

The Daily Drama of the Body: Disability and Samuel Beckett's *Endgame*

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Abstract: In Beckettian reality, bodies are not seen in their corporeality. Rather, they become tools for various philosophical and metaphysical speculations. This rupture between reality and corporeality is what makes Beckett an interesting case-study for disability studies. Disabled characters and their impaired bodies in the play *Endgame* are also subjected to such hermeneutical speculations. My effort will be to blast open the continuum of such hermeneutics and see those bodies in their phenomenological materiality—going back to the internal structure of pain, suffering and disability.

Keywords: lived body, disability, lived time, lived space, mobility

"I say to myself—sometimes, Clov you must learn to suffer *better* than that if you want them to weary of punishing you—one day"¹

— Clov in Beckett's *Endgame*

Throughout Beckett's corpus we find bodies—maimed bodies, disabled bodies, incarcerated bodies, grotesque bodies, painful bodies—bodies even though in crisis, are never seen in their phenomenological materiality. Rather, those bodies become a cradle for different philosophical and metaphysical speculations. They are always already de-contextualised and de-animated. They are free from the socio-political condition as well as from their spiritual and organic semblances. They become, in the hands of modern hermeneutics, what Foucault would call, "military machine" (*machine à guerir*) "not as a self-healing whole, but as an object, a hindrance to be mastered and made-over design"². The singularity and specificity of the body is completely ignored for the sake of some already established categories and, "[t]hus" as Ato Quayson points out "discussions of maimed and disabled characters in Beckett are often conducted around two broad rubric: existential phenomenology and deconstructive antihumanism"³. In Beckett there is a rupture between disability and pain.

Beckett himself suffered from various chronic ailments including arrhythmic heartbeat, cysts and abscesses and hence, it is no surprise that his *weltanschauung* is layered with different metaphors of illness. Deirdre Bair in *Samuel Beckett: A Biography* points out, "at one point Beckett insisted that all of life was a disease, with babyhood its beginning. Man, to him, was the prime example of the mortally ill, for man began as a helpless infant, unable to attend to himself, and most of the time ended in the same manner. In man's beginning and end there was immobility, and each man was thus at the mercy of all others"⁴. His dereliction for human and humanity makes him to employ illness and disability as chimerical devices in his works. There is no distinction between human-other in Beckett. In him we find a journey from anthropological to non-anthropological—in Beckett, the human is the *other* to the extent that that it is discontinuous and deformed.⁵

Disease, decay, deterioration and dismemberment are archetypes we find in Beckett's plays and novels in profusion but they are seldom associated with physical suffering. They are rather often conceived as allegorical—in many cases as symptom of spiritual and creative debasement. And in doing so, obliterates the very specificity of the body and the body-in-pain. It succumbs to what Quayson calls "hermeneutical conundrum", "not so much so as to raise doubt about what it might mean, but so that the entire apparatus of representation is riddled with gaps and aporias"⁶. *Endgame* too is filled with gaps and aporias or what Theodor Adorno calls "organized meaninglessness" and "an expression of meaning's absence". The disabled and

¹ Beckett, Samuel (1957): *Endgame & Act Without Words I*, Grove Press, New York

² Aho, James & Aho, Kevin (2008): *Body Matters: A Phenomenology of Sickness, Disease, and Illness*, Lexington Books, Plymouth, UK, 146

³ Quayson, Ato (2007): *Aesthetic Nervousness: Disability and Crisis of Representation*, Columbia University Press, New York, 56

⁴ Bair, Deirdre (1993): *Samuel Beckett: A Biography*, Touchstone, New York, 170

⁵ Sheehan, Paul (2004): *Modernism, Narrative and Humanism*, Cambridge University Press, UK, 176

⁶ *Ibid*, 84-5

impaired bodies in the play thus concomitantly, are never seen in their physiological and phenomenological realities; the studies on Beckettian dramaturgy are more centred around body as an idea or an ideal.

The play dramatizes the disability of two pairs of characters: Hamm and Clov on one hand and, Nagg and Nell on the other. But all these four characters have been tied together in such a manner that it would be almost impossible for a character to live autonomously and might perish in no time if taken out of this arrangement. Hamm is completely blind, crippled and immobile, and his entire existence is contingent upon Clov. He will die in no time if Clov leaves him. On the other hand, Clov is mobile and comparatively healthier. He is the only character who can move from one corner of the stage to another. He always threatens to leave Hamm but never does ("I'll leave you, I have things to do"⁷). He is aligned to Hamm because of some unknowable reasons. In case of Nagg and Nell, we see a sort of radical captivation—they are both physically and psychologically confined in their ash cans, totally cut-off from the world as well as from each other. The absurdity of the situation is thus, very striking. In the play, Clov's movement is in sharp contrast to the stillness of Hamm, Nagg and Nell. Quayson also iterates, "The dialectical relationship between mobility and immobility in a play constituted exclusively by characters that carry impairments serves to further accentuate the existential constraint of disability. Every move within this dialectic is constitutively dependent on its opposite, thus suggesting that impairment/disability/immobility and nondisability/mobility are part of a single continuum"⁸. Such radical interdependency becomes necessary especially when one is encountering a post-Holocaust-like situation:

Hamm: [...]
Why do you stay with me?
Clov: Why do you keep me?
Hamm: There's no one else.
Clov: There's nowhere else.
[Pause.]⁹

Moreover, Hamm's physical incapacity on the stage has been placed in striking contrast to Clov's mental incapacity that disables him to go from the stage and away from Hamm. Being completely blind and immobile, Hamm does not have any direct control over Clov but still we see him exerting some sort of *indirect* control over Clov and Clov's subsequent internalization of Hamm's authority. It is this internalization which helps in his confinement—when other's gaze is internalized, it creates a stand-still arresting one's essential "becoming" and binding it to "me-here-now". This objectification captivates one's self and initiates the process of extermination of one's subjectivity. And here, Victoria Swanson in her article draws a parallel between Sartre and Beckett and points out, "[t]he organizing consciousness, the consciousness of the observer, displaces and objectifies the subject. Sartre and Beckett both present the gaze of the 'Other' as violent and subjectifying"¹⁰. But as opposed to Sartre, in Beckettesque reality there is no provision for freedom, will and authenticity. Rather, she argues "Beckett embraces the impossibility of meaning as liberation from confinement inherent with predicaments of subjectivity, power, and the limitations of language". She continues, "[f]or Beckett, the Sartrean vision of subjectivity is a trap that can only be escaped, if it can at all, by the kind of self-violence that leads to self-dissolution"¹¹, something that can be seen in Clov's subjectivation and subjugation by Hamm:

Clov: I can't sit down.
Hamm: [*impatiently*] Well you will lie down then, what the hell! Or you'll come to a standstill, simply stop and stand still, the way you are now. One day you'll say, I am tired, I'll stop. What does the attitude matter?
[Pause]
Clov: So you all want me to leave you.
Hamm: Naturally.
Clov: Then I'll leave you.
Hamm: You can't leave us.
Clov: Then I won't leave you.
[Pause]¹²

⁷ Beckett, Samuel (1957): *Endgame & Act Without Words I*, Grove Press, New York, 15

⁸ Quayson, Ato (2007): *Aesthetic Nervousness: Disability and Crisis of Representation*, Columbia University Press, New York, 68

⁹ Beckett, Samuel (1957): *Endgame & Act Without Words I*, Grove Press, New York, 13

¹⁰ Swanson, Victoria (2011): Confining, Incapacitating, and Partitioning the Body: Carcerality and Surveillance in Samuel Beckett's *Endgame*, *Happy Days*, and *Play*, in Miranda [Online], Université Toulouse, <http://miranda.revues.org/1827>

¹¹ *ibid*

¹² Beckett, Samuel (1957): *Endgame & Act Without Words I*, Grove Press, New York, 44-5

So, vulnerability in the play not only comes from corporeal confinement but psychological confinement too. Both Hamm and Clov are confined to the stage in their own way—the former because of his physical impairment and, the latter because of his subjectivity and carcerality. And it is only through his chaotic function, through his “repeated violations” that, Clov will be able to disrupt this very power relation and “transform the abode into a pandemonium”¹³.

All the four characters in the play including Clov are incapacitated—they are at dis-ease with the world (though it will be very difficult for me to use the words ‘disease’ and ‘disability’ interchangeably). Their lack of ability (read, dis-ability) to interact with the other creates a rupture between their being and the world. Similarly, our bodies too live in relation to the other. Our bodies act as a bridge between the “self” and the “world”—the world is not ‘out there’ separated from our being but a situation which can easily be deemed as body-in-the-world and body-with-the-world. It is always already embedded, enmeshed, entangled with the world. So what the characters in the play lack is the inter-subjective acknowledgement; they remain not only physiologically but ontologically fractured, bruised, alienated and paranoid. Their incapacity to interact and communicate with the surrounding makes them deficit of the state of holiness—the wholeness, completeness, balance which we call ‘health’. They are all apprehensive and paranoid about their surroundings, abiding by the Sartrean thesis “Hell is—other people”¹⁴. It is this cynicism that is dis-abling them to escape from their situation—they are all either incarcerated or self-incarcerated:

Hamm: Outside of here it's death.
[Pause]¹⁵

And again,

Hamm: Stop!
[Clov stops chair close to back wall. Hamm lays his hand against wall.]
Old wall!
Beyond is the...other hell.
[Pause. Violently.]
Closure! Closure! Up against!¹⁶

Thus, all the players in Beckett's play are restricted to their limited time and space—Hamm to his wheel-chair, Nagg and Nell to their ash cans and Clov to the stage. The shrinking of time and space is one of the highlights of *Endgame*. The ‘restrictive economy’ of Beckettian stage does not provide any scope for transcendence.

The lived space, the familiar territory of the characters in the play shrinks as their impairments are turned into disabilities. Their bodies no more stretched “ex-statically” into lived space—rather we see restricted bodily functions and concomitantly, contraction of space. Their bodies lack what Maurice Merleau-Ponty would call “*praktognosia*” or kinesthetic wisdom. James Aho and Kevin Aho explain: “When I am healthy, my body stretches “ex-statically” into lived space, beyond the limits of my skin. The lived-body and the world “intersect and engage each other like gears” as I climb stairs, open doors, and sit at the desk. It is in those moments that I feel “I can”. When the lived-body is ill, on the other hand, this disposition shifts dramatically to “I can't”. Now the world no longer gives itself as an expansive horizon of possibilities into which I can pass. Instead, the stairs look *insurmountable*, the door is *too heavy*, and sitting is *painful*. The boundaries of my world begin to collapse”¹⁷. Such bodily restrictions and “freezing and rigidity of the lived-body” accentuate disability and immobility as one is pinned down to a particular space and never move and act beyond the *vicinity*. The players refuse leaving their *vicinity* since, all that they can be sure of is their *vicinity*, nothing further than:

Hamm: Nature has forgotten us.
Clov: There is no more nature.
Hamm: No more nature? You exaggerate.
Clov: In the *vicinity*.¹⁸

The actions in the play are very much restricted as there is no intersubjectivity, no intercorporeality, no ‘bodying-forth’—we see a contraction of both lived-body and lived-space. The bodies in the play fail to transcend their skin, their *körper*; they remain always already limited to their corporeality; and thus any attempt

¹³ Beckett, Samuel (1995): “The Lost Ones”, *The Complete Short Prose, 1929-1989*, Grove Press, New York, 209

¹⁴ Sartre, Jean-Paul (1946): *No Exit and The Flies*, Knopf, 61

¹⁵ Beckett, Samuel (1957): *Endgame & Act Without Words I*, Grove Press, New York, 16

¹⁶ *Ibid*, 33

¹⁷ Aho, James & Aho, Kevin (2008): *Body Matters: A Phenomenology of Sickness, Disease, and Illness*, Lexington Books, Plymouth, UK, 115-7

¹⁸ Beckett, Samuel (1957): *Endgame & Act Without Words I*, Grove Press, New York, 18

to establish relationship with the world remains futile. Hamm, Nagg, Nell and to a certain extent Clov stay caged in their machine-like bodies, they become what La Mettrie would call *L'homme machine*, devoid of any of the essential 'becoming(s)'. None of the characters enjoy what they do. And as the space is 'narrowing' upon them, their life is being reduced to its bare minimum ("bare life"). We witness such claustrophobic ambience in the very stagecraft and such 'narrowing' down from the beginning of the play:

Bare interior.

Grey light.

Left and right back, high up, two small windows, curtains drawn. Front right, a door. Hanging near door, its face to wall, a picture. Front left, touching each other, covered with an old sheet, two ashbins. Center, in an armchair on castors, covered with an old sheet, Hamm. Motionless by the door, his eyes fixed on Hamm, Clov. Very red face. Brief tableau.¹⁹

And that is all that Beckettian stage has to offer; life reduced to its bare minimum. The "bare interior" and closed spaces of the stage are symptomatic of not only the nadir of life but also shrinking of lived-space resulting from impairment and disability. "That is to say, there is a narrowing or 'funneling' of our existence down to essentials. Life close in on us; we stop doing things that once nourished and nourished us, leaving only work or other stressors that continue to deplete our emotional resources. The narrower the funnel becomes, the easier it is to be drawn into the hallowed-out state of having but one choice, either to live or die"²⁰. Disability and space are thus, directly proportional to each other.

Not only do we see shrinkage of lived space in *Endgame* but also shrinkage of lived time—the continuum of time which anticipates what-is-to-come (the future) relative to what-is- now (the present) and to what-once-was (the past). The temporal existence of the characters on stage is reduced to their immediacy, as if they are stuck or glued to their present "now". They have become prisoners of the present, to their single temporal dimension. They are all unsure about their past and the future seem to be dark and bleak. In illness "the lived past" as James and Kevin Aho point out "with its remembered images of vitality and independence closes off. The remaining memories are stripped of their emotional valence and begin showing up in an alien and abstract way as the experiences of someone else" and on the other hand "once open vista of future hopes and dreams collapses"²¹. The illness and impairment in the play causes the rhythmic flow of time to stop and shrink, disabling them to think and act beyond the limits of the time on stage. So not only *here* but 'outside of *now* its death' too.

In the play, we do not find any of the characters transcending the limits of the time on stage. "Nothing seems to happen in the now of the dramatic action. All that is left for the characters is the recollection of the past"²², as Quayson points out. We see Hamm and especially Nagg and Nell taking recourse to the past as a respite from the pain of the present—the dull, dreary and weariness of their present existence:

Hamm: I love the *old* questions.

[*With fervor*]

Ah the *old* questions, the *old* answers, there's nothing like them!

[...]²³

Although their effort to (re)create the past in order to suit their present proves futile, it provides them some kind of anesthesia — momentary relief from their painful sterile condition. Nagg and Nell remain isolated from each other in their separate ash bins. They do not share anything in the 'here, now' of the stage but that lack of 'with-the-other' is compensated by a shared past. They were hardly able to see each other but they could hear properly and it was their narrative (of the past) that was keeping them alive:

Nagg: Can you see me?

Nell: Hardly. And you?

Nagg: What?

Nell: Can you see me?

¹⁹ Ibid, 7

²⁰ Williams, M. J. Teasdale, Z. Segal, and J. Kabat-Zinn (2007): *The Mindful Waythrough Depression: Freeing Yourself from Chronic Unhappiness*, The Guilford Press, New York, 28-29 (Quoted from Aho, James & Aho, Kevin (2008): *Body Matters: A Phenomenology of Sickness, Disease, and Illness*, Lexington Books, Plymouth, UK, 120)

²¹ Aho, James & Aho, Kevin (2008): *Body Matters: A Phenomenology of Sickness, Disease, and Illness*, Lexington Books, Plymouth, UK, 120-121

²² Quayson, Ato (2007): *Aesthetic Nervousness: Disability and Crisis of Representation*, Columbia University Press, New York, 68

²³ Beckett, Samuel (1957): *Endgame & Act Without Words I*, Grove Press, New York, 46

Nagg: Hardly.
Nell: So much the better, so much the better.
Nagg: Don't say that.
[Pause.]
Our sight has failed.
Nell: Yes
[Pause. They turn away from each other.]
Nagg: Can you hear me?
Nell: Yes. And you?
Nagg: Yes.
[Pause.]
Our hearing hasn't failed. [...]
Nagg: Do you *remember*—
[...]²⁴

The narrative of what had happened on Lake Como in this particular scene juxtaposes the past with the present or to be more correct, the *ability* of the past with the *disability* of the present. So for Nagg and Nell, “the process of recalling the past is at same time a process of animating what is potentially sterile and inert, that is, dead and only enlivened in memory”²⁵. Such interlocutions help to build up the conflict— mnemonic interludes of *action* in the play are in stark contrast to the general *inaction* on the stage.

The experience of pain and disability remains unaccounted throughout the play. Although in pain, none of the characters recognize it. Only in few instances we find Hamm asking for painkillers nevertheless, pain and especially physical pain remains unrecognized and uncertain. We do not see any articulation of the body in pain, of the body which is suffering. A condition which can be called *painfulness without pain* where one is able to be in pain but is not able to feel pain. Such ambiguous and perplexing status of pain in the play is the consequence of the contradiction between *being in pain* and *feeling pain*. Pain is always already contingent upon intersubjective recognition— the validation of pain of the sufferer is somewhat validated by the recognition of the other. In *Body in Pain* (1985), Elaine Scarry suggests that one of the complex things about pain is that it produces epistemological certainty for the pain sufferer but the possibility of doubt for the nonsufferer. “To have pain,” Scarry points out, “is to have *certainty*; to hear about pain is to have *doubt*”²⁶. There is no “analogical verification” or “analogical substantiation” of pain in Beckett's plays. *Endgame* employs a whole new structure of interlocution by disrupting and reframing the very relationship between the sufferer and the witness. Not only recognition, there is no effort on the part of the characters to alleviate pain— they remain indifferent to each other's pain. Hamm's demand for painkillers is never meted out by Clov. Hamm on the other hand, never takes Clov's pain seriously. And they both stay oblivious to the hunger, pain and suffering of Nagg and Nell:

Hamm: [...]
Is it not time for my pain killers?
Clov: No
[Pause.]
I'll leave you, I have things to do.²⁷

And again,

Hamm: How are your eyes?
Clov: Bad
Hamm: How are your legs?
Clov: Bad
Hamm: But you can move.
Clov: Yes.
Hamm: [*violently*] Then move!²⁸

Quayson points out, “[t]he absence of a structure of interlocution for addressing pain in Beckett is what allows his drama in particular to reside uneasily between tragedy and comedy. The dianoetic laughter that often attends plays such as *Endgame* is possible because the characters' suffering is not physical or even indeed emotional.

²⁴ Ibid, 22

²⁵ Quayson, Ato (2007): *Aesthetic Nervousness: Disability and Crisis of Representation*, Columbia University Press, New York, 71

²⁶ Scarry, Elaine (1985): *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World*, Oxford University Press, Oxford and New York

²⁷ Beckett, Samuel (1957): *Endgame & Act Without Words I*, Grove Press, New York, 14

²⁸ Ibid, 14

They are not perceived to be in pain in any physical sense of the word"²⁹. Rather than evoking pathos the situation of the characters tend to evoke bathos. The characters in the play are often thought to be ciphers and their act nothing more than clowning. Nell diagnoses the problem and critiques their situation, as they say:

Nell: One mustn't laugh at those things, Nagg. Why must you always laugh at them?

Nagg: Not so loud!

Nell: [without lowering her voice] Nothing is funnier than unhappiness. I grant you that...³⁰

The negation of any real referent of pain and discomfort, thus, from the stage, from the structure of impairment and disability and from the minds of the characters and the relationship between them enables the play to fall victim to several metaphysical categories.

Such overdetermination of physical pain can be observed throughout the play. Even the three-legged castrated dog by which Clov in the play hits Hamm can be seen as an allusion to Friedrich Nietzsche's metaphor for pain. In *The Gay Science* Nietzsche writes, "I have given a name to my pain and call it 'dog'. It is just as faithful, just as obtrusive and shameless, just as entertaining, just as clever as any other dog— and I can scold it and vent my bad mood on it, as others do with their dogs, servants, and wives."³¹ Perhaps, even Clov himself can be seen as a reification of Hamm's unbearable pain. He never gives Hamm his painkillers. The entire existence of Hamm is conditional and heavily depends upon Clov. The latter on the other hand, always threatens Hamm but never leaves ("I'll leave you, I have things to do"). They equally surmount Hamm— *like* pain, *like* Clov. The pain is more of a cipher in Beckettian reality rendering it to be very difficult to read. The disabled and impaired bodies in *Endgame* and the "precise metacritical function" that it serves makes it elusive and ambiguous in nature rendering the "entire apparatus of representation... riddled with gaps and aporia"³².

Beckett's plays diagnose the limits of lived body. In *Theatre and Body* Colette Conroy points out, "the body" for Beckett "is a metaphor for the restrictive experiences of the human psyche and its failure to escape from its own painful restrictions"³³. There is no 'escape' in Beckett's theatre and in *Endgame* too, the uncanny immobility on the stage never allows any extant for freedom and transcendence. Although once in the play we find Hamm hinting at such an escape to a distant land, "Let's go from *here*, the two of us! South! You can make a raft and the currents will carry us, far away, to other... mammals!"³⁴ but very soon his anagnorisis of pain brings him down to his bodily existence: "Wait! [...] Is it not yet time for my pain-killer?" The limits of 'here, now' of the stage *limit* the agency of the characters— not allowing them to come out of their 'restrictive economy' of corporeal existence.

The lived body becomes a tool to study different dimensions of disability in theatre. Conroy claims, "[t]here is a huge difference between talking about 'the body' and its experience of a theatre performance and talking about 'bodies' and their experiences. *The body* supposes that there is an ideal or assumed body and that all people gain access to the pleasures of performance in broadly the same way. When we think about *bodies* as entities that see, feel and move in radically different ways, as in disability theatre, the idealized *body* becomes the disparate *bodies*. We can't suppose that the play offers one overriding 'meaning' or a single coherent performance."³⁵ The (re)presentation of disability and impairment in Beckett's *Endgame* blasts open the very continuum of hermeneutics— challenging the 'ideal' and calling for an array of possibilities. There is no end to this game. By continuously resisting and subverting the notions of body, pain, disability and action Beckett is trying to change the very rules of the game. The body, pain, illness and impairment in the play are not what we understand off-stage. On-stage, the exceptional bodies of Hamm, Clov, Nagg and Nell incite violence, encourage representation and force explanation persistently. Even when sufferance was looming large they managed to suffer *better*. The play rather becomes a game to end the kind of conventional politics prevalent— both on and off the stage.

²⁹ Quayson, Ato (2007): *Aesthetic Nervousness: Disability and Crisis of Representation*, Columbia University Press, New York, 83

³⁰ Beckett, Samuel (1957): *Endgame & Act Without Words I*, Grove Press, New York, 26

³¹ Nietzsche, Friedrich (1974): *The Gay Science*, trans. Walter Kaufmann, Vintage, New York, 249

³² Quayson, Ato (2007): *Aesthetic Nervousness: Disability and Crisis of Representation*, Columbia University Press, New York, 83

³³ Conroy, Colette (2010): *Theatre and the Body*, Palgrave Macmillan, New York, 73

³⁴ Beckett, Samuel (1957): *Endgame & Act Without Words I*, Grove Press, New York, 42

³⁵ Conroy, Colette (2010): *Theatre and the Body*, Palgrave Macmillan, New York, 55-6

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