic that characterizes most of Vladimir's and Estragon's dialogue is often derailed by these misunderstandings and linguistic quirks. As Davidson writes, their "formulaic routines and dialogues often seem parodic versions of rational discourse whose content has been evacuated, leaving interlocutors to exchange empty signs" (p. 85). Another example from when the two are discussing their relation to Godot:

ESTRAGON: Where do we come in?
VLADIMIR: Come in?
ESTRAGON: Take your time.
VLADIMIR: Come in? On our hands and knees.
ESTRAGON: As bad as that? (pp. 4–15)

Vladimir and Estragon play on the double meaning between "come in" to figuratively

denote how one relates to a given situation and the literal act of entering, which is particularly important for theater where the literal entrance of a character simultaneously signals the actor's entrance into the ontology of the theater space. Regardless of whether Vladimir genuinely misunderstands Estragon's intended meaning or is merely playing along, the result is the same: the multiple linguistic functions of a single phrase derails clear understanding. A significant portion of *Godot* portrays this struggle with or exploitation of the differences between the literal and figurative meanings of words and the capacity for language to fluctuate between the two.

In his letter, Beckett also employs garments of the body (the mask, the bathing suit) as metaphors for how language obfuscates the void beyond it, including the rather visceral and scatological image of boring holes into language such that "what lurks behind it" may "seep" to the forefront. This analogy between language and the body manifests in Beckett's staging of his characters: his push to accelerate language's decay is mirrored in the constant acknowledgments of decay that his characters in turn suffer. In fact, Beckett singles out literature itself as stubborn in its slow adoption of an anti-foundational approach to language, questioning whether "literature alone [is] to remain behind in the old lazy ways that have been so long ago abandoned by music and painting?" (Beckett 1984, p. 449). Here, Beckett refers to how other artistic modes have long abandoned a commitment to simply representing the world, or the belief that the function of art itself is merely to convey reality. Even with a play like *Godot*, arguably Beckett's most legible literary output, his commitment to subverting a descriptive and representionalist function of language had thoroughly infiltrated his dramatic writing.

Of course, Beckett does not render language into such a state of disrepute that his own literary output becomes unreadable or inexpressive, or which abrogates *all* interpretation. Audrey Wasser, for example, takes issues with the argument that the "aesthetic telos of Beckett's own work is some sort of failure, whether the failure of novelistic conventions, of literary form, of knowledge, of the mind–body relation, of life itself, of the referential function of language, or of language's general expressivity" (p. 253). Even though Beckett himself occasionally suggests such a goal, as his letter evinces, the logical end of an "aesthetics of failure" leads simply to contradiction. If Beckett "fails to fail, does he not still fail (that is succeed?)"—the issue quickly descends into "dizzying" and "unsatisfactory" readings, in Wasser's view (p. 254). We therefore cannot simply settle the matter by claiming that Beckett is beyond interpretation or expression, or that his works are bereft of analogical possibility. Eagleton is perhaps missing something when he characterizes Beckett's work as "anti-Literature allergic to all rhetorical flatulence and ideological plenitude" (p. 70). In their reading of the trilogy, Wasser finds some resolution in the notion of epanorthosis, "a kind of nervous adjusting, adding, displacing, or diminishing" that is part of a "wider gesture of repetition" (Wasser 2011, p. 262) that Beckett displays across his literary output, which also helps to explain the seeming disjunct between the different discourses in Beckett's texts and plays.

Importantly for this paper, when Beckett stages pain and disability, the content of his character's claims of impairment cannot so easily function as descriptions or representations of their bodily conditions, but neither are they beyond expression, and neither are Vladimir and Estragon casted into an infinite solitude where the content of their private experiences shall remain forever unspoken. Their friendship and interdependence very much rests on their ability to understand each other, even if the content of their pain utterances truly are hollow or confusing. Beckett's language can still stifle readings of his plays as subversions of normative expressions of the body and the citizen because his characters' disabilities are variously muddled by or conveyed through expressions of pain and are thus only occasionally perceivable through these expressions. In turn, how Beckett's characters verbally articulate their pain—namely, the issue of linguistic performativity—may variously align or contradict the visual presentation of impairment by which audiences then assess disability, and indeed may be completely imperceivable depending on the actors. In this regard, the importance of disability performances for revealing the markers of disability

embedded in Beckett's scripts, as Hannah Simpson (2021a) has explored, becomes even more apparent when we recognize the struggle over linguistic performativity that Beckett stages. In particular, Beckett's characters voice pain expressions in confrontation with an obstinate language that denies them the means of seamlessly conveying their impairment, revealing fissures within the very discourse of able-bodiedness and its attending political striations. Beckett portrays the failure of language to provide a one-to-one representation of the world, using the pain utterance as a means of revealing the limits of language to function descriptively. In Beckett's attempt to undermine linguistic functioning, there emerges a conscious recognition by the characters in *Godot* of "performing performativity", as Begam puts it (Begam 2007, p. 154), where the struggle to convey their pain in a context of self-conscious theatricality becomes intertwined with the struggle to convince others of a condition of impairment that relies on language that is fundamentally performative rather than descriptive. In turn, by staging the limits of language for conveying our private experiences, Beckett likewise stages a deficient public discourse of able-bodiedness that lacks assured signifiers.

3. Pain Utterances in *Waiting for Godot*

While contemporary performance art has pushed the boundaries for staging the human body in suffering via piercing of the flesh and the presence of blood (Richards 2008, p. 108), physical acts of bleeding or stabbing are different from the sort of pain staged in Beckett's theater. Beckett's plays are no doubt "suffused with pain and suffering" (Tanaka et al. 2012, p. 10), and these conditions manifest as chronic impairment or temporary injury, which are occasionally indistinguishable from what audiences might readily identify as a disability, in the sense of a condition that renders the social and built environment as inaccessible. Beckett's staging of pain has implications for the discourse of able-bodiedness that informs present archetypes for citizenship. There are oblique references to citizenship early on act one when Estragon admits to Pozzo that they are "not from these parts" (p. 19), which suggests that he and Vladimir are foreigners of some sort or another, either nationally or provincially. Pozzo in response appears to understand Estragon's claim as an admission of not just political exile but of a more essentialized foreignness as well. He is incredulous that Vladimir and Estragon are by appearances "human beings none the less" (p. 19). "Of the same species as myself", he says, bursting into laughter, "Of the same species as Pozzo! Made in God's image!" (ibid). Pozzo's suspicion of Vladimir and Estragon's humaneness conflates their political estrangement with a biological otherness, which he affirms when he prods them a moment later why they are waiting "On my land?" (p. 20). Though they are human by appearances, Pozzo's mild disbelief and questioning suggests that he sees the two men as inferior. The fact that he implies that Lucky is likewise his property only further establishes that Pozzo's sense of superiority is at minimum politically inflected. This conflation between Vladimir and Estragon's foreignness to the landscape—they consistently forget if they are in the right spot for meeting Godot—and their various impairments ties their otherwise personal expressions of pain or disability to broader, more interpersonal networks of political community. In their first encounter with Pozzo, Vladimir and Estragon are crucially exposed as politically estranged, and their subsequent banter and boredom reveals that this sense of disaffection is intertwined with a linguistic and bodily estrangement as well. In this section, I will explore how pain expressions in *Godot* undermine a discourse of able-bodiedness that underwrites notions of contemporary citizenship.

Beckett stages the difficulty of conveying pain and impairment when the language at our disposable lacks clear, objectified signifiers or fails to cohere to culturally and socially accepted markers for expressing or performing pain. Depending on how the opening stage directions are performed, an expression of pain appears to inaugurate *Godot*:

> *Estragon, sitting on a low mound, is trying to take off his boot. He pulls at it with both hands, panting. He gives up, exhausted, rests, tries again.*
>
> *As before.*
>
> *Enter Vladimir*

ESTRAGON: (*giving up again*). Nothing to be done. (p. 2)

Before Estragon speaks, he 'pants' from the exhaustion of trying to remove his boot, but what precisely constitutes panting will fall on the actor playing Estragon. When he does eventually remove his boot and informs Vladimir that his foot is "swelling visibly", the direction to pant seems as much an indication of pain as mild exhaustion, as the act of removing his boot is inseparable from his sore feet, which will ultimately manifest as an impairment.

The stage direction to pant seems a paradigmatic example of what Elaine Scarry describes as pain's active destruction of language, which brings about an "immediate reversion to a state anterior to language, to the sounds and cries a human being makes before language is learned" (p. 4). Rather than a recognizable phrase, *Godot* begins with a pre-linguistic grunt and pant—or, in other words, Beckett depicts the unmaking of language through Estragon's struggle to express his distress. Estragon is not just struggling with his boot in this sense but with language itself. Finding himself bereft of the vocabulary necessary to articulate his struggle, he resorts to the sort of pre-linguistic expression we all retain even after learning a language, in turn inaugurating a central theme of *Godot*, namely the capacity (or rather limitations) of linguistic performativity. Estragon appears resigned to the failure of language to perform as intended, resulting in his defeated but allusive opening phrase "Nothing to be done", which crucially avoids specifying the nature of his discomfort. The first spoken thing then—the expression that precedes, and in some sense justifies, Estragon's declaration that defines the play—is a pain utterance.

Given the common assessments of *Godot* as a philosophically rich dramatic text, pain might seem trite in comparison to the character's existential anguish, or a mere dramatic accessory to Beckett's interest in vaudeville, mime acts, and silent movies, where pain is often employed for comedic effect or for depreciating a character's sense of self-worth (Lowe 1995, p. 14). The various pains of Vladimir and Estragon contribute to the tragic yet comic nature of their predicament, adding to their image and antics as "evocative of circus [. . .] routines" (Varró 2010, p. 209). Eric P. Levy has suggested that Beckett criticism has had a "pronounced tendency towards abstraction", which conflicts with the "recurrent textual emphasis on *pain*—perhaps the most private of all experiences and hence the one which most resists abstraction" (Levy 2001, pp. 271–72). While not remarking on disability as such, Levy's point suggests that the presence of pain in Beckett's texts should tell us something about the content of our interpretations, or at minimum disrupts readings that are overly philosophical. Like Levy, Mary Bryden also warns against reading pain in Beckett as mere background material. Even though Beckett can easily be reduced to a "purveyor of endless landscapes of pain", it is still "unsatisfactory to characterise his work as a kind of grey and undifferentiated soup in which his benighted characters simply wash about on the brink of submergence" (Bryden 2012, pp. 201–2). Beckett's characters do suffer without valor, cure, or redemption, and instead tend to "fester from everyday sores" (Strong 1998, p. 297) that are chronic, incurable, and quotidian. Further into Act One, for example, after Pozzo and Lucky have come and left, Vladimir is offended by Estragon's comparing himself to Christ:

VLADIMIR: you can't go barefoot!
ESTRAGON: Christ did.
VLADIMIR: Christ! What has Christ got to do with it? You're not going to compare yourself to Christ!
ESTRAGON: All my life I've compared myself to him. (p. 57)

The comparison is of course absurd, but not necessarily because Estragon manifestly lacks Christ's qualities but because the Beckettian world does not allow for Christ-like suffering. Estragon cannot martyr himself or suffer for some higher cause. Any search for a grand explanatory system with which to contextualize their pain or impairment is derided or undermined. After all, Vladimir and Estragon are ensconced in a theatrical universe variously referred to as a "post-Christian void" (Strong 1998, p. 300) and a "meaningless void" (Moran 2006, p. 93) where formerly foundational concepts and epistemologies have collapsed. The expected structures of meaning that render the world intelligible appear

dissolved or weakened, and passing references to these structures go unacknowledged, unheard, or misconstrued, as evidenced by Estragon's seeming ignorance of Christianity. At the same time, however, these characters are not entirely hopeless as these assessments might suggest. *Godot* still exhibits a remarkable example of endurance both within the framing of the play and for the actors themselves.

In any case, Vladimir and Estragon are casted into a world they seem unable to unravel and are frustrated by bodily circumstances they cannot entirely navigate or regulate. The body acts much like Pozzo does towards Lucky, fascistically dictating movements and experiences and inciting unwanted habits. While Beckett's characters occasionally position themselves as mere spectators to their own bodily facticity, unable to will their bodies to function as intended, such a de-personalized standpoint belies the fact that pain cannot be extricated from the subject experiencing it. For Vladimir and Estragon, both of whom demand visual recognition, pain initially emerges as a potential criterion for one's own existence in a world where doubt is an unavoidable juncture on the quest for self-knowledge. If struggling with pain is a primary method for encountering one's sense of self, then selfhood becomes inseparable from that struggle. Part of the problem is that Beckett's characters are so overburdened with pains and impairments that, as Eagleton suggested, subjectivity itself seems an indulgence. Estragon appears to refer to such a problem near the beginning of Act Two when he suggests that the body is laden with bodily processes that it becomes impossible to keep track:

> ESTRAGON: Everything oozes.
> VLADIMIR: Look at the tree.
> ESTRAGON: It's never the same pus from one second to the next. (p. 66).

At a moment when Vladimir attempts to incite memories of the previous day, Estragon instead meditates briefly on the inevitability of bodily discharges. Every day becomes a repetitive process of forgetting and relearning the different bodily discharges one must undergo, to the extent that the only assured foundation of experience is bodily excretion and decay. Just as Estragon is justifiably incapable of recognizing the landscape within which they wait for Godot because he's "never stirred from it" (p. 67), Estragon has never occupied a body absent conditions of bodily secretion—another example of Levin's "Beckettian exhaustion." Everyday involves unsightly bodily processes that cast the notion of able-bodiedness as itself an absurdity, or at minimum an uninformative distinction that cannot capture the nature of bodily functioning.

As a result, Estragon and Vladimir (and to a degree Lucky and Pozzo) are so overburdened with pains and impairments that disability emerges as an almost mundane feature of existence, and their resulting attempt to communicate both temporary sores and chronic injury become part of the monotonous and recurring linguistic games they often play to pass the time waiting for Godot. Pain expressions contribute to what Andrea Yates characterizes as Vladimir's and Estragon's "repetitive and rhythmic behavior and dialogue" which "functions as both cause and effect and construct the only 'reality' that these two characters know" (p. 438). "Without each other", Yates continues, "they would be looking at a mirror with no reflection and the reflection verifies their own existence" (p. 439). Pain expressions emerge with a heightened sense of theatricality or performativity, and as a device for provoking the visual recognition they depend on. For example, Estragon consciously employs both pain and impairment throughout *Godot* in his struggle to receive attention from Vladimir, such as when he is kicked by Lucky and shouts out that he's been "crippled" and that he'll "never walk again" (p. 32). Other attempts to elicit response are not as successful, such as in the moment below:

> ESTRAGON: Forget it. What we need—Ow! (*Vladimir does not react.*) Ow!
> VLADIMIR: (*to himself*). Unless they're not the same . . . (p. 52)

Estragon announces "ow!" a second time in response to Vladimir's failure to react. Vladimir's non-response reflects either indifference or conscious recognition that Estragon's plea is an empty performative—that Estragon accents his pain expressions as a means of eliciting pity. Pain expressions in this sense are precisely the sort of language that reveals the porous

border between art and life that consumed Beckett's theatrical work. As Begam has argued, Beckett not only lays bare the "artifice of representation" but also the "artificiality of life", revealing in the process how the "ceremonies and protocol of the stage" are a function of life itself rather than strictly of art (p. 159). Beckett's "performative view of language recognizes that citationality, iterability, ceremony, and protocol—in short, the paraphernalia of stage artifice—necessarily define our everyday relation to words and things" (ibid). Vladimir and Estragon appear self-conscious of the stage artifice in which they are embedded, and which no longer distinguishes their utterances as distinct from those spoken outside theatrical space. Begam points to various examples in *Godot* where Vladimir and Estragon resort to routines and rituals to explicitly pass the time, such as in Act Two when Estragon proposes they "abuse each other" (p. 85), to which they then hurl insults in a jesting, self-conscious way. In fact, it is amidst that routine when Pozzo and Lucky emerge, knock into each other, and fall to the ground. Vladimir's and Estragon's response to Pozzo's subsequent cries for help follow an identical pattern to how they had responded to each other's pain expressions, namely an indifference or apathy that withholds or denies the sought-after recognition of the sufferer's distress. Crucially, Pozzo's emergence and subsequent pleas comes at a time when Vladimir and Estragon are in the middle of their time-wasting—in the routines and rituals that Begam identifies as examples of their self-conscious theatricality. Rather than seeing Pozzo's entrance as a disruption to this theatricality, Pozzo's tumble and plea are continuous with the performance that Vladimir and Estragon consciously enact, hence their response devolves into a protracted discussion regarding whether they should help Pozzo.

As a result, Vladimir and Estragon may seem ignorant or mean for not attending to each other's pain, but they also exhibit consciousness of the performative function of the pain utterance. If we return to the scene where Estragon loudly exclaims "ow!" in a clear attempt to garner the recognition of Vladimir, we can recognize this moment in the larger context of their relationship in which they continually resort to these sorts of routines and rituals as a means of passing the time waiting for Godot. Rather than this being strictly an example of pain's annulment or abstention, their response reflects their self-consciousness—they are aware of the inherent theatricality of pain expressions and the struggle this poses for convincing one another of their experience of pain or impairment. Vladimir and Estragon express a potential knowingness that an utterance like "ow!" is performative and an attempt to incite them to act a certain, habitual way.

When acknowledgment of each other's pain is successfully elicited (as in the scene below), it's undermined on two fronts, firstly through questioning and secondly through sarcasm:

ESTRAGON: (*feebly*). Help me!
VLADIMIR: It hurts?
ESTRAGON: (*angrily*). Hurts! He wants to know if it hurts!
VLADIMIR: (*angrily*). No one ever suffers but you. I don't count. I'd like to hear what you'd say if you had what I have.
ESTRAGON: It hurts?
VLADIMIR: (*angrily*) Hurts! He wants to know if it hurts! (p. 3)

Both provide a detached assessment when questioned on their pain, seemingly doubtful that each other's reports are genuine—at most all that is given is an acknowledgment that each other's pain is to some degree unknowable. This unknowability of each other's pain appears acknowledged by Vladimir's biting comment that "No one ever suffers but you", as in one can only ever know of one's own suffering, although even this apparent certainty of one's own pain will dissolve over the course of the play. Vladimir and Estragon's interrogation importantly lacks any of the reactions that might indicate the experience of pain but crucially includes an awareness of the performative function of the pain utterance. As such, both respond with a question rather than affection, pity, or empathetic acknowledgment. Indeed, their exclamation "He wants to know if it hurts!" is, on the one hand, a sarcastic bite at each other's unwillingness to respond with the intended affect and, on the other hand, an acknowledgment that they can never truly know if the other is in pain, and their

questioning is therefore enraptured in the limitations of language to bring them closer to knowledge of each other's private experience.

Pain exhibits a condition of unsharability that results from pain's active resistance to objectification in language. As Scarry has extensively explored, pain is "exceptional in the whole fabric of psychic, somatic, and perceptual states for being the only one that has no object" (p. 161). Our subsequent attempts to circumvent pain's unsharability by giving pain the same sort of referential character we apply to everyday objects results in a "project laden with practical and ethical consequences" (Scarry 1985, p. 6). The attempt to translate our private experiences into shared discourse constitutes a site of politics, where the goal of pain remediation begins with its communication. While we have forged vocabularies for conveying our pain to others, verbalization remains fragmentary and limited, and often filtered through the existing vocabulary of medicine, law, politics, or art. As such, the "sentient fact of physical pain", Scarry writes, is that pain is not just difficult to express relative to some other event but "so nearly impossible to express, so flatly invisible, that the problem goes beyond the possibility that almost any other phenomenon occupying the same environment will distract attention from it" (p. 12). As a result, the problem of pain is the problem of both language creation and destruction: pain's objectlessness prevents it from being easily rendered into language while simultaneously opening up new opportunities for imagining. The implications of pain's unsharability extend beyond our everyday attempts to convey our sensations and into the very nature of rights discourse. As Scarry suggests, it is hardly surprising that "society had developed sophisticated procedures for protecting 'property rights' long before it had succeeded in formulating the concept of 'the rights of the handicapped'" (p. 12)—her point being that the ease of verbally representing property partially explains both its earlier emergence relative to disability rights and its continued emphasis over and above rights that are arguably more difficult to objectify in language. That some contemporary imaginings of citizenship still emphasize private property ownership over and above, say, accessible public infrastructure is not merely random or historical but a consequence of enduring language practices for communicating pain and disability. With *Godot*, pain's unsharability puts considerable stress on the capacity of the characters to communicate both physical and cognitive anguish, resulting in Vladimir and Estragon expressing their different senses of estrangement through banter and wordplay. Lucky arguably does the same thing. When he is finally given the opportunity to speak, he appropriates and ultimately deconstructs an institutional language. Completely estranged from places like the "Acacacademy", he uses their terminology ("quaquaquaqua") and references seemingly important but obscure names ("Puncher and Wattmann", "Testew and Cunard") in a way that overburdens the act of articulation itself (p. 45). This institutional language represents those official or standardized discourses of politics, law, or medicine that Scarry references and which are exposed as incapable of creating sufficient meaning—or are incapable of meaningfully conveying experience.

The disjunct between pain expression and the staging of disability in *Godot* is understandable in the context of pain's unsharability, which results from pain's resistance to objectification in language. Evaluating the truth or falsity of someone else's pain experience can be a fraught and chaotic affair dependent on preexisting networks of trust or enforced by a national culture. In the context of theater performance, the issue is not simply whether an audience believes that actors really are in pain for the purposes of enjoying theater (though *Godot* does put considerable strain on its actors, especially Lucky, whose posture and accessories are burdensome and onerous). Rather, the issue cuts across the ethical and social policy implicated in our identification and response to impairment, and our expectations around how pain and impairment should be expressed. The inherent doubt that occasions someone else's pain expressions can migrate to doubt of someone else's claim to disability or doubt on what constitutes disability in the first place. Vladimir does precisely this in Act Two when Pozzo claims to be blind. After Pozzo and Lucky depart, the following exchange occurs between Vladimir and Estragon:

VLADIMIR: I wonder is he really blind.
ESTRAGON: Blind? Who?
VLADIMIR: Pozzo.
ESTRAGON: Blind?
VLADIMIR: He told us he is blind.
ESTRAGON: Well what about it?
VLADIMIR: It seemed to me he saw us.
ESTRAGON: You dreamt it. (pp. 103–4)

Vladimir doubts Pozzo's claim of impairment based on a vague set of criteria, namely that he thinks he perceived in Pozzo the capacity for visual recognition. Here, we can identify how disability is both staged and obfuscated through Vladimir's questioning of how disability is meant to be expressed and performed. The language here is significant. Firstly, Vladimir's claim that he thought Pozzo had seen them repeats what Vladimir had told the boy at the end of Act One, and which he will repeat again at the end of Act Two, namely that he wishes the boy to tell Godot that he saw them. This condition of being seen is important to Vladimir's sense of self, so he doubts Pozzo's blindness precisely as a means of assuring himself that he has been visibly recognized, thus obfuscating Pozzo's disability in the process. This moment is immediately followed by an admonishment by Estragon, who accuses him of having dreamt that Pozzo saw him. This accusation will lead Vladimir into self-questioning, which involves a clear and cruel irony:

ESTRAGON: I supposed I might as well get up. (*He gets up painfully*.) Ow! Didi!
VLADIMIR: I don't know what to think any more.
ESTRAGON: My feet! (*He sits down again and tries to take off his boots*.) Help me!
VLADIMIR: Was I sleeping, while the others suffered? Am I sleeping now? To-morrow, when I wake, or think I do, what shall I say of to-day? (p. 104)

Vladimir questions whether he has neglected the suffering of others in the moment that Estragon cries for help, his painful foot injury reigniting in the closing moments of the play, and shortly after he has openly doubted Pozzo's impairment. Vladimir's descent into reverie leads him to miss the suffering of others in the moment in which he is being explicitly summoned to recognize the suffering of Estragon, and this disjunct is made explicit, highlighting the fault in Vladimir's response not just to Estragon but Pozzo a moment earlier, whose suffering is without any apparent physical pain. Indeed, precisely because Pozzo's blindness does not manifest through accepted conduits of discourse or visual presentation, Vladimir appears at least temporarily incapable of recognizing Pozzo's disability, which is only aggravated by Vladimir's and Estragon's antics.

4. Conclusions

Pain and impairment are recurrent features of Beckett's work precisely because they are experiences that can discombobulate linguistic functioning even though the criteria for their determination in others relies on shared discourse bounded by rules for expression. The integrity of a national culture that ties its endurance to expressions of able-bodiedness and muscularity admits cracks and fissures when the language to convey those conditions is unstable. Scarry suggests physical pain "actively destroys" (p. 4) language, and for a writer like Beckett, who explicitly wished to pressure language into disrepute, pain emerges as an enticing condition by which to accomplish this. In a sense, Beckett staged precisely the chaotic and destructive attempt to transform our pain experiences into language that Scarry catalogued three decades later, although whereas Scarry presents the ethical consequences of this unmaking through a focus on war and torture, Beckett's *Godot* focuses on the mundane forms of relationality that constitute our everyday ethical and political relations, as well as the "structure of unmaking" (as Scarry describes war) that is arguably present in the quotidian task of conveying our private experiences. A significant part of Vladimir and Estragon's friendship revolves around pain utterances or expressions of physical discomfort. In turn, the language of able-bodiedness becomes a casualty of Beckett's unmaking of linguistic performativity, as the same set of vocabulary that underwrites discourses of normative bodily expression are undermined. In a sense, none of Beckett's

characters could express able-bodiedness even if they tried, for the essence of their linguistic expressions can only constantly cycle through the fissures and adjustments of conveying our private experiences, leading inevitably to expressions of dependence that disavow either the ideal human form of fascistic aesthetics or the individualism of neoliberal subjecthood.

Godot exhibits an uneasy overlap between aesthetics, ethics, and politics where the supposedly separate aesthetic representation of pain becomes itself an ethical and political question because the public criteria for pain expressions *is* the thing being cited in the attempt to communicate impairment both on and off stage. In the examples explored, the staging of disability is paired alongside the struggle to convey pain and impairment, not because pain and impairment are thematically or aesthetically absented but because language is not entirely adequate for conveying the extent of private experiences, resulting in Vladimir and Estragon self-consciously engaging in semantic play. In turn, Beckett's contesting the capacity of language to capture the experience of pain and impairment involves the simultaneous confrontation with the language we use in life to convey a condition of able-bodiedness and which underwrites the nation as an imagined constituency of nondisabled persons. *Godot* challenges audiences on what they expect the markers of pain or impairment or the discomfort of disability to be like, embodied by Vladimir's and Estragon's subversion and deconstruction of linguistic performativity, which invariably leads them to confront an unsatisfactory vocabulary surrounding health and the able-bodied. The implications arguably go deeper than a specific type of rhetoric or bodily aesthetic. Beckett's attention to how pain and impairment destabilizes linguistic functioning recenters disability as the operative experience by which to reveal the tenuous border between theatrical and non-theatrical space and to unmask the "Nothingness" that resides behind language. In the process, Beckett subverts the notion of an imagined constituency of nondisabled persons that underwrites visions of the nation by unmaking the language of able-bodiedness and revealing how the struggle to articulate our private experiences forges a continuous state of interdependence.

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