TRAUMA, COMPANY AND WITNESSING IN SAMUEL BECKETT’S POST-WAR DRAMA, 1952-61

A thesis submitted to The University of Manchester for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in the Faculty of Humanities

2014

ELECTRA GEORGIADES

SCHOOL OF ARTS, LANGUAGES AND CULTURES
LIST OF CONTENTS

Abstract 3
Declaration 4
Copyright Statement 5
Acknowledgements 6

1. Introduction 7
   1.1. Beckett and Trauma: The Theoretical Framework 12
   1.2. Performing Testimony 25
   1.3. Human Company: The Other as a Witness 36
   1.4. Thesis Structure 41

2. In Need of a Witness: Beckett’s Testimonial Drama (1952-61) 45
   2.1. Trauma, Testimony and the Theatre 48
   2.2. Beside History: Beckett’s Testimonial Drama 66
       2.2.1 Performing Trauma 69
       2.2.2 Performing and Responding to Testimony 86

3. Acting out the Trauma: Memory, Language and the Body 99
   3.1. Memory 109
   3.2. Language 133
   3.3. The Body 142

4. Reclaiming Witnessing in the Post-war Period: Human Company in Beckett’s Drama Trilogy 158
   4.1. Human Company and Trauma 161
   4.2. Resisting the Trauma: Company and Witnessing 189

5. Conclusion: Trauma, Company and Witnessing in Samuel Beckett’s Post-war Drama 205
   5.1. Beckett and Trauma 208
   5.2. The Human Other 212

Bibliography 217

   Primary Sources 217
   Secondary Sources 218

Words: 80,551
ABSTRACT

The present thesis examines the interrelation between the dynamics of human company and the psychoanalytic concept of witnessing in Samuel Beckett’s major post-war drama. The analysis provided concentrates primarily on *Waiting for Godot* (1952), *Endgame* (1957), and *Happy Days* (1962) and situates these plays within a post-war framework, while examining their stylistic qualities and thematic concerns within the context of trauma studies.

To trace and expose the overwhelming presence of trauma in the plays, I focus on the treatment of form and content and expand on existing critical readings by proposing that both form and content simultaneously internalise the symptoms, the rhythms and the processes of traumatic memory and experience. Demonstrating that the theatrical performance is adequately suited to represent and give embodied form to trauma, I then discuss the viability and significance of approaching Beckett’s post-war trilogy as testimonial drama. Testimonial drama, I argue, embodies the symptoms of trauma both thematically and structurally, and effectively manages to testify to its historical context through the act of being performed in front of an audience, in front of a human witness. By acknowledging the physical presence of the audience, the theatrical performance manages to create the witness to its struggle to testify, as the Beckett stage mutates into a key site of interaction between trauma, theatre and history.

Focusing then on the condition of memory, language and the body, I suggest that they constitute three primary sites for the manifestation of unprocessed traumatic experience and question agency, subjectivity and the availability of choice in the aftermath of massive historical trauma. This discussion is followed by the assessment of the nature, purpose and value of human company in the traumatic aftermath. Human company, I argue, is fundamentally related to past trauma. It is decisively shaped by the collapse of social structures, the loss of communality and the absence of witnessing, emerging as a compelling human need that is compulsively longed for, sought out and maintained while reducing individual identity to role-play. A product of a deeply traumatic history, human company also surfaces as a means of resistance to historical horrors as the human other serves as a vital source of solace, support and communality, while providing with his or her physical presence the much-needed human witness to one’s existence.

A key trope of Beckett’s post-war drama, human company foregrounds the status of the trilogy as a profound artistic and ethical response to the horrors of the Second World War, as the need for the human other as a witness – exposed both thematically and structurally – opens up the possibility for witnessing and testimony to take place in the aftermath of a historical period which precluded its own witnessing.
DECLARATION

No portion of the work referred to in the thesis has been submitted in support of an application for another degree or qualification of this or any other university or institute of learning.
COPYRIGHT STATEMENT

i. The author of this thesis (including any appendices and/or schedules to this thesis) owns certain copyright or related rights in it (the “Copyright”) and s/he has given The University of Manchester certain rights to use such Copyright, including for administrative purposes.

ii. Copies of this thesis, either in full or in extracts and whether in hard or electronic copy, may be made only in accordance with the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988 (as amended) and regulations issued under it or, where appropriate, in accordance with licensing agreements which the University has from time to time. This page must form part of any such copies made.

iii. The ownership of certain Copyright, patents, designs, trade marks and other intellectual property (the “Intellectual Property”) and any reproductions of copyright works in the thesis, for example graphs and tables (“Reproductions”), which may be described in this thesis, may not be owned by the author and may be owned by third parties. Such Intellectual Property and Reproductions cannot and must not be made available for use without the prior written permission of the owner(s) of the relevant Intellectual Property and/or Reproductions.

iv. Further information on the conditions under which disclosure, publication and commercialisation of this thesis, the Copyright and any Intellectual Property and/or Reproductions described in it may take place is available in the University IP Policy (see http://documents.manchester.ac.uk/DocuInfo.aspx?DocID=487), in any relevant Thesis restriction declarations deposited in the University Library, The University Library’s regulations (see http://www.manchester.ac.uk/library/aboutus/regulations) and in The University’s policy on Presentation of Theses.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to express my sincere gratitude to my supervisor, Dr. Liam Harte, for his continuous support, help and guidance, as well as to Mr. John McAuliffe and Dr. Robert Spencer for their particularly insightful comments.

I would also like to thank my parents, sisters and fiancé for their encouragement. Without their love and support this thesis would not have been possible.
1. Introduction

As the title suggests, the present thesis is principally concerned with the interrelation between the dynamics of human company and the psychoanalytic concept of witnessing in the major post-war drama of Samuel Beckett (1906-1989). A thematic preoccupation that I perceive as crucial, not only in the way it defines the plays of the period 1952-61 but also in terms of how it emerges time and again in numerous later works, company still constitutes a relatively unexplored territory in the field of Beckett studies. Concentrating primarily on the onstage depiction of couples in Waiting for Godot (1952), Endgame (1957), and Happy Days (1961), this study aims to address this gap in the existing criticism by assessing the nature, purpose, and role of company, thereby determining and, indeed, establishing its central position in Beckett’s oeuvre.

Indeed, the centrality of human company in Beckett is suggested by the title of the 1980 novella, Company. A work which centres on a solitary protagonist who ‘devis[es] it all for company’,¹ it echoes the need for the physical presence of the human other, communicates the radical impact of the absence of the human other, and constitutes, I believe, the culmination of the writer’s textual exploration of the issue of human company. Focusing on the depiction of concrete images of human interaction in Waiting for Godot, Endgame and Happy Days, this thesis aspires, therefore, to examine Beckett’s early treatment of company with not only the purpose to determine its nature and value in these three stage plays, but also with the intention to expose the potential for tracing the re-emergence and development of this issue throughout his works.

Key questions that drive my thesis are the following: (a) what is the reason for which so many characters in Beckett’s works appear obsessed with the presence or absence of another human being?; (b) to what extent is this obsession with the human other related to the historical and socio-political background of the works? In other words, is it possible to speak of the representation of human company in post-war Beckett as a product of a distinct historical period, a period marked by the occurrence of unprecedented

historical and collective trauma? To provide answers to these questions, answers which I believe will contribute to our further understanding of the major drama, my analysis will closely examine the depiction of human company alongside the psychoanalytic theorisation of human relationships as these emerge in the aftermath of a traumatic experience, and particularly that of the Second World War. What I propose to explore, then, is how Beckett’s drama trilogy destabilises our conception of human company by rethinking its purpose and value in a period of profound atrocity, violence and death.

A closer look at the interactions between each couple in the respective settings of the major post-war plays exposes the need for company as being fundamentally related to the state of belonging or, rather, non-belonging, which in itself points towards an impaired sense of communality whose roots lie in catastrophic traumatic experience. The term “communality” I borrow from trauma theorist Kai Erikson, who uses it to describe ‘the networks of relationships that make up [one’s] general human surround.’ Accordingly, communality can be profoundly affected by the occurrence of what Erikson theorises as “collective trauma”:

[C]ollective trauma [is] a blow to the basic tissues of social life that damages the bonds attaching people together and impairs the prevailing sense of communality. The collective trauma works its way slowly and even insidiously into the awareness of those who suffer from it, so it does not have the quality of suddenness normally associated with ‘trauma.’ But it is a form of shock all the same, a gradual realization that the community no longer exists as an effective source of support and that an important part of the self has disappeared. [...] ‘I’ continue to exist, though damaged and maybe even permanently changed. ‘You’ continue to exist, though distant and hard to relate to. But ‘we’ no longer exist as a connected pair or as linked cells in a larger communal body.3

---

2 Kai Erikson, *Everything in its Path: The Destruction of Community in the Buffalo Creek Flood* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1976), p.187. In his research, which concentrates primarily on the consequences of the dam break and subsequent flood which destroyed the community of Buffalo Creek, West Virginia, in 1972, Erikson draws some groundbreaking conclusions concerning the impact of shared trauma on the individual and his position against the surrounding environment which have come to occupy a prominent space in the field of trauma studies.

3 Ibid., p.154, my emphasis.
Erikson’s discussion of collective trauma and communality is key to my analysis of Beckett’s drama for a number of reasons. First, it provides a framework of trauma within which I intend to read three plays composed in the immediate post-war period, at a time when Europe – and France in particular – struggled not only to rebuild itself, but also to come to terms with what it meant to be human in the aftermath of the Holocaust. Second, Erikson’s study exposes the impact of shared trauma on the individual, stressing both the disruption of the bond between him or her and the community, as well as the way in which this affects one’s individual identity. Finally, and perhaps most crucially, it highlights the manner in which trauma can permanently damage the general sense of communality, thereby destabilising the fundamental nature of society and eliminating the possibility to speak of the existence of “we.” In light of Erikson’s account, my analysis of Beckett’s drama trilogy traces a relation between human company and collective trauma that is intimately tied to the post-war European atmosphere. In my discussion I propose that the need for human company in Beckett constitutes an effort to cope with the impaired sense of communality in the aftermath of trauma by opening up the possibility for witnessing. By providing the protagonists with one other that may act as a witness, I contend, Beckett’s plays simultaneously open up the possibility for an expansion, as Jeffrey Alexander puts it, of “the circle of “we.’” Taking this a step further by considering the onstage depiction of couples in extreme social exclusion and against a barren landscape in *Waiting for Godot*, a widespread, apocalyptic catastrophe in *Endgame* and a gruelling exterior in *Happy Days*, I argue that company in Beckett emerges as both a product of, and a response to, a historical trauma of immense proportions which subtly but powerfully resonates with the impact of the Second World War. In so doing, the depiction of human company in the three plays questions the value of human interaction in the aftermath of a period of profound atrocity and mass extermination, while simultaneously

4 Quoted in Roxana Waterson, 'Testimony, Trauma and Performance: Some Examples from Southeast Asian Theatre', *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, Vol. 41, No. 3 (October, 2010), p.509. Alexander’s exact quote is: ‘Is the suffering of others also our own? In thinking that it might in fact be, societies expand the circle of “we.”’
uncovering the significance of witnessing after an event like the Holocaust which, according to psychoanalyst Dori Laub, took place with no witnesses.\textsuperscript{5}

My analysis, then, discusses human company in Beckett as fundamentally related to past traumatic experience, one which is never explicitly named, but the consequences of which are still endured in the present, thereby triggering the expression of the inherent need for a witness. Taking into account both the impact of the historical period in which the works were composed, as well as the status of \textit{Waiting for Godot}, \textit{Endgame} and \textit{Happy Days} as drama, I also argue that the interrelation between company, trauma, and witnessing also manifests itself in the performance of each work in front of an audience. More particularly, I propose that the need for the presence of the human other is expressed not only by each protagonist but also by each work itself, primarily due to its status as drama. In presupposing the presence of the audience, the trilogy, I maintain, reflects through its very form the predominant need for the physical presence of the human other as a witness. Thus, by considering the onstage performance of each work as essentially a performance of drama as testimony, the present thesis also concentrates on the way in which the three plays invite the active engagement of the audience as a witness to the act of bearing witness to an inaccessible, traumatic history. As testimony, I contend, each play is an embodiment of unprocessed cultural memory, with each performance acting out the struggle to recapture and articulate this memory. What are the implications, my analysis asks, of acting as witnesses rather than as mere spectators to Beckett’s drama? What does the adoption of such a position towards the plays entail, and in what ways does it illuminate the overall value of the works? These key questions will preoccupy a central space in my analysis, which will ultimately seek to answer exactly what role the human other is asked to play both in and towards Beckett’s drama.

This introduction consists of three sections which lay the groundwork for the rest of the thesis. In the first section I consider theories of trauma and recent psychoanalytic approaches to works of fiction with the purpose of providing the

theoretical framework within which I situate Beckett’s plays. Commenting on the so far limited criticism on Beckett and trauma, I discuss both the viability as well as the significance of approaching his dramatic works as testimonial drama. The second section concentrates on the nature of the works as drama and the aspect of performance, arguing that Beckett’s post-war shift from prose to theatre enabled him to explore the implications of a more direct engagement between art and audience. As testimonial drama – that is, as drama which internalises the symptoms, rhythms, and processes of traumatic experience and memory in both content and form – I suggest that the trilogy testifies, obliquely but powerfully, to the historical period from which it emerges while simultaneously engaging the audience as a witness to its struggle to bear witness. This section ultimately prepares the ground for one of the core arguments of my thesis, namely, that the Beckett stage constitutes a key site of interaction between theatre and trauma and, most crucially, a key site of interaction between theatre and history. In light of the above, I finally discuss the value of the physical presence of the human other both in and towards Beckett’s drama. The human other, who on one level is the second protagonist and on a second level is the audience, opens up with his or her very presence the possibility for witnessing in the aftermath of trauma. It is the very presence of the other and the possibility that he or she may act as a witness, I propose, that eventually makes possible the transmission of a history that otherwise resists integration, representation and articulation.

For the purposes of my thesis I have chosen to concentrate solely on the English-language versions of the drama trilogy. To not draw upon the French versions of the plays is therefore a deliberate choice, one that does not intend to ignore the bilingual nature of Beckett’s oeuvre but one that derives from the decision to focus exclusively on what I have identified as the major concern of this thesis, namely, the value of human company and its fundamental relation to the concepts of testimony and witnessing in Beckett’s major post-war drama. Nonetheless, I would like to suggest that a consideration of each play next to its translation, next to its other, could prove particularly beneficial and contribute to the discussion provided by scholars such as Sinéad Mooney and Brian T. Fitch
on the significance of bilingualism and self-translation in Beckett’s works. By approaching the two versions of each play within the context of company and by considering the role that each text plays towards its other, it may be possible, then, to rethink and reassess the relationship between Waiting for Godot and En Attendant Godot, Endgame and Fin de Partie, Happy Days and Oh les Beaux Jours.

1.1. Beckett and Trauma: The Theoretical Framework

My analysis of the concept of human company in Beckett firmly situates the post-war plays in the context of major historical trauma, specifically that associated with the Second World War. Waiting for Godot, Endgame and Happy Days, I maintain, revolve around an overwhelming sense of absence and non-belonging which manifests in ellipsis and fragmentation, deprivation and lack, and a distinctive resort to repetition. Trauma in Beckett affects at once both content and form equally and radically, as both content and form internalise its symptoms and emit a sense of profound disruption. Trauma, then, exposes the present as a mere remnant of the past, a futile and persistent struggle to cope in the aftermath of a historical period that remains too immediate and too present to be fully processed or acknowledged as a period which has passed. In other words, trauma emerges in the radical disruption of the passage of time, which turns the present into a period of what Freud identifies as “latency.”

Understood as ’the successive movement from an event to its repression to its return,’ latency constitutes a period that ‘must be allowed before any impact or change can be felt and before the survivor-sufferer(s) can begin to theorize properly about the impact of the event.’ Emerging from the immediate post-war period, I argue, Beckett’s major drama performs the impossibility to address, speak of, or represent this period, while simultaneously being driven

---

by what Dori Laub defines as the trauma survivor’s ‘imperative to tell and to be heard.’

I would like to suggest, first, that a theorisation of Beckett’s works in a framework of trauma is long overdue. The rapid development of trauma theory since the 1970s by prominent scholars and psychoanalysts such as Dori Laub, Cathy Caruth, Judith Herman, Kai Erikson, Susan Brison, Bessel A. van der Kolk and Onno van der Hart, has triggered invaluable discussions on the relationship between psychoanalysis and literature, which in turn has led to highly influential readings of literary texts by Shoshana Felman, Laurie Vickroy, and Irence Kacandes, among others. Prior to expanding on how I intend to incorporate trauma theories into my analysis of Beckett’s plays, and before I discuss the manner in which I make use of existing readings of literature of/as trauma, I believe it is useful to look at how the psychoanalytic concept of trauma appears in the available Beckett criticism.

Though it is true that few critics have so far attempted to read Beckett’s works within the context of trauma studies, the 2008 double issue of The Journal of Beckett Studies, entitled ‘Beckett, Language, and the Mind’, provides substantial evidence of the writer’s interest in neuroscience, clinical psychology, and the psychoanalytic concepts available at the time. The issue includes essays by Steven Connor, Kristin Czarnecki, Ulrika Maude and Peter Fifield, among others, which discuss the treatment of language and the mind in Beckett’s works in relation to the aforementioned disciples. Concentrating primarily on Murphy (1938), the Trilogy [Molloy (1951; English version, 1955), Malone Meurt (1951; Malone Dies, 1956), L’Innommable (1953; The Unnamable, 1958)], Watt (1953), and the later plays, the essays consider the ways in which Beckett’s interests and his own experiences of psychoanalysis with Wilfred Bion have shaped his works, either through the textual integration of the rhythms and processes of his sessions with Bion, or through the manner in which the behaviour of his

---

characters is suggestive of symptoms of abjection,\textsuperscript{13} Tourette's syndrome,\textsuperscript{14} or Cotard's syndrome.\textsuperscript{15}

An essay which provides an examination of Beckett's works alongside a discussion of trauma as theorised by Freud but also Caruth, Herman and LaCapra, is Jonathan Boulter's 'Does Mourning Require a Subject? Samuel Beckett's \textit{Texts for Nothing}' (2004). Here, Boulter argues that 'the Beckett character and the Beckett text have undergone some kind of trauma, physical, psychological, or some combination of both',\textsuperscript{16} and reads \textit{Texts for Nothing} (\textit{Nouvelles et Textes Pour Rien}, 1955; \textit{Stories and Texts for Nothing}, 1967) as a text that 'consistently dismantles the stabilizing concepts of self and history (of self \textit{in} history)', thereby deeming trauma and mourning concepts and processes which, in their presupposition of the categories of the self, history, and memory, 'no longer have any operational viability.'\textsuperscript{17} Thus, he suggests that in its depiction of 'a narrating subject without subjectivity', a subject, that is, 'whose ontology denies the viability of mourning and trauma, yet who seems to display the symptomology of mourning and trauma', \textit{Texts for Nothing} confronts us with what may be termed as 'aporetic mourning and trauma'.\textsuperscript{18} Boulter's essay is rather extensively discussed in Russell Smith's study on \textit{Endgame}, entitled 'Endgame's Remainders' (2007). In it, Smith considers LaCapra's model of historical trauma, as well as the concepts of absence and loss, and argues that \textit{Endgame} is a play of losses, not just absences: historical losses that take the form of events that [...] are repeatedly narrated through the formula "There's no more...".\textsuperscript{19} Thus, he contends that whereas the greater part of the play dramatises the preservation of the attachment to the object through 'fidelity to the remainder', its ending tragically enacts the concept of mourning by presenting us with 'a callous betrayal of the lost object [...] that is inseparable

\textsuperscript{17}Ibid., p.345, original emphasis.
\textsuperscript{18}Ibid., p.337.
from the callous task of going on living.’ However, Smith’s interpretation of the concept of mourning differs from that of Boulter. Accordingly, ‘the key element of the process of mourning – defined as the successful acceptance of a loss – is not the resurrection, narrative re-enactment and mastery of the traumatic experience of loss, as implied by Boulter.’ Rather, he asserts, the process of mourning constitutes in actuality ‘the act of betrayal of the lost object in the decision to go on living.’

A recently published book-length study that firmly situates Beckett’s works in a context of trauma and is therefore much more akin to my analysis of the major plays is David Houston Jones’ *Samuel Beckett and Testimony* (2011). Concentrating primarily on prose works including *The Unnamable, Texts for Nothing,* and *How It Is* (1964; *Comment c’est,* 1961), Jones examines the rendering of the first-person singular pronoun and argues that the “I” constitutes an encounter between the works in question and the process of testimony. The correlation between what appears as a ‘deep, pervasive and yet unlocalisable presence of atrocity’ and ‘the dilemma of unspeakability’ provides the basis on which he then develops a theorisation of Beckettian testimony. Accordingly, Beckettian testimony is enabled by that very impossibility of reference and entails not an explicit representation but an ‘anguished and problematic entry of the speaker of testimony into language.’ It is notable that Jones frequently alludes to Dori Laub’s work on trauma and testimony in his analysis, considers testimonies of Holocaust survivors, and contends that ‘Beckett fulfils two distinct functions in Holocaust discourses’: ‘the first as a marker of the limits of testimony’; the second concerning ‘the insidious form of citation which characterises responses to the problem of unspeakability.’ With respect to the second function, he stresses how Andrew Leak and George Paizis’ allusion to Beckett in their discussion of Holocaust representation that appears in the study, *The Holocaust and the Text: Speaking the Unspeakable* (2000), suggests that his work ‘has become, or is becoming, a
cipher for the unspeakability within the field of Holocaust studies itself.\textsuperscript{26} Though he also acknowledges the presence of atrocity in the works as in some cases referential to the specific historical context of the Second World War and in particular the Holocaust,\textsuperscript{27} Jones curiously hesitates to associate the images of wounding and trauma in Beckett with this, or any other, historical or biographical context; instead, he concentrates on how the failure of representation in the works ‘has a great deal in common with testimony as a discursive structure.’\textsuperscript{28}

Because his analysis revolves around the position and treatment of the ‘I,’ Jones focuses primarily on Beckett’s prose works, thereby paying minimal attention to the drama.\textsuperscript{29} Yet, his study does much to demonstrate both the viability of reading Beckett’s works in the context of trauma studies, as well as the contribution that such an examination can make to the ever-growing field of Beckett studies. Contrary to Jones, though, who refrains from aligning trauma in Beckett with a specific historical context, my analysis starts from the premise that the major post-war drama is fundamentally related to the historical period from which it emerges. Indeed, I see Beckett as a writer deeply concerned with the socio-political issues prevalent during his time, and I argue that a closer examination of his works exposes that his personal views and experiences not only found their way into his early pieces, but also shaped the works he was to write even after the much-cited epiphany he experienced in the summer of 1945.\textsuperscript{30}

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{26} Ibid. p.3, original emphasis. Jones quotes from Andrew Leak and George Paizis’ account on Holocaust representation, who write: ‘in order to redeem themselves from [the betrayal of history] representations need to be understood not as final words or complete histories, but as contributions to an ongoing conversation about the Holocaust, a conversation which, Beckett-like, can’t go on, but must go on.’
\item \textsuperscript{27} Ibid., p.1.
\item \textsuperscript{28} Ibid., p.20.
\item \textsuperscript{29} Jones writes: ‘[A]lthough Beckett’s theatre is marked by silence, hesitation and repetition in ways which recall unspeakability, this study is concerned above all with the problems which arise in narration. Beckett’s dramatic language is certainly complex and elusive, but the exact form which “I, say I” assumes in prose cannot be rendered on the stage. That form, I argue, represents a critical encounter between Beckett’s work and testimony, and that encounter is at the heart of this book.’ See ibid., pp.5-6.
\item \textsuperscript{30} Beckett’s epiphany occurred in 1945 in his mother’s room, during one of his visits to Ireland. Alluded to in the 1958 play, \textit{Krapp’s Last Tape}, the epiphany accordingly triggered the writer’s decision to concentrate on self-perception, to ‘draw henceforward on his own inner world for his subjects’ [James Knowlson, \textit{Damned to Fame: The Life of Samuel Beckett} (London: Bloomsbury, 1996), p.352]. The event also awoke Beckett to the realisation of how his style differed from that of James Joyce: ‘[joyce] was always adding to [his material]’, he confided to
In my approach of Beckett’s trilogy as testimonial drama I expand on the widely acknowledged correlation between form and content that defines his work – traced and praised perhaps most notably by Theodor Adorno – by reading it as a simultaneous internalisation of the symptoms, the rhythms and the processes of traumatic memory and experience. However, I am not suggesting that the plays constitute didactic representations of history, nor that they present us with thematic reproductions of various traumas inflicted on the individual protagonist. Rather, I argue that *Waiting for Godot*, *Endgame* and *Happy Days* perform trauma in the manner in which both form and content simultaneously carry evidence of symptoms such as stasis and repetition, repression and re-emergence of background and memory, linguistic breakdown and silence. Thus, I read what appears to be an absence of structure, plot and resolution as in actuality a telling deprivation, and I interpret what seems a failure to communicate as in truth an inability, a profound impossibility to communicate. In this context, I argue that the overwhelming presence of trauma enables a dialogue to take place between past and present, as the Beckett stage becomes a key site of interaction between theatre, trauma, and history. With the audience occupying the position of the human other in relation to the performance of each play, I suggest that it is possible to act as witnesses to the struggle within each work to testify and, in so doing, to trigger the transmission of history.

The development of my discussion of *Waiting for Godot*, *Endgame* and *Happy Days* as testimonial drama entails the consideration of three existing bodies of criticism. The first concerns the appreciation of Beckett’s treatment of form and content in two leading readings of his works, namely, Theodor Adorno’s as it appears in ‘Trying to Understand *Endgame*’ (1961) and *Aesthetic Theory* (1970), and Martin Esslin’s as it appears in *The Theatre of the Absurd* (1961). Writing on Beckett in the 1960s, neither Adorno nor Esslin make any references to trauma theories in their criticism, of course, as it was not until the 1980s that a more accessible conceptualisation of trauma as applied to literary

James Knowlson during an interview; ‘I realised that my own way was in impoverishment, in lack of knowledge and taking away, in subtracting rather than adding’ (James Knowlson interview with Samuel Beckett, 27 Oct. 1989, quoted in ibid., p.352). Beckett’s epiphany is recounted in detail in ibid., pp.351-3.
and dramatic texts began to surface. Albeit reading Beckett’s works in different contexts, both critics provide valuable insights into the interrelation between form and content which defines his texts. In *Aesthetic Theory*, Adorno expresses his conviction that form and content are of equal value, and asserts that the artistic success is reliant on the immersion of each in the other. ‘[A]esthetic form’, he writes, is ‘sedimented content’; ‘[a]esthetic success is essentially measured by whether the formed object is able to awaken the content [Inhalt] sedimented in the form.’  

Thus, he traces the value of Beckett’s works in the way they epitomise this process:

In Beckett the negative metaphysical content affects the content along with the form. [...] A relation, not identity, operates between the negativity of the metaphysical content and the eclipsing of the aesthetic content. The metaphysical negation no longer permits an aesthetic form that would itself produce metaphysical affirmation; and yet this negation is nevertheless able to become aesthetic content and determine the form.

This specific treatment of form and content in Beckett’s drama leads Adorno to distinguish it from Existentialist plays, writing in ‘Trying to Understand *Endgame*’ that existentialist dramatists, and in particular Jean-Paul Sartre, regard form ‘rather traditionally as that of didactic plays, not at all as something audacious but rather oriented toward an effect,’ whereas Beckett’s texts follow a structure in which form ‘absorbs what is expressed and changes it.’ In *The Theatre of the Absurd*, Esslin pursues a rather similar line of argument in terms of the unity between form and content that defines Beckett’s plays, though he recognises this unity as one of the major characteristics of Absurdist theatre. Like Adorno, he separates Beckett’s dramatic works, which he considers Absurdist, from Existentialist theatre, arguing that Absurdist theatre ‘has renounced arguing about the absurdity of the human condition; it merely presents it in being’. The plays which belong to this genre, he contends, demonstrate a ‘striving for an integration between the subject-matter and the

---

32 Ibid., pp.347-8.
form in which it is expressed,’ and it is this striving which fundamentally separates them from Existentialist theatre.\textsuperscript{35} In my analysis of \textit{Waiting for Godot}, \textit{Endgame} and \textit{Happy Days} as plays that internalise trauma in both content and form, then, I intend not to dismiss the views of Adorno and Esslin but, rather, to expand on their observations by taking into account the theories of trauma that are now available.

The second body of theory that I consider key to my analysis is the conceptualisation of trauma and its symptoms in the field of psychoanalysis. In my discussion I draw upon a number of influential studies on the topic which include Cathy Caruth’s \textit{Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History} (1996), the essays of Kai Erikson, Dori Laub, Bessel A. van der Kolk and Onno van der Hart which appear in Caruth’s highly influential edited collection, \textit{Trauma: Explorations in Memory} (1995), as well as the essays of Mieke Bal, Ernst van Alphen, and Susan Brison that are included in \textit{Acts of Memory: Cultural Recall in the Present} (1999), edited by Bal, Jonathan Crewe, and Leo Spitzer. In addition to these seminal critical works, I shall also be utilising Dominick LaCapra’s work on trauma, in particular his discussion of historical trauma and the concepts of absence and loss in the essay ‘Trauma, Absence, Loss’ (1999). LaCapra’s notion of empathy will also contribute to my discussion of the relationship between audience and performance, particularly due to the way it highlights the position that the witness occupies towards the survivor’s testimony to trauma.

Central to my reading of Beckett’s dramatic works as testimonial drama is the following, much-cited definition of trauma provided by Caruth in her introduction to \textit{Trauma: Explorations in Memory}:

[Trauma is] a response, sometimes delayed, to an overwhelming event or events, which takes the form of repeated, intrusive hallucinations, dreams, thoughts or behaviors stemming from the event, along with numbing that may have begun during or after the experience, and possibly also increased arousal to (and avoidance of) stimuli recalling the event.\textsuperscript{36}

\textsuperscript{35} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{36} Caruth, ‘Trauma and Experience’, p.4.
As Caruth goes on to state, the symptoms of trauma vary. The pathology, she writes, ‘cannot be defined either by the event itself – which may or may not be catastrophic, and may not traumatize everyone equally – nor can it be defined in terms of a distortion of the event [...]’. Rather, she argues, ‘[t]he pathology consists [...] solely in the structure of its experience or reception’.\(^{37}\)

We may note, here, that this specific theorisation of trauma and its symptoms which Caruth provides, as well as the accounts on trauma which the theorists I refer to above include in their respective studies, have been subject to notable criticism over the last few years.\(^{38}\) In The Trauma Question (2008), for example, which provides a multi-disciplinary genealogy of the concept of trauma and examines its permeation into modern culture following the inclusion of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder in the official diagnostic manual of the American Psychiatric Association in 1980, Roger Luckhurst argues that the numerous symptoms associated with PTSD, as well as the gradual expansion of the categories of individuals that might be diagnosed with PTSD, ‘helped consolidate a trauma paradigm that has come to pervade the understanding of subjectivity and experience in the advanced industrial world’, so much so that extremity and survival have become ‘privileged markers of identity’.\(^{39}\) Thus, he takes issue with the theorisation of trauma as a particularly paradoxical experience since, as he writes elsewhere, this is a theorisation in which ‘traumatic subjectivity and representation is consistently invoked through a rhetoric of aporia.’\(^{40}\) However, and as my analysis proposes to show, the field of trauma studies can significantly contribute to a reconsideration of the status and value of the theatrical performance in general, and Beckett’s post-war drama in particular. Concentrating specifically on what Mieke Bal identifies as three of the most telling characteristics of trauma, namely, its “timeless” duration, its symptomatology of relentless repetition, and its propensity to

\(^{37}\) Ibid., original emphasis.
\(^{39}\) Luckhurst, The Trauma Question, p.1, 2.
cause narrative splitting-off,\(^{41}\) my analysis will examine the way in which each of these are internalised in the form and content of the three plays, radically questioning the notion of subjectivity while simultaneously determining character identity, as well as the very identity of the dramatic text and the theatrical performance.

The aforementioned characteristics of trauma expose the impact that the traumatic event has on memory and language. Indeed, for Caruth, pathologies of memory are key features of trauma and may appear in many forms,\(^{42}\) though what ultimately defines that which occurs as traumatic memory is, according to Susan Brison and Mieke Bal, that it is uncontrollable and intrusive, experienced by the individual as ‘inflicted, not chosen’,\(^{43}\) thereby resisting integration into one’s life narrative.\(^{44}\) With this in mind, my analysis will focus primarily on what is theorised as memory repression which, according to van der Kolk and van der Hart, ‘evokes the image of a subject actively pushing the unwanted memory away.’\(^{45}\) The very act of pushing the unwanted memory away, though, neither suggests recovery from trauma, nor does it constitute an appropriate means through which the victim may deal or cope with the trauma; rather, it indicates his or her ability to recognise what emerges as traumatic memory and to actively attempt to prevent its intrusion into the present. However, as the trauma of the past remains inaccessible and not fully integrated into one’s life narrative, repression can only result in the repeated re-emergence of the unwanted memory. According to Bal, then, repression manifests in ‘interrupt[ing] the flow of narratives that shapes memory’ and leads to ellipsis, that is, ‘the omission of important elements in the narrative.’\(^{46}\)

The impact of trauma on language is extensively discussed in Ernst van Alphen’s essay, ‘Symptoms of Discursivity: Experience, Memory, and Trauma’

---


\(^{44}\) See Bal, 'Introduction', p.viii.

\(^{45}\) Bessel A. van der Kolk and Onno van der Hart, 'The Intrusive Past: The Flexibility of Memory and the Engraving of Trauma', in *Trauma*, ed. Caruth, p.168.

\(^{46}\) Bal, 'Introduction', p.ix.
(1999). Here, van Alphen concentrates primarily on what he identifies as a failure of language to 'provide the terms and positions in which to experience [the lived events].’\textsuperscript{47} In ‘An Event Without a Witness: Truth, Testimony and Survival’ (1992), Dori Laub also focuses on this issue, writing that the inherent struggle of the traumatised to testify, ‘the imperative to tell and to be heard’ as he defines it, becomes ‘an all-consuming life-task’, and one of the reasons for this is the inadequacy of language. Accordingly:

\[N\]o amount of telling seems ever to do justice to this inner compulsion. There are never enough words or the right words, there is never enough time or the right time, and never enough listening or the right listening to articulate the story that cannot be fully captured in \textit{thought, memory, and speech}.\textsuperscript{48}

In my reading of Beckett’s trilogy as testimonial drama I consider the interrelation between form and content which Adorno and Esslin discuss next to the theorisation of trauma, and propose that the said interrelation is simultaneously an internalisation of the symptoms of repetition, omission and ellipsis, as well as a manifestation of structural and linguistic breakdown. This leads to my conclusion that the performance of \textit{Waiting for Godot, Endgame} and \textit{Happy Days} is driven by an ‘inner compulsion’ to tell, as Laub puts it, a story that overwhelsms and defines the three plays; a story which they embody but at the same time cannot fully capture in either thought, memory, or speech.

Finally, the third body of criticism that lays the groundwork for my discussion of Beckett’s plays is made up of recent studies of contemporary works of fiction as “trauma narratives,”\textsuperscript{49} or “narratives-of/as-trauma.”\textsuperscript{50} Among those which I have found most useful for my purposes are Laurie Vickroy’s \textit{Trauma and Survival in Contemporary Fiction} (2002), and Irence Kacandes’ essay, ‘Narrative Witnessing as Memory Work: Reading Gertrud Kolmar’s \textit{A Jewish Mother}’, in \textit{Acts of Memory}, eds. Bal, Crewe and Spitzer.

\textsuperscript{47} Ernst Van Alphen, ‘Symptoms of Discursivity: Experience, Memory, and Trauma’, in \textit{Acts of Memory}, eds. Bal, Crewe and Spitzer, p.27.

\textsuperscript{48} Laub, ‘An Event Without A Witness’, p.78, original emphasis.

\textsuperscript{49} The term “trauma narratives” is employed by Laurie Vickroy in her discussion of prose works that internalise symptoms of trauma in both form and content. See Laurie Vickroy, \textit{Trauma and Survival in Contemporary Fiction} (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2002).

\textsuperscript{50} The term “narratives-of/as-trauma” is employed by Irene Kacandes in her discussion of Gertrud Kolmar’s novel, \textit{A Jewish Mother} (\textit{Eine jüdische Mutter}, written 1930-31, published 1965). See Irene Kacandes, ‘Narrative Witnessing as Memory Work: Reading Gertrud Kolmar’s \textit{A Jewish Mother}’, in \textit{Acts of Memory}, eds. Bal, Crewe and Spitzer.
In their respective works, both critics provide informed discussions of how recent literary works successfully manage to perform trauma by internalising the subject-matter within their structures, thereby engaging the audience through the act of reading in a process of testimony carried out by each work itself. Vickroy, who examines the works of Toni Morrison, Marguerite Duras, Edwidge Danticat, Jamaica Kincaid, Dorothy Allison, Larry Heinemann and Pat Barker, outlines the specific traits of trauma narratives as follows:

Trauma narratives go beyond presenting trauma as a subject matter or character study. They internalize the rhythms, processes, and uncertainties of traumatic experience within their underlying sensibilities and structures. They reveal many obstacles to communicating such experience: silence, simultaneous knowledge and denial, dissociation, resistance, and repression among others.  

Similarly, in her study on Kolmar's novel Irene Kacandes distinguishes between texts which present trauma only as a subject-matter and narratives that embody and perform trauma. Kacandes writes:

[W]e can think about narratives “of” trauma, but also about narratives “as” trauma. That is to say, literary texts can be about trauma in the sense that they can depict perpetrations of violence against characters who are traumatized by the violence and then successfully or unsuccessfully witness to their trauma. But texts can also “perform” trauma, in the sense that they can “fail” to tell the story, by eliding, repeating, and fragmenting components of the story.  

What I consider crucial for my analysis of Beckett’s drama is the emphasis which these critics place on the argument that trauma fiction does not solely present a re-enactment of the traumatic experience but, rather, internalises the trauma expressed in its content and performs it in its telling. In my discussion of Beckett’s trilogy I will follow a similar line of argument, though my concentration on dramatic texts suggests the need for a consideration of the treatment of different, or additional, techniques which enable the manifestation and performance of trauma. Thus, in the following section of this chapter, which revolves around the possibilities that the theatre opens up for the performance

---

51 Vickroy, Trauma and Survival, p.3.
52 Kacandes, ‘Narrative Witnessing’, p.56.
of trauma, I also draw upon a recently published book on theatre and trauma which provides valuable insights into the interaction between the two. Patrick Duggan’s 2012 study, *Trauma-Tragedy: Symptoms of Contemporary Performance*, constitutes one of the most detailed discussions of the representation of trauma in theatre and performance to date and, despite being primarily concerned with plays that differ from Beckett’s works in numerous aspects, it provides a useful background for my analysis of the issue of witnessing and the performance of drama as testimony in front of a live audience.

Drawing upon the three bodies of criticism which I have outlined above, therefore, I will seek to examine how Beckett’s major drama performs trauma through the internalisation of its symptoms. This will prepare the ground for my assertion that *Waiting for Godot*, *Endgame* and *Happy Days* are significantly more related to their historical background than the majority of studies on Beckett has been willing to acknowledge heretofore, addressing this background not simply through the scarce references to French locations but most importantly through the transmission of an overwhelming sense of ambiguity and deprivation, fear and impending threat. Reading the major drama as intimately tied to a Europe still trying to awake from the nightmare of industrialised genocide on a hitherto unprecedented historical scale, I will move on to argue that the Beckett stage constitutes not only a key site of interaction between theatre and trauma but also a key site of interaction between theatre and history, addressing this history through the depiction of the status and condition of the individual and, indeed, the status and condition of art and literature, in the ruins of the Second World War. Approaching Beckett’s drama as the result of his quest for ‘a form that accommodates the mess’,

1.2. Performing Testimony

As plays, *Waiting for Godot*, *Endgame* and *Happy Days* by definition demand to be performed in the presence of an audience. The performance aspect of his drama was naturally very significant for Beckett, who often asked for his works not to be published in book form until he attended rehearsals and made the necessary revisions to each text.54 Having outlined the theoretical framework within which I propose to situate Beckett’s trilogy, I will now concentrate on the way in which theatre provides the ideal space for the performance of drama as testimony, paying particular attention also to the role of the audience as the witness to testimony. The analysis which follows expands on the previous section, particularly on the readings of trauma fiction, and draws upon Patrick Duggan’s study on the representation of trauma in the theatre and performance with two predominant aims. The first aim is to establish the viability of approaching drama as performance of testimony, while simultaneously exploring the implications that this carries concerning the audience’s position towards, and engagement in, the performance. The second aim is to discuss the relation between the theatrical performance as testimony and the history to which it testifies. Both aims are therefore intertwined, and the pursuit of each illuminates the other since they enable the assessment of the extent to which the performance of a dramatic work in front of a witness may simultaneously act as a means for exposing the reality of a so far unprocessed and often unspeakable history.

Patrick Duggan’s recent study, *Trauma-Tragedy: Symptoms of Contemporary Performance*, revolves around the representation of trauma in theatre and performance. In it, the critic is quick to note that ‘[w]hile trauma has long been the subject of scholarly attention in many other fields, very little has been written on the subject in the context of theatre and performance.’55 Duggan proceeds to draw upon the works of numerous performance theorists, theatre academics and psychoanalysts to develop his theorisation of the concept of “trauma-tragedy,” which he understands not as a new genre but as ‘a means by

55 Duggan, *Trauma-Tragedy*, p.2.
which society can engage in attempting to understand, contextualize and bear witness to its own social dramas and traumas.' It is indeed notable that his assertion that ‘[i]n trauma-tragedy there is a desire to evoke a sense of being there in an attempt to generate an effect of “real” presence or presence in “reality”’, followed by the argument that ‘[r]ather than attempting a resolution through form,’ trauma-tragedy as a contemporary tragic mode ‘is about the trauma’, not only echoes Vickroy’s and Kacandes’ analyses of trauma fiction, but also recalls Esslin’s assertion that Absurdist drama does not argue ‘about the absurdity of the human condition’ but rather ‘presents it in being’. Concluding early in his study that ‘theatre/performance, more than any other art form, is perfectly placed to attempt a dialogue with, and even a representation of, trauma’, Duggan concentrates on how the interpretation of contemporary drama as trauma-tragedy enables the recognition of performance as ‘a possible site of witness’ that ‘offers an opportunity for testimony which may function as some form of *catharsis* (from trauma).’

Duggan’s discussion of the theatre as a site for the representation and witnessing of trauma contributes extensively and in many ways to my approach of Beckett’s major drama. Before elaborating further on the manner in which I intend to make use of his arguments in my analysis, I believe it is useful to distinguish between Beckett’s trilogy and the dramatic works which Duggan considers as examples of the mode of contemporary performance he identifies as “trauma-tragedy.” First and foremost, Duggan is explicit in arguing that trauma-tragedy as a mode of performance applies to theatrical works that have been composed after the late 1960s, during a period defined by ‘a desire to produce a sense of a more immediate and more authentic experience in the theatre.’

---

56 Ibid., p.8.
57 Ibid., p.43, original emphasis.
60 Ibid., pp.9-10, original emphasis. See also Chapter Four of Duggan’s study, entitled ‘Performance “texts” as sites of witness’.
61 Ibid., p.39.
feeling," he argues that ‘[t]rauma-tragedy is a model of contemporary performance that has arisen in response to the de-cathected, individualized and flattened society in which we live at the beginning of the twenty-first century.’

In other words, trauma-tragedy does not apply to theatrical works composed during or after the Second World War, works which address and respond to this specific historical period. Though it does emerge as a product of, and a response to, overwhelming historical and sociological concerns, trauma-tragedy is not preoccupied with the immediate aftermath and consequences of the Holocaust but, rather, with ‘the sociological concerns and traumatized structure of feeling of the contemporary epoch.’

Though the historical period which Duggan considers in his theorisation of the concept of trauma-tragedy essentially precludes the possibility of reading Beckett’s drama in this context, the theatrical works he looks at, and which include Sarah Kane’s *Blasted* (1995), Franko B’s *Still Life* (2003), and Kira O’Reilly’s *Untitled (Syncope)* (2007), also differ extensively from Beckett’s texts, particularly in the way they attempt to engage the audience in the performance through the employment of remarkably vivid imagery of trauma and violence. Though Duggan does maintain that ‘[t]rauma-tragedy does not imply a performance of violence or shocking imagery, although this may be part of it,’ it is notable that the works he considers open up the possibility for witnessing precisely through the way in which explicit acts of violence occur directly in front of an audience that is often asked to sit or stand immediately next to the performer(s). Though I share his contention that a theatrical performance may act as a site of witness, it remains crucial that the means by which Beckett’s plays engage the audience in the theatrical performance differ extensively from the means by which the plays Duggan looks at do. Beckett’s trilogy does not invite the active engagement of the audience through the explicit presentation of trauma but, as I shall argue, through metatheatrical references, through the prevailing sense of ambiguity, but primarily through the depiction of the need for the human other as a witness. Thus, I contend that this notable distinction between the plays my thesis is concerned with and the works which Duggan

---

63 Ibid., my emphasis.
64 Ibid.
discusses renders inappropriate an approach of Beckett’s drama in the context of trauma-tragedy.

In addition, though I argue that the performance of Beckett’s plays enables the possibility for testimony, I do not share Duggan’s view that through the mere act of being performed, a dramatic work achieves any sense of catharsis. It must be noted, first, that Duggan reads the notion of catharsis in light of Malcolm Heath’s argument which suggests catharsis as the state in which one comes to ‘feel the right degree of emotion in the right circumstances’, and associates it with Judith Herman’s assertion that a cathartic experience in trauma therapy ‘is less a purging but rather an “integration” through a “process of reconstruction” by which the trauma memory/story “undergo[s] a transformation [...]so as to become] more present and more real.’

Thus, Duggan argues that where testimony and witnessing function as ‘potentially curative elements in any trauma-cycle’, the performance of plays which may be interpreted in light of the concept of trauma-tragedy can bring ‘relief from or balancing of the emotions and memories associated with [...] trauma.’

Catharsis, then, viewed as both ‘a means by which an individual, community or culture can come to terms with overwhelming emotions’, and ‘a means by which the art experience might be able to mediate, think through or balance [...] traumatic memory’, can result in the ‘historicization’ and ‘reconstitution’ of the theatrical performance. However, as I have already mentioned above and intend to demonstrate in more detail below, Beckett’s major drama, as product of a world in ruins, does not or, rather, cannot bring about a sense of catharsis. His post-war plays can neither mediate, nor think through the traumatic memory they embody but only perform it; that is to say that they can only testify to the impossibility of fully recapturing, processing or assimilating the traumatic past. Instead of catharsis, then, what the performance of the major drama brings about is more akin to what LaCapra defines as “empathetic unsettlement,” a concept which differs from catharsis in the way it entails the active participation of a witness/audience who, rather than coming to terms with overwhelming emotions, as Duggan has it, adopts the position of the victim.

65 Quoted in ibid., p.10.
66 Ibid., p.94, 96.
67 Ibid., p.95, 96.
and experiences a profound sense of unsettlement, yet without taking the victim’s place.68

More pertinent to my analysis of Beckett’s drama is Duggan’s argument that theatre is perfectly placed to attempt a dialogue with, and a representation of, trauma, as well as his contention that theatre enables the possibility for the performance of testimony in front of an audience that occupies the position of the witness. Before elaborating on these notions, though, I would first like to explore another issue Duggan discusses and which I also consider crucial for my discussion; namely, the fundamental relation between theatre and history, which emerges from the relation between a theatrical work and the historical period of which it is a product. Indeed, I maintain that Beckett’s experiences during the Second World War had a profound effect on the works he composed in its aftermath, fundamentally shaping both their subject-matter and overall structure. In his biography of Beckett, James Knowlson discusses this issue in the following passage:

The war years as a whole had a profound effect on Beckett. It is difficult to imagine him writing the stories, novels and plays that he produced in the creative maelstrom of the immediate post-war period without the experiences of those five years. It was one thing to appreciate fear, danger, anxiety and deprivation intellectually. It was quite another to live them himself. [...] Many of the features of his later prose and plays arise directly from his experiences of radical uncertainty, disorientation, exile, hunger and need.69

For Knowlson, then, the depiction of Lucky, the heavily-laden servant that carries his master’s belongings in Waiting for Godot, is suggestive of the mass exodus from Paris that followed the German invasion,70 whereas the shortage of food supplies and commodities that also defines the situation in Endgame reflects the general lack of food in Paris that Beckett and his partner, Suzanne Deschevaux-Dumesnil, endured. The exchanges of carrots, radishes and turnips between Estragon and Vladimir were common in the life the writer and Suzanne too, Knowlson writes, as ‘the infamous “rutabaga” or humble swede (normally

69 Knowlson, Damned to Fame, p.351.
70 See ibid., p.298.
fed only to cattle) came into its own as one of the commonest vegetables.’ Indeed, the issue of hunger in Beckett is also stressed in Alys Moody’s recent essay, ‘The Non-Lieu of Hunger: Post-war Beckett and the Genealogies of Starvation’ (2012), in which she asserts that it is in the post-war works that ‘hunger emerges for the first time as a pervasive theme,’ and as such constitutes ‘a point of engagement with history and nation.’ To the above we may add the numerous references to French locations associated with the war such as the red countryside of Rousillon that is evoked in Waiting for Godot and the allusion to the Ardennes region in Endgame, which during the war constituted an area of conflict between the Germans and the Allied Forces; the selection of names of ‘international flavor’ for the protagonists, including the name ‘Lévy’ that was attributed to Vladimir in the first manuscript of Waiting for Godot; the appearance of Willie in an earlier draft of Happy Days in striped pyjamas; the decisive namelessness of most settings and landscapes that replaces Beckett’s previous tendency to set works in Ireland and England.

Albeit often read as an apolitical writer, in my discussion I argue that Beckett was a writer deeply preoccupied with the socio-political concerns prevalent during his time, concerns which found expression in, and often radically affected, the subject-matter of his prose and dramatic texts. A conversation he once shared with Knowlson, and which the latter recounts in the study, Images of Beckett (2003), offers a valuable insight into Beckett’s perspective towards the manner in which the position of the individual in the world is determined by exterior circumstances. Accordingly, during their conversation, Knowlson expressed his views on Sartre’s philosophy and argued that ‘we were too firmly en situation (too limited by our situation) for the existentialist’s emphasis on human freedom to have a lot of meaning.’ To this,

71 Ibid., p.303.
74 Knowlson, Damned to Fame, p.475.
76 Ibid., p.18, original emphasis.
the writer’s response was telling: ‘Beckett agreed enthusiastically with this objection,’ Knowlson writes, ‘saying that he found the actual limitations on man’s freedom of action (his genes, his upbringing, his social circumstances) far more compelling than the theoretical freedom on which Sartre had laid so much stress.’ Indeed, the following, brief consideration of Beckett’s works reveals his lasting preoccupation with social and political issues, as well as the way in which these concerns surface time and again in both early and later works.

In early works composed during the 1920s and 1930s, Beckett is deeply antagonistic towards the narrow, censorious Irish environment that emerged in the aftermath of the partition of his home country. The partition of Ireland, which preceded the Anglo-Irish Treaty of 1921 and saw the formation of the independent Irish Free State, was the prelude to the development of a cultural climate in the new twenty-six-county state that was deeply influenced by the Catholic conservatism that pervaded society at all levels. From a literary or artistic standpoint, this censorious climate was powerfully expressed in the 1929 Censorship of Publications Act. Described as ‘an Act to make provision for the prohibition of the sale and distribution of unwholesome literature,’ the Censorship Act contributed to the promulgation of an exclusivist version of Irishness – nationalist, Catholic, and Gaelic – that could only alienate those whose proclivities were unionist, Protestant, and Anglocentric. Unwilling to conform to the nation’s expectations for a kind of literature that centred exclusively on the issues of religion, nationalism, and the land, Beckett was strongly opposed to the Censorship Act, accusing it of promoting ‘sterilization of the mind and apotheosis of the litter.’ In ‘Dante... Bruno. Vico... Joyce’ (1929), in which he praises James Joyce’s Work in Progress, the prototype for his Finnegans Wake (1939), he is also particularly caustic towards the antiquarian tendency to concentrate solely on the content of literary work while paying minimal

---

77 Ibid.
attention to form and style. Applauding Joyce’s work as a text in which ‘form is content, content is form’, he proceeds to attack the critics of Joyce in the following, much-cited passage: ‘Here is direct expression [...]. And if you don’t understand it, Ladies and Gentlemen, it is because you are too decadent to receive it. You are not satisfied unless form is so strictly divorced from content that you can comprehend the one almost without bothering to read the other.’

In his 1934 essay, ‘Recent Irish Poetry’, Beckett addresses the antiquarians once more, arguing against their predisposition to follow what he describes as ‘the Celtic drill of extraversion’, whereas in the novel *Murphy* (1938), he satirises the Irish poet Austin Clarke, whose knowledge and engagement with the Gaelic tradition fundamentally shaped his works, through the character of Austin Ticklepenny. According to critics Alexander McKee and William Atkinson, the 1951 novel, *Molloy*, also exposes Beckett’s opposition to the censorious instincts of the Irish nationalist mind, this time through the controlling behaviour of Moran, whose depiction arguably constitutes a reference to D. P. Moran, a notably vigorous supporter of the 1929 Act.

Beckett’s critique of narrow-gauge Irish cultural nationalism also appears in the novellas he composed in the 1940s. In *First Love* (written in French as *Premier Amour*, 1946, published 1970; published in English, 1973), he savagely satirises the nationalist veneration of the Irish Gaelic past:

> What constitutes the charm of our country [...] is that all is derelict, with the sole exception of history’s ancient faeces. These are ardently sought after, stuffed, and carried in procession. Wherever nauseated time has dropped a nice fat turd you will find our patriots, sniffing it up on all fours, their faces on fire.

---

83 Joyce’s works were never formally banned in Ireland, yet, as Roy Foster writes, ‘many of these ominous tremors about artistic expression [in the Irish Free State] would be concentrated around one writer and one book: James Joyce and *Ulysses.*’ See Roy Foster, *The Normal and the National: Yeats and the Boundaries of Irish Writing*, in *The Irish Story: Telling Tales and Making it up in Ireland* (London: Allen Lane and the Penguin Press, 2001), p.103.
85 Beckett, ‘Recent Irish Poetry’, p.73.
Years later, Beckett would revisit the same issue in the following passage from the play, *That Time* (1975), which albeit less explicit, it places much emphasis onto the repercussions of Irish nationalism:

[W]hen you started not knowing who you were from Adam [...] no notion who it was saying what you were saying [...] there alone with the portraits of the dead black with dirt and antiquity and the dates on the frames in case you might get the century wrong.  

Similar references to specific social and political events appear in numerous other works including *More Pricks Than Kicks* (1934), *The Expelled* (written in French as *L'Expulsé*, 1946, published 1955; published in English, 1967), and *All That Fall* (1957), though as the above passage from *That Time* reveals, Beckett’s response is often incorporated more subtly in later works. His preoccupation with the historical events that defined the era in which he wrote perhaps reached a climax with the composition of the play, *Catastrophe* (1982), which he dedicated to the then-imprisoned playwright and subsequent leader of Czechoslovakia and the Czech Republic, Václav Havel, and which ends with the protagonist slightly raising his head as a sign of saying, ‘you bastards, you haven’t finished me yet.’ Focusing on *Waiting for Godot*, *Endgame* and *Happy Days* in my analysis of the interrelation between human company and witnessing, I argue that the playwright’s lasting preoccupation with socio-political concerns also appears in the major drama, though here it manifests primarily as an attack against Nazism, fascism and totalitarianism in all its forms. Informed by Beckett’s disdain for the totalitarianism of the Third Reich and his active engagement as a member of the French Resistance against fascism, the plays he composed in the immediate aftermath of the war emerge as products of a period of unprecedented atrocity, genocide and torture, a period which saw the mass extermination of millions, including a number of Beckett’s acquaintances, in the gas chambers of Auschwitz and Dachau. Reading his post-war trilogy as testimonial drama, I propose that it addresses this period initially through the manner in which symptoms of trauma radically affect its subject-matter and

---


89 Samuel Beckett to James Knowlson, in undated interview. Quoted in Knowlson, *Damned to Fame*, p.680.
form, yet most crucially through the way in which it testifies to this history through the act of performance.

Returning now to Duggan’s argument that theatre can serve as a site for the performance of testimony in front of an audience/witness, I would like to suggest that through the very act of being performed, *Waiting for Godot, Endgame* and *Happy Days* bear witness to a distinct historical period which they dare not name or localise, testifying in so doing to its agonising unrepresentability. Like the more recent dramatic works which Duggan examines in his study in the context of trauma-tragedy, Beckett’s major drama, I argue, does not ‘[look] back at a historical moment of trauma’ but attempts, rather, ‘to bridge or reduce the gap between historical moment, its witness and (that) experience.’"90 Unlike David Houston Jones who, in his examination of Beckettian testimony reads the words of the protagonists as efforts to testify, arguing that the characters ‘seek their place in language with anguish, and their narratives suggest a prior event which can never satisfactorily be recovered’,91 I do not approach only the words spoken by the characters but, rather, each play itself as a profound example of testimony. In testifying to their historical contents through the act of performance, I believe that Beckett’s plays actively engage the audience in the process of bearing witness. Indeed, the ability of art and literature to create a witness to testimony is addressed by Duggan when he states:

[W]hile bearing witness through testimony might be carried out by a first-person witness, it might also be achieved through the creation of a painting, play, film, performance or poem, for example, which in some way testifies to the event(s) and so creates the viewer of that “testimony” as second order of witness to the original event.”92

Assuming the position of the witness to the performance of drama as testimony, the audience becomes itself a part of the performance, ‘bound up in its action and responsible […] to and for it.’93 That is to say that we are placed in ‘a position of ethical responsibility to the work,’ since we act not as mere spectators but as

---

90 Duggan, *Trauma-Tragedy*, p.57.
92 Duggan, *Trauma-Tragedy*, p.89.
93 Ibid., p.90.
recipients of testimony.\textsuperscript{94} Thus, I propose that the performance of Beckett’s major drama as testimony achieves two purposes. First, through the performance of testimony, the post-war plays create a witness to a historical event or, rather, a non-event, like the Holocaust, the ‘incomprehensible and deceptive psychological structure of [which] precluded its own witnessing, even by its very victims.’\textsuperscript{95} Where the Holocaust resulted in what Dori Laub defines as a ‘collapse of witnessing’, precluding the presence of a witness ‘entirely outside’ the event who could ‘provide an independent frame of reference through which the event could be observed’,\textsuperscript{96} Beckett’s drama manages through the creation of the audience as a witness to provide that much-needed frame of reference, through which history may begin to be transmitted.

‘Beckett has given us the only fitting reaction to the situation of the concentration camps’, Adorno argues, ‘a situation he never calls by name, as if it were subject to an image ban.’\textsuperscript{97} Elsewhere, he writes: ‘History [in Beckett] is excluded, because it itself has dehydrated the power of consciousness to think history, the power of remembrance. [...] Only the result of history appears – as decline.’\textsuperscript{98} Drawing upon the recent theorisation of trauma which I have outlined in the first section, as well as upon the interrelation between trauma and theatre, my thesis will argue that history in Beckett is in fact not excluded. Rather, it is everywhere, manifesting itself in the form of trauma symptoms. Reading \textit{Waiting for Godot}, \textit{Endgame} and \textit{Happy Days} as testimonial drama, I argue that it is possible to look at the plays themselves as traumatised; they, too, to borrow Cathy Caruth’s phrase, ‘carry an impossible history within them,’ and ‘become symptoms of a history that they cannot entirely possess.’\textsuperscript{99} Taking into account Laub’s work on the issues of testimony and witnessing, as well as Lawrence Langer’s prominent studies, \textit{Versions of Survival: The Holocaust and the Human Spirit} (1982) and \textit{Holocaust Testimonies: The Ruins of Memory} (1991), I will seek to demonstrate that Beckett’s post-war drama testifies to the unrepresentability of its historical content precisely through the impossibility of fully and

\textsuperscript{94} Ibid., p.93.
\textsuperscript{95} Laub, ‘An Event Without a Witness’, p.80, original emphasis.
\textsuperscript{96} Ibid., p.80, 81, original emphasis.
\textsuperscript{98} Adorno, ‘Trying to Understand \textit{Endgame}’, p.125.
\textsuperscript{99} Caruth, ‘Trauma and Experience’, p.5.
coherently recapturing it. Reading Beckett’s trilogy as a profound theatrical response to the horrific historical context from which it emerges, I ultimately propose that his plays confront us as remnants of the post-war years, bearing witness to the condition of art and literature in the aftermath of the Second World War, while simultaneously exposing the fundamental need for the presence of the other as a witness in the aftermath of an unprecedented, historical trauma.

1.3. **Human Company: The Other as a Witness**

Concentrating on the dynamics of human company in Beckett’s drama trilogy, I seek to explore the purpose and value attributed to the presence of the other in the aftermath of profound and far-reaching traumatic experience. Conceptualising the other as a witness to one’s existence, then, does not constitute a reference to the Existentialist concept of “being-with-others”, according to which the presence of a second person enables the first person to work towards differentiation and self-definition, thereby achieving true Existence.\(^{100}\) Rather, I look at the way in which in the traumatic aftermath – that is, in the period following an experience which can neither be addressed nor dealt with and which has brought about the present state of gradual decline – the human other is sought out as a fundamental source of human solace and support, but most importantly a source of communality which restores, at least to some extent, one’s radically impaired sense of belonging to the world. The presence of the human other as a witness in Beckett’s post-war drama also opens up the possibility for the discussion of the role which the audience is asked to play towards Beckett. By firmly situating us in the position of the other towards the performance of drama as testimony, Beckett’s post-war plays create that belated witness to their historical content, while simultaneously destabilising and questioning, to borrow Duggan’s phrase, ‘our individual constructions of self’.\(^{101}\)

---

\(^{100}\) The word “existence” is capitalised in this instance as it refers to the Existentialist concept introduced by Søren Kierkegaard, which describes the state of achievement of the desired self-definition on behalf of the individual, rather than merely the fact of living.

\(^{101}\) Duggan, *Trauma-Tragedy*, p.111.
Revealingly, human company emerges for the first time as a core preoccupation in Beckett’s oeuvre in the novel *Mercier and Camier*, which was written in 1946, only months after the Second World War came to an end. The novel, which was published in French in 1970 and in English four years later, revolves around the journey two men embark on towards an unspecified location and is often considered a prototype for *Waiting for Godot*, echoing many of its themes and verbal exchanges between Vladimir and Estragon. Most significantly, *Mercier and Camier* includes a telling description of the nature of company its protagonists dwell in:

It so chanced that Mercier, up to now, had shown himself the live wire, Camier the dead weight. The reverse was to be expected at any moment. On the less weak let the weaker always lean, for the course to follow. They might conceivably be valiant together. That would be the day. Or the great weakness might overtake them simultaneously. Let them in this case not give way to despair, but wait with confidence for the evil moment to pass.\(^{102}\)

Here, the role of company as a fundamental source of solace, support and communality in a period and a place where the occurrence of ‘the great weakness’ is an absolute certainty is explicitly addressed. What is more, the pervasive interdependence between the two protagonists also foreshadows the nature of the dichotomous relationships we encounter in the three major plays and which take the form of protector/victim, master/slave and caretaker/dependent.

The theme of company also surfaces in a number of other post-war works, which feature a protagonist’s obsession with the previous presence of another human being. The radio play *Embers* (written 1957; broadcast 1959) and the stage play *Rough for Theatre I* (1961) provide some revealing examples, with the protagonist of *Embers*, Henry, expressing his need for the presence of a human other in the first of the two monologues he delivers during the course of the play:

*Stories, stories, years and years of stories, till the need came on me, for someone, to be with me, anyone, a stranger, to talk to, imagine he hears*

me, years of that, and then, now, for someone who... knew me, in the old
days, anyone, to be with me, imagine he hears me, what I am, now.\textsuperscript{103}

Henry's helpless state is indeed strongly suggestive of trauma, with the character
continuously assailed by images of a past that intrude and take over what occurs
in time present. Permanently preoccupied, almost drowned in re-emerging
recollections of his previous experiences with his family, Henry is left to endure
the consequences of a nameless trauma, the persistence of which is suggested as
the result of the absence of a listener and a witness. Similarly, the character A in
\textit{Rough for Theatre I}, blames his present, deteriorating condition and blindness on
the absence of another woman:

\begin{quote}
I used to feel twilight gather and make myself ready. I put away fiddle
and bowl and had only to get to my feet, when she took me by the hand.
[...] My woman. [...] A woman. [...] But now... [...] When I set out I don't
know, and when I get here I don't know, and while I am here I don't
know, whether it's day or night.\textsuperscript{104}
\end{quote}

Indeed, the contrast that Beckett's protagonists draw between their present
and past state and the way in which they relate this contrast to the absence of
company communicates the physical presence of a human other as an inherent
necessity. Yet, perhaps one of the most profound examples of the role company
plays in Beckett's oeuvre is to be traced in the 1980 novella, \textit{Company}. What is
most interesting here is the way company is associated with the impact of the
past: 'A voice comes to one in the dark', the work begins, telling the protagonist
of 'a past.'\textsuperscript{105} At once suggestive of absolute dissociation, of an impaired identity
and an inability to assimilate “a” past which contaminates the present moment,
the text continues: 'And in another dark or in the same another devising it all for
company.'\textsuperscript{106} Company and the traumatic past are deeply and inextricably
interrelated in this novella, which echoes Hamm's striking fantasy in \textit{Endgame}:
'Then babble, babble, words, like the solitary child who turns himself into
children, two, three, so as to be together, and whisper together, in the dark.'\textsuperscript{107}

\begin{footnotes}
\item[105] Beckett, \textit{Company}, p.7, 8, my emphasis.
\item[106] Ibid., p.8.
\end{footnotes}
My analysis concentrates on the dynamics of human company in *Waiting for Godot*, *Endgame* and *Happy Days* primarily because they stand apart from the rest of Beckett’s dramatic works due to the onstage depiction of the interaction between couples. That is to say that these three plays do not only depict an unwavering obsession with the physical presence of the human other, but also present profoundly vivid and concrete images of company in action. As I have mentioned at the beginning, the criticism available on this topic is scarce, whereas the few critics who look at the interactions between Beckett’s couples do so in contexts vastly different to the one which my analysis considers. For example, in ‘Beckett and Homoeroticism’ (2004), Peter Boxall considers the tendency to read the protagonists of *Waiting for Godot* as a married couple, and suggests ‘the possibility that there might be an erotic dimension to their quasi-marital relationship’.

Conversely, in her essay, ‘From Narcissistic Isolation to Sadistic Pseudocouples: Tracing the Genesis of *Endgame*’ (2010), Elsa Baroghel writes that Beckett’s rendering of personal relationships in *Waiting for Godot* and *Endgame* ‘is marked from the outset with the protagonists’ hopeless attempts to bridge the abyss between the subject and object of desire.’ As a result, the relation of each character with himself and the world is fundamentally affected, leading towards an ‘urge to enslave the other.’ Thus, Baroghel looks at Vladimir and Estragon, Hamm and Clov, as pseudocouples, with each character serving as an ‘other’ who is ‘instrumentalised’ and ‘deployed as a palliative device in order to distract the subject from his own existential sufferings without curing their cause’. Essentially, she concludes, ‘the “other” is given the function of painkiller.’ The relationship between Hamm and Clov is also the focus of Nels C. Pearson’s 2001 essay, ‘“Outside of Here it’s Death”: Codependency and the Ghosts of Decolonization in Beckett’s *Endgame*’, which views the master/slave relationship in the play through the prism of Anglo-Irish relations, thereby reading it as a ‘lingering co-dependency between two leftover

---


110 Ibid.

111 Ibid., p.127, 128.
participants from an imperial/colonial (or at the very least ruler/subject) historical situation that no longer exists.\textsuperscript{112}

With the issue of human company at the heart of my analysis, I propose to show that the presence of the human other in Beckett’s drama is longed for, sought out and maintained as a source of communality that restores, albeit to a minimal extent, the impaired sense of belonging to the world in the aftermath of trauma. Opening up the possibility for witnessing to take place – the possibility, that is, that the other may act as a witness to one’s existence – company ultimately enables the latter to “go on” in the aftermath of trauma. However, persistence, or endurance in the aftermath of trauma is not synonymous with recovery and does not imply the attainment of any sense of catharsis. Recovery implies coming to terms with a past that finds full and coherent integration into the life narrative, but most significantly, recovery presupposes the act of bearing witness. According to trauma theorists, bearing witness, or testifying to the trauma of the past, is vital for recovery to take place. Trauma survivors, Laub argues, ‘[need] to tell their story in order to survive. [...] One has to know one’s buried truth in order to be able to live one’s life.’\textsuperscript{113} Yet despite living in a state of company, the protagonists of Beckett’s trilogy do not bear witness to the past, they do not testify to it in the manner David Houston Jones suggests that the protagonists of the prose works do. The reason for this, I argue, is precisely because they cannot testify. Their history is a history that is too immediate, too present for it to be fully recaptured or coherently articulated in speech. Thus, the imperative to tell of a story of such horrific magnitude, a story which would recount an event like that of the Holocaust, ‘is inhabited by the impossibility of telling, and therefore, silence about the truth commonly prevails.’\textsuperscript{114}

My analysis suggests that the interactions between the couples in the post-war trilogy convey that the plays are set in a period of latency. That is to say that the plays are set in a period that is too near the traumatic event that it precludes the possibility of recovery. In other words, this is a period which can only see

\textsuperscript{113} Laub, ‘An Event Without a Witness’, p.78.
\textsuperscript{114} Ibid., p.79.
'the successive movement from an event to its repression to its return.' In this period, human company nevertheless provides that human other, that ‘second person [...] needed for the first person to come into his- or herself in the present,’ as Mieke Bal argues, ‘able to bear the past.’ As audience, as witnesses to the performance of Beckett’s post-war drama, what we are confronted with, then, is indeed the decline that Adorno observes, yet it is a decline that is in its first stages. The characters do endure a progressive deterioration; memory, language, and the body all emerge as sites for the manifestation of traumatic experience, even if this experience cannot be coherently addressed. Yet, it is a deterioration that is at a significant remove from the near-complete annihilation of the self we encounter in one-man works such as *Embers*, *Rough for Theatre I*, or *Company*. Assuming the position of the witness, we as audience are therefore confronted with an image of human company emerging as both a product of trauma and a means of resistance to it; the sole means by which the self may, if only temporarily, cope with the radically impaired sense of communality that overwhelms existence in the present moment.

### 1.4. Thesis Structure

The second chapter of my thesis provides in more detail the theoretical framework within which my examination of the issue of human company will occur. It considers the emerging tendency of incorporating theories of trauma in the analysis of literary texts, and discusses the value of situating dramatic works, and in particular Beckett’s plays, within a similar framework. In the first section of this chapter I draw upon the theorisation of prose works as trauma narratives as it appears primarily in the works of Laurie Vickroy, Irene Kacandes, and Shoshana Felman, before moving on to discuss and expand upon Patrick Duggan’s recent study on the concept of trauma-tragedy. In light of Theodor Adorno’s and Martin Esslin’s respective studies, the second section of this chapter discusses the interrelation between form and content in Beckett’s drama trilogy and examines the manner in which both form and content simultaneously internalise the rhythms and processes of traumatic experience. Demonstrating

115 Caruth, 'Trauma and Experience', p.7.
117 Adorno, 'Trying to Understand *Endgame*', p.125.
the viability of conceptualising the three major plays as examples of testimonial drama – as drama, that is, which manages with its performance to bear witness to the historical period from which it emerges – I will propose that the trilogy invites the active participation of the audience/witnesses to the performance as recipients of testimony, primarily by triggering a sense of what Dominick LaCapra identifies as ‘empathetic unsettlement.’

Chapter Three concentrates on the three major plays and reads memory, language, and the body as three different sites for the manifestation of trauma. The consideration of the characters’ behaviours alongside trauma theories will show that what confronts us as an image of the present is in actuality the remnant of a traumatic, unprocessed past, the symptom of a profound historical trauma that has resulted in a loss of communality. My analysis will then discuss the impact of trauma on the individual in Beckett’s drama by focusing on the depiction of impaired individual identities and disrupted life narratives.

Having fleshed out this theoretical framework, I move to examine the function of human company in closer detail in Chapter Four. Tracing in all three plays an inherent, compelling need for a witness in the aftermath of a collective, historical trauma, I argue that the value of the human other lies in the manner his or her physical presence opens up the possibility of witnessing to take place. Initially, a close examination of the post-war trilogy will enable me to expand further on my contention that the nature of relationships in the form of protector/victim, master/slave, caretaker/dependent, suggests a vital correlation between human company and role-play. Role-play, I will maintain, conveys the reduction of individual identity to a role, perpetually modified and acted out against the human other as means through which company is maintained in the traumatic aftermath. This discussion will revolve around two main objectives, namely, the assessment of the purpose and value of human company after personal history and individual identity have been permanently impaired, and the exploration of the role which company is asked to play in the

aftermath of an event like the Holocaust, an event, that is, which brought about a collapse of witnessing, thereby taking place with absolutely no witness.\textsuperscript{119}

Finally, the fifth and concluding chapter discusses the possibility and significance of responding to Beckett’s drama by actively and self-reflexively repositioning ourselves as audience, thereby acting as witnesses to the onstage performance of drama as testimony. Here, I draw upon Duggan’s discussion of witnessing within the context of trauma-tragedy, in which he writes that ‘[t]he central difference between being a spectator and being a witness is [...] to do with implication.’\textsuperscript{120} Taking into account Laub’s and Langer’s works on testimony and witnessing, I examine the implication that Duggan speaks of and argue that acting as witnesses to Beckett’s drama entails a conscious experience of unsettlement as well as an awakening to the problematic nature of the concepts of freedom, choice, and responsibility. Thus, I propose that by acting as witnesses we become recipients of testimony, providing the performance with ‘enough listening’ and ‘the right listening’, thereby enabling it not to ‘articulate’ but, rather, to transmit ‘the story that cannot be fully recaptured in thought, memory, and speech.’\textsuperscript{121}

Company in Beckett’s works anticipates the possibility that ‘perhaps it won’t all have been for nothing’ (\textit{E}, 108), as Hamm says in \textit{Endgame}, just as the participation in rebuilding the destroyed town of Saint-Lô after the end of the war anticipated for Beckett ‘the possibility [of] a vision and a sense of a time-honoured conception of humanity in ruins, and perhaps even an inkling of the terms in which our condition is to be thought again.’\textsuperscript{122} Through its depiction, the plays question the possibility of ever coming to terms with history, when this history has left the self crumbling in ruins. Most significantly, though, the representation of human company questions the nature of human relationships and whether communality can ever be fully restored in the aftermath of an event like the Holocaust. By acting as witnesses to the dramatic performance, then, I suggest that it is possible after a period of latency that has lasted for

\textsuperscript{119} See Laub, ‘An Event Without a Witness’.
\textsuperscript{120} Duggan, \textit{Trauma-Tragedy}, p.90.
\textsuperscript{121} Laub, ‘An Event Without a Witness’, p.78.
more than six decades, to think again and theorise properly the overwhelming presence of history in Beckett's major post-war drama.
2. In Need of a Witness: Beckett’s Testimonial Drama (1952-61)

The present chapter consists of two sections which provide the theoretical framework of my discussion of Beckett’s major post-war plays as testimonial drama. The first section is devoted to an assessment of the suitability of theatre to address, respond to, and represent trauma, and proposes that the theatrical space, in its presupposition of a more direct and intimate relationship between artwork and audience, opens up the possibility for witnessing. By so doing, theatre becomes a key site for the performance of testimony.

The second section then focuses on *Waiting for Godot*, *Endgame* and *Happy Days* and provides an analysis of the treatment of form and content next to a consideration of the thematic concerns and stylistic qualities of Holocaust testimonies. Taking into account what I perceive as a defining, all-encompassing internalisation of trauma symptoms in its structure, I argue that Beckett’s drama trilogy emerges as a product of the historical trauma of the Second World War, testifying to its sheer unrepresentability. At the same time, through the transformation of the theatrical performance into a compulsive, onstage struggle to articulate that which permanently resists articulation, the trilogy also testifies to the condition and purpose of art and literature in the post-war period. In presupposing the presence of the audience through their status as works of drama, Beckett’s plays, I argue, expose the compelling need for a witness, for one whose very presence constitutes the fundamental, enabling factor for the transmission of the traumatic, unprocessed cultural memory which the plays embody, are radically shaped by, and repeatedly fail to assimilate.

My analysis of the suitability of theatre to address and give embodied form to trauma begins with a discussion of the developments in psychoanalytic literary criticism which have taken place during the last two decades. Due to the notable absence of substantial criticism on the presentation and treatment of trauma in the theatre, I will initially concentrate on the theorisation of literary prose works as trauma fiction, as this appears in the works of Shoshana Felman,
Laurie Vickroy, and Irene Kacandes. Indeed, in their highly influential studies, which revolve around the presence of trauma in the literature of the twentieth century, these critics draw attention to the perceived interrelation between contemporary art and history by showing how particular literary works emerge as testimonies to their respective historical and cultural contexts. Their analyses of trauma fiction ultimately pave the way for my discussion of the viability of situating theatrical works within a framework of trauma, which occurs alongside a consideration of one of the very few book-length studies on trauma and theatre, namely, Patrick Duggan’s 2012 study, *Trauma-Tragedy: Symptoms of Contemporary Performance*. My analysis, which will share Duggan’s contention that ‘theatre/performance, more than any other art form, is perfectly placed to attempt a dialogue with, and even a representation of, trauma’,¹ serves the purpose of demonstrating the qualities, purpose, and value of what emerges as testimonial drama. Most crucially, though, it prepares the ground for the subsequent assessment of the potential that such an approach towards Beckett’s plays has, particularly in terms of shedding light on a number of key aspects of his oeuvre, which include the treatment of memory, language, and the body; the historical relevance of his drama and the extent to which we can speak of it as a performance of testimony; the centrality of the issue of witnessing in his post-war plays, exposed most tellingly through the manner in which the need for human company constitutes both a recurring thematic preoccupation as well as a crucial requirement for the theatrical performance.

Concentrating primarily on *Waiting for Godot*, *Endgame* and *Happy Days*, the second section provides a theorisation of the three works as testimonial drama. Focusing first on the treatment of form and content, I argue that the interrelation which exists between the two, and which is examined perhaps most notably in the foundational works of Theodor Adorno and Martin Esslin, derives primarily from a simultaneous internalisation of the symptoms, the rhythms, and the processes of trauma. Drawing upon theories of trauma, and taking into account Dori Laub’s and Lawrence Langer’s respective studies on Holocaust testimonies, I then suggest that the three major post-war plays may

---

best be approached as testimonial drama, as embodiments of unprocessed, cultural memory to which they testify through performance. The implications of such an approach I believe are crucial. On the one hand, theatre emerges as a genre which provided Beckett with the means through which he could both convey and respond to the profoundly unstable and ideologically sinister European climate of the 1940s. On the other, theatre seems to have enabled the playwright to test the limits of literature even more so than prose works did. 'A written narrative,' Lawrence Langer writes, 'is finished when we begin to read it; its opening, middle, and end already established between the covers of the book. This appearance of form is reassuring [...].' Theatre, however, offers no such consolation. The impact of history on the artwork which stems from it can be much more starkly demonstrated. Most notably, though, the theatrical space seems to have allowed Beckett to expose the inherent need for human company, the fundamental need for the presence of another human being as a witness to one's existence in the traumatic aftermath. Composed shortly after the event of the Holocaust, an event which, for Dori Laub and Shoshana Felman brought about 'a radical historical crisis of witnessing' in the way in which it eliminated its own witnesses, Beckett's major drama, I argue, responds to this profound collapse of witnessing precisely through the manner in which the performance of drama as testimony in front of a live audience opens up the possibility for witnessing to take place. Thus, my analysis ends with an account of what acting as witnesses to the performance of Beckett's plays entails – morally and ethically as well as artistically and theatrically – and with a discussion of how and in what ways such an approach can contribute to the existing body of criticism on the playwright. With the following chapters providing an assessment of the representation of human company in the trilogy as a response to the impaired sense of communality that radically affected the structure of society during and after the Second World War, this chapter aspires to lay the groundwork for the argument that the performance of Beckett's plays constitutes both an artistic and an ethical stance, opening up the possibility for witnessing to take place in the aftermath of a historical event which precluded


any such possibility, an event which is ‘not encapsulated in the past,’ but emerges ‘as a history which is essentially not over’. 4

2.1. Trauma, Testimony and the Theatre

Few studies have so far been published on the suitability of theatre or the theatrical performance to address, respond to, or represent traumatic experience and memory. Conversely, the treatment of trauma in prose fiction has received significant attention by literary critics and trauma theorists alike, chief among whom are Shoshana Felman, Laurie Vickroy, Irene Kacandes, and Dominick LaCapra. The following analysis traces the developments of psychoanalytic literary criticism that the past two decades have seen before turning to look at the recent attempts of critics like Patrick Duggan and Roxana Waterson to theorise the interconnections, or the dialogue which may be achieved, between theatre and trauma.

In an essay published in 1987, Peter Brooks begins with the assertion that psychoanalytic literary criticism had up until that point in time ‘always been something of an embarrassment’. 5 In his view, the reason for this was the recurring tendency to mistake the object of analysis. Traditional psychoanalytic criticism, which took as the object of analysis the writer, the reader, or the fictive characters of a text, eventually offered ‘precious little about the structure and rhetoric of literary texts.’ 6 Rather than dismissing the viability of a psychoanalytic approach towards literature, though, Brooks proceeds by offering a reassessment of the object of analysis.

His study starts from the following premise: ‘we sense that there ought to be, that there must be, some correspondence between literary and psychic process, that aesthetic structure and form, including literary tropes, must somehow coincide with the psychic structures and operations they both evoke

4 Ibid., p.xiv, original emphasis.
6 Ibid.
and appeal to.’ Writing in the 1980s, though, Brooks is quick to agree with Jack Spector’s argument that ‘[n]either Freud nor his followers... have ever shown concretely how specific formal techniques correspond to the processes of the unconscious.’ As means of tracing the interconnections between literary and psychic processes he proposes that we consider the relationship between text and reader in terms of Freud’s concept of transference. ‘The transference,’ Brooks writes, ‘is a realm of the as-if, where affects from the past become invested in the present, notably in the dynamics of the analysand-analyst relation’. The critic continues: ‘[w]ithin the transference, recall of the past most often takes place as its unconscious repetition, an acting out of past events as if they were present: repetition is a way of remembering brought into play when recollection in the intellectual sense is blocked by repression and resistance.’

Once we interpret the relationship between text and reader in terms of transference, he argues, the object of analysis consequently becomes neither the text nor the reader but the very act of reading. This implies, then, that both text and reader possess some level of authority over the other, as the text narrates a number of story events and withholds others, whereas the reader ‘intervene[s]’ in the text by the very act of reading. In addition, the reader also bears a certain level of responsibility similar to the analyst’s, since he ‘must reconstruct and understand’ both the story as well as its relation ‘to the narrative discourse that conveys it in a certain manner, discourse that itself constitutes an interpretation which demands further interpretation.’ The result of this relation between reader and literary text, Brooks argues, is that the meaning of the latter emerges from ‘the dialogic struggle and collaboration’ between the two, as well as from ‘the activation of textual possibilities in the process of reading.’

Since the publication of Brooks’ essay, some notable studies have contributed greatly to the advancements that the field of psychoanalytic literary criticism has seen. Shoshana Felman’s work in _Testimony: Crises of Witnessing_ has been particularly influential.
Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History (1992), which also draws upon her earlier study, Literature and Psychoanalysis: The Question of Reading: Otherwise (1982), Laurie Vickroy’s Trauma and Survival in Contemporary Fiction (2002) and Irene Kacandes’ essay, ‘Narrative Witnessing as Memory Work: Reading Gertrud Kolmar’s A Jewish Mother’ (1999), all of which I consider vital for my analysis of Beckett’s drama, are among the most influential and provide groundbreaking discussions on the relationship between literature and psychoanalysis. Indeed, it is noteworthy that the above readings of literary works as trauma fiction echo a number of concerns that Brooks addresses in his own essay, concerns which, albeit similar, are often expressed by employing different terminology, most likely due to the rapid growth of the field of trauma studies during the late 1980s and early 1990s. For example, instead of addressing the relationship between text and reader in terms of the process of transference, Kacandes speaks of it in the context of the process of testimony, in which the analysand is the victim who testifies, thereby bearing witness to the trauma of the past, as the analyst assumes the role of the witness to testimony. Thus, in her analysis of the act of reading, Kacandes opts for the term “narrative witnessing”, a term she borrows from the role that narrative and witnessing play in the treatment of psychic trauma victims, and which she employs in reference to ‘[the] circuit connecting an individual writer, her text, and her present reader.’

In this context, the particular form of the literary text, referred to in Brooks’ essay as a narrative discourse that is related to the story it conveys and demands further interpretation, is read by Kacandes, as well as by Vickroy and Felman, next to a consideration of the stylistic attributes of written testimonial accounts.

In their critical studies of literary texts as “trauma narratives” and “narratives-of/as-trauma” respectively, Vickroy and Kacandes trace the way in

---


15 Kacandes writes that by considering the acts of reading and analysing as “narrative witnessing” we allow ‘testimony to flow’ (Ibid., p.56); Vickroy discusses the way in which specific literary works adopt testimonial traits, thereby ‘reshap[ing] cultural memory through personal contexts’ [Laurie Vickroy, Trauma and Survival in Contemporary Fiction (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2002), p.5]; Felman focuses on contemporary writing which she examines within the context of “narrative as testimony” (Shoshana Felman, ‘Camus’ The Plague, or a Monument to Witnessing’, in Felman and Laub, Testimony, p.95).
which prose fiction may embody trauma thematically and structurally. For both critics, this interrelation between the form and the content of a narrative derives from what is perceived as a simultaneous internalisation of trauma symptoms. Vickroy writes:

Trauma narratives go beyond presenting trauma as a subject matter or character study. They internalize the rhythms, processes, and uncertainties of traumatic experience within their underlying sensibilities and structures. They reveal many obstacles to communicating such experience: silence, simultaneous knowledge and denial, dissociation, resistance, and repression among others.¹⁶

The presence of trauma not only in subject-matter but also in the overall structure of a narrative is discussed by Kacandes in quite similar terms. Literary texts, she argues, may move beyond merely presenting symptoms of trauma by managing also to ‘perform’ them:

[W]e can think about narratives “of” trauma, but also about narratives “as” trauma. That is to say, literary texts can be about trauma in the sense that they can depict perpetrations of violence against characters who are traumatized by the violence and then successfully or unsuccessfully witness to their trauma. But texts can also “perform” trauma, in the sense that they can “fail” to tell the story, by eliding, repeating, and fragmenting components of the story.¹⁷

The theorisation of trauma fiction, then, is founded on the correlation that a literary text displays between its thematic concerns and its underlying structure. The form of trauma fiction, Vickroy and Kacandes argue, embodies and is radically shaped by the trauma it evokes in its content. Thus, a protagonist’s inability to address the trauma of the past, for example, is mirrored in narrative fragmentation or stylistic disjunction, with the text itself displaying symptoms of ellipsis and often a resort to silence. What the character does not or cannot say, Vickroy asserts, occurs as a simultaneous narrative silence which represents ‘a traumatic gap, a withholding of words because of terror, guilt, or coercion.’¹⁸ In the same context, memory emerges out of the silences as traumatic, as ‘wordless, visual, and reenactive rather than cognitive/verbal,’ the underlying cause of

¹⁶ Vickroy, Trauma and Survival, p.3.
¹⁷ Kacandes, ‘Narrative Witnessing’, p.56.
¹⁸ Vickroy, Trauma and Survival, p.187.
endless repetition. Arguing in her examination of the works of Duras and Kincaid that a text may become itself repetitive in the actions it presents, in the conversations it includes, and in its sentence structures, Vickroy eventually draws the conclusion that in trauma fiction, 'reenactment and repetition replace memory for the severely traumatized'. Similarly, the manifestation of trauma on a protagonist's body is reflected in the seemingly impaired body of the text, with the body emerging, according to Kacandes, as 'a sign that is perfectly decodable'.

Crucially, these critics’ theorisation of trauma fiction also gives much emphasis to the historical background of its composition. Indeed, the specific treatment of both content and form is perceived as fundamentally related to, and defined by, the socio-political circumstances that prevail over the place and period from which a text emerges. ‘[T]rauma narratives’, Vickroy argues, ‘are personalized responses to this century’s emerging awareness of the catastrophic effects of wars, poverty, colonizations, and domestic abuse’, responses which ‘raise questions about how we define subjectivity as they explore the limits of the Western myth of the highly individuated subject and our ability to deal with loss and fragmentation in our lives.’ Thus, the core task of these narratives, which is also where their overall value lies, is to ‘reshape cultural memory through personal contexts’, to ‘preserv[e] personal recollections of collective catastrophes’, and to act as ‘valuable venues for politically or socially marginalized witnesses.’

The way in which contemporary trauma fiction manages this, Vickroy continues, is through the adoption of testimonial traits that radically affect its structure. Focusing on specific works of fiction which she examines next to Holocaust testimonies, she proceeds to draw a vital parallel between literary texts and survivor memoirs, both of which ‘retain intrusive literary conventions such as chronology, characterization, dialogue, and a directive narrative voice.’ Drawing upon Lawrence Langer’s discussion of Holocaust testimonies, she argues that the voice in trauma narratives reflects the

19 Ibid.
20 Ibid., p.30.
22 Vickroy, Trauma and Survival, p.x, 2.
23 Ibid., p.5.
24 Ibid.
voice in survivor memoirs, a voice which, according to Langer, 'seeks to impose on apparently chaotic episodes a perceived sequence, *whether or not that sequence was perceived in an identical way* during the period that is being rescued from oblivion by memory and language.'

It is precisely through the internalisation of this voice in both the form and the content of a narrative, Vickroy asserts, that literature, which 'has often functioned as a carrier of public memory', manages to expose the memory it embodies; a memory that, albeit inaccessible, overwhelms and decisively shapes the literary work.

The effect of twentieth-century history on literature receives much attention in the study, *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis and History*, by Felman and Laub. In the foreword to the work, Felman and Laub address the 'ongoing, as yet unresolved *crisis of history*' which the Holocaust brought about, and which stems from the manner in which the very structure of the event radically impaired the possibility for witnessing. The Holocaust, they argue, constituted '[an] unprecedented, inconceivable, historical occurrence of “an event without a witness” – an event eliminating its own witness.'

The crisis of history it caused translates, therefore, as a simultaneous *'crisis of literature*, insofar as literature becomes a witness [...] to the crises within history which precisely cannot be articulated, witnessed in the given categories of history itself.' Thus, the critics proceed to identify Paul de Man’s and Albert Camus’ works as not only testimonies to the crises of history, but also as testimonies to the ‘radical crisis of the literary text’, since the text itself acts as ‘a witness to the crisis [...] of a history that nonetheless remains, as such, at once unspeakable and inarticulatable – a history that can no longer be accounted for, and formulated, in its own terms.’

In her analysis of Camus’ *The Plague* (*La Peste, 1947*), Felman expands further on the effect of history on literature, arguing that Camus’ novel constitutes a profound example of the ‘new,
transformational relationship between narrative and history'\textsuperscript{31} which emerged in the aftermath of the Second World War. Accordingly:

Camus [...] exemplifies the way in which traditional relationships of narrative to history have changed through the historical necessity of involving literature in action, of creating a new form of narrative as testimony not merely to record, but to rethink and, in the act of its rethinking, in effect transform history by bearing literary witness to the Holocaust.\textsuperscript{32}

Camus’ *The Plague* narrates the story of a town stricken by an epidemic which Felman reads as an allegory of the mass deaths in the concentration camps of the Second World War. ‘How is it possible,’ she asks, ‘to read about a hundred million corpses in connection with the singularly chosen metaphor of “a puff of smoke” without immediately associating it with the millions of corpses that were literary transformed into smoke in the Nazi death camps’ crematoria?’\textsuperscript{33} That the novel substitutes the actual historical event of the Holocaust with an event like the plague, she argues, occurs as the result of the specific nature of the Holocaust. As the Holocaust constitutes ‘an event that is historically impossible: an event without a referent,’\textsuperscript{34} Camus’ work can therefore only testify to its impossibility: ‘[i]t is precisely because history as holocaust proceeds from a failure to imagine,’ Felman argues, ‘that it takes an imaginative medium like the Plague to gain an insight into its historical reality, as well as into the attested historicity of its unimaginability.’\textsuperscript{35} The particular nature of the plague, or the Holocaust, is also that which shapes the form of Camus’ work. Though *The Plague* presents itself in the opening chapter as a chronicle, an actual reproduction of historical events which took place in the year 194- in the town of Oran, the novel soon resorts to the employment of metaphor. Why, Felman asks, ‘does Camus have recourse to the metaphor of the plague? [...] Why not refer directly to the Second World War as the explicit subject of the testimony?’\textsuperscript{36} Taking into account the Holocaust as a referential impossibility, it

\textsuperscript{31} Felman, ‘Camus’ *The Plague*, p.95.
\textsuperscript{32} Ibid., original emphasis.
\textsuperscript{33} Ibid., p.97.
\textsuperscript{34} Ibid., p.102, original emphasis.
\textsuperscript{35} Ibid., p.105, original emphasis.
\textsuperscript{36} Ibid., p.101.
soon becomes clear that the novel cannot address or objectively narrate its historical content in the conventional form it initially sets out to do. The plague, or the Holocaust, Felman writes, ‘occurs [...] as what is not provided for by the conceptual framework we call “History,” and as what [...] has no place in, and therefore cannot be assimilated by or integrated into, any existing cultural frame of reference.’

This is precisely what causes, then, the modification of the novel’s form and what necessitates the resort to metaphor, since the events of the Holocaust cannot find adequate or unbiased expression in what initially purports to serve as an objective historical account. ‘Since we can literally witness only that which is within the reach of the conceptual frame of reference we inhabit,’ Felman concludes, ‘the Holocaust is testified to by The Plague as an event whose specificity resides, precisely, in the fact that it cannot, historically, be witnessed.’

Though I have chosen to concentrate primarily on the studies by Vickroy, Kacandes, and Felman for my purposes, the decisive impact that twentieth-century history has had on the development and purpose of literature has been well documented. Published within a few years of Peter Brooks’ essay, which called for a reassessment of the object of psychoanalytic literary criticism, the works I have looked at manage to successfully demonstrate the ‘correspondence between literary and psychic process,’ to borrow Brooks’ phrase, through the theorisation of literary works in terms of trauma fiction. Focusing closely on formal techniques such as repetition and ellipsis, narrative fragmentation and the adoption of testimonial traits, they also trace the precise manner in which literature may act as ‘perhaps the only witness’ to history, testifying – paradoxically – to its unrepresentability. The insights which Vickroy, Kacandes, and Felman offer in their studies, and particularly their accounts on the internalisation of trauma symptoms in a narrative's form and content, will therefore be of crucial value for my discussion of Beckett’s major post-war drama.

---

37 Ibid., p.104.
38 Ibid., original emphasis.
Like Camus, Beckett does not present himself, and is not officially identified as a writer of the Holocaust.\textsuperscript{41} The presence of the Second World War in his works receives adequate attention only by few critics, among which the most notable perhaps is Theodor Adorno. In addition, his texts, like Camus', do not explicitly refer to, or deal with, the Holocaust as such.\textsuperscript{42} Though subtle references to the war can be traced in the allusions to French locations including Rousillon, the community of Sedan and the Ardennes region, as well as perhaps in the depiction of characters carrying their belongings\textsuperscript{43} or dressed in striped pyjamas,\textsuperscript{44} the word “war” itself, as Marjorie Perloff observes, appears nowhere in the works that otherwise seem to evoke it.\textsuperscript{45} Yet, another similarity between Beckett and Camus is that they both had a first-hand experience of the war, actively participating in it as members of the French Resistance and bearing witness as survivors to the aftermath of an event like the Holocaust. By proposing that Beckett’s drama may be considered testimonial, then, I share Felman’s conviction that the literary work as testimony ‘exists in a state of referential debt, of “constant obligation” to the “woes of history,” and to its dead.’\textsuperscript{46} His major plays, I contend, composed in the immediate aftermath of the war, perform the ‘obligation to express’ albeit there being ‘nothing to express, nothing with which to express, nothing from which to express, no power to express, no desire to express’.\textsuperscript{47} That is to say that the works perform what Dori Laub defines as the Holocaust survivor’s ‘imperative to tell’, an imperative that becomes ‘an all-consuming life task’ since it ‘is inhabited by the impossibility of telling’.\textsuperscript{48} Like Camus’ \textit{The Plague}, they, too, amount ‘to the historical determination to bear witness, a determination that is lived at once as an artistic and as a political decision,’\textsuperscript{49} while also serving as a critique of philosophical, in particular Existentialist, concepts through the depiction of the actual and

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{41} See Felman, ‘Camus’ \textit{The Plague}, p.96. Felman writes that Camus ‘does not present himself, and is not officially identified as, a writer of (about) the Holocaust’ (original emphasis).
\item \textsuperscript{42} See ibid., p.95. Felman writes that ‘it is by no means clear or obvious that [Camus’] texts in any way refer to, or claim to deal with, the Holocaust as such.’
\item \textsuperscript{43} James Knowlson, \textit{Damned to Fame: The Life of Samuel Beckett} (London: Bloomsbury, 1996), p.298.
\item \textsuperscript{44} Ibid., p.475.
\item \textsuperscript{46} Felman, ‘Camus’ \textit{The Plague}, p.115, original emphasis.
\item \textsuperscript{49} Felman, ‘Camus’ \textit{The Plague}, p.113.
\end{itemize}
compelling limitations imposed on man's freedom of action.¹⁰ Concentrating primarily on the theorisation of *Waiting for Godot*, *Endgame* and *Happy Days* as testimonial drama in the second section of this chapter, I will return to the works of Vickroy, Kacandes, and Felman, and propose that the three plays bear witness to the historical background of their composition primarily through the way in which they question the condition of individual identity, personal history and subjectivity, and consequently the purpose and value of human interaction in the aftermath of the historical, collective trauma of the Second World War.

Focusing on Beckett’s plays in her study, *Directing Beckett* (1994), Lois Oppenheim writes that ‘it is the process of transforming, of actualizing what otherwise is but frozen on the page, that reveals the play as play.’¹¹ My analysis of Beckett’s major post-war plays within the context of trauma studies in the second section of this chapter necessitates, therefore, a more detailed consideration of the possibilities that the theatrical genre opens up for the performance of drama as testimony. In her discussion, Oppenheim proceeds to argue that ‘[t]he texts of Beckett’s plays are profoundly theatrical. More than those of a number of playwrights, they were written with a view to what precisely was to be seen and heard.’¹² Drawing upon recent critical studies which concentrate on the performance of trauma in the theatre, I will now elaborate further on two issues I consider crucial for my subsequent analysis, namely, the suitability of the theatrical space as a site for the performance of testimony, and the role of the audience as a witness to the performance/testimony. This discussion will be carried out with the purpose of assessing the viability, the implications and the consequences of approaching dramatic works as testimonial drama and will prepare the ground for my theorisation of Beckett’s trilogy within this framework.

With respect to the first issue I identify above, namely, the capability of the theatre to act as a site for the performance of testimony, I share Patrick Duggan’s

---

¹⁰ See John Haynes and James Knowlson, *Images of Beckett* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), p.16,18. Here, Knowlson recounts Beckett’s objection to Sartre’s concept of human freedom, and informs of the playwright’s belief that ‘the actual limitations on man’s freedom of action (his genes, his upbringing, his social circumstances) [are] far more compelling than the theoretical freedom on which Sartre had laid so much stress.’


¹² Ibid.
view that ‘theatre/performance, more than any other art form, is perfectly placed to attempt a dialogue with, and even a representation of, trauma.’ His argument, first expressed in his 2007 essay, ‘Feeling Performance, Remembering Trauma’, is central to his theorisation of the concept of “trauma-tragedy” in *Trauma-Tragedy: Symptoms of Contemporary Performance*. For Duggan, what enables a discussion of drama within the context of trauma studies is initially the way in which trauma theories are ‘underpinned by a history of theatricality,’ as well as the fact that ‘performativity is inherent within the structure of trauma.’ These two issues, as well as the work carried out in the field of drama therapy, allow him to argue for the suitability of theatre as a site for the performance and witnessing of trauma and to assert that theatre not only ‘illustrate[s] the destructive nature of a traumatic past that is not properly witnessed,’ but also ‘address[es] the gap between the impossibility of articulating trauma and the necessity of doing so.’ Thus, he agrees with Karen Malpede’s view that ‘[b]ecause theatre takes place in public and involves the movement of bodies across as stage, theatre seems uniquely suited to portray the complex [...] realities of trauma’, and proposes trauma-tragedy as ‘a performative addressing of and bearing witness to traumata.’

The essay, ‘Testimony, Trauma and Performance: Some Examples from Southeast Asian Theatre’ (2010) by Roxana Waterson, also addresses the way in which theatre opens up the possibility for the performance of testimony. Focusing on a number of theatrical performances held in Singapore, each of which accordingly ‘probed problematic or traumatic historical events occurring either in Singapore itself or in other parts of Southeast Asia’, Waterson traces ‘a striking fluidity in the boundaries between testimony and performance.’ Drawing upon her earlier work on testimony on film, she argues that ‘[f]ilms of testimony develop their own trajectories as they enter into the realms of public remembering. They preserve and extend the record of personal experiences,

---

54 Ibid., p.17.
55 Ibid., p.10.
56 Quoted in ibid., p.30.
57 Ibid., p.86.
thereby adding them to the pool of collective memory about an event.'

Her examination of theatrical performances, then, starts with the two following questions: ‘what exactly might be different when testimony is performed as drama before a live audience? What are the purposes of such performances, and what might be their possible effects upon both participants and audiences?’

As for Duggan, what establishes the suitability of theatre for the performance of testimony for Waterson is, again, the very presence of the audience. What testimony and theatre have in common, she consequently argues, ‘is this need for an audience; they are [both] intrinsically dialogical.’

The presence of a live audience, or, the physical presence of one who may act as a witness to the performance of testimony, constitutes for Duggan the central factor which makes the theatre ‘more adequately suited’ than any other art form to bear witness to personal or collective trauma.

It is precisely in the act of performing in front of another, an act which decreases the distance between testimony and witness that otherwise exists between literary text and reader, which exposes the theatrical space as a more appropriate site for the performance of testimony. This brings to attention the second, underlying issue for my analysis of Beckett’s post-war drama as testimony, namely, the role that the audience is asked to play as a witness to the onstage act of bearing witness.

The fundamental need for a witness to testimony is first and foremost discussed in psychoanalytic criticism, which contends that the process of testimony in fact presupposes the presence of an active listener. In their respective studies, Dori Laub and Lawrence Langer devote much attention to this issue, arguing that the process of testimony necessitates the active participation of a witness to the one who bears witness to the past traumatic experience. In a chapter entitled, ‘Bearing Witness or the Vicissitudes of Listening’ (1992), Laub writes:

Bearing witness to a trauma is, in fact, a process that includes the listener. For the testimonial process to take place, there needs to be a bonding, the intimate and total presence of an other – in the position of one who hears. Testimonies are not monologues; they cannot take

---

59 Ibid., p.510.
60 Ibid.
61 Ibid., p.514.
62 Ibid.
place in solitude. The witnesses are talking to somebody: to somebody they have been waiting for for a long time.\footnote{Laub, ‘Bearing Witness or the Vicissitudes of Listening’, in Felman and Laub, Testimony, pp.70-1, original emphasis.}

In Holocaust Testimonies: The Ruins of Memory (1991) Langer talks of the necessary presence of what he calls an ‘active hearer’ in the process of testimony in similar terms:

[Testimonies] impose on us a role not only of passive listener but also of active hearer. This requires us to suspend our sense of the normal and to accept the complex immediacy of a voice reaching us simultaneously from the secure present and the devastating past. That complexity, by forcing us to redefine our role as audience \textit{throughout} the encounter, distinguishes these testimonies from regular oral discourse as well as from written texts.\footnote{Langer, Holocaust Testimonies, p.21, original emphasis.}

As both scholars suggest, testimony by definition cannot take place in the absence of a witness. The role of this witness is not merely to observe but, rather, to actively engage in the process of testimony by ‘partially experienc[ing] trauma himself’, thereby becoming ‘a co-owner of the traumatic event’.\footnote{Laub, ‘Bearing Witness’, p.57.} Taking into account the fact that massive trauma is ‘something that is in fact nonexistent, […] a record that has yet to be made’,\footnote{Ibid.} the listener also becomes ‘the blank screen on which the event comes to be inscribed for the first time.’\footnote{Ibid.}

\begin{itemize}
\item Indeed, as Irene Kacandes and Shoshana Felman demonstrate in their respective studies on trauma fiction, a prose text as trauma narrative also asks for the active engagement of the reader as a witness to literary testimony. In her essay on Gertrud Kolmar’s novel, Kacandes argues that it is by approaching the act of reading in terms of “narrative witnessing” that the reader essentially allows ‘testimony to flow.’\footnote{Kacandes, ‘Narrative Witnessing’, p.56.}
\item The audience’s response to the testimonial narrative is also addressed in Felman’s chapter on Camus’ \textit{The Plague}, which discusses the dynamics of the relationship between text and reader in similar terms:
\end{itemize}

The specific task of the literary testimony is […] to open up in that belated witness, which the reader now historically becomes, the
imaginative capability of perceiving history – what is happening to others – in one’s own body, with the power of sight (of insight) usually afforded only by one’s own immediate physical involvement.\textsuperscript{69}

Yet, and without dismissing the potential of a prose narrative to trigger the participation of a witness to testimony, the presupposed presence of a live audience in the performance of oral, rather than written testimony in the theatre exposes both the power and the potential of the genre to provide the site for perhaps a more authentic interaction between history and art; to bear witness, that is, to historical and collective trauma more truly. This crucial sense of immediacy that is unique to the theatrical performance is also what Langer identifies as that which distinguishes the process of testimony from ‘regular oral discourse as well as from written texts.’\textsuperscript{70} Trauma fiction, as Vickroy argues, may indeed act as a survivor memoir; after all, as Langer writes, ‘[t]he content of a written survivor memoir may be more harrowing and gruesome than most autobiographies.’\textsuperscript{71} Yet, such a memoir, and perhaps more so a work of prose fiction, still ‘abides [...] by certain literary conventions: chronology, description, characterization, dialogue, and [...] the invention of a narrative voice.’\textsuperscript{72} Conversely, oral testimony – and it is here, I suggest, that the value of testimonial drama lies – ‘includes gesture, a periodic silence whose effect cannot be duplicated on the printed page, and above all a freedom from the legacy of literary form and precedent to which anyone attempting a written narrative on any subject is indebted.’\textsuperscript{73} As Langer argues, ‘when literary form, allusion, and style intrude on the surviving victim’s account, we risk forgetting where we are and imagine deceptive continuities.’ Testimonial drama, and in particular Beckett’s plays, overwhelmed as they are by profound repetition, intrusive silences, and driven by his desire to write ‘sans style’\textsuperscript{74} eliminate any such sense of continuity. This makes possible the suggestion, then, that the performance of drama as testimony in front of a live audience also acquires its value by opening up the possibility of fulfilling the purpose that autobiographical accounts of

\textsuperscript{69} Felman, ‘Camus’ The Plague’, p.108, original emphasis.
\textsuperscript{70} Langer, Holocaust Testimonies, p.21.
\textsuperscript{71} Ibid., p.41.
\textsuperscript{72} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{73} Ibid.
trauma also attempt to fulfill, namely, that of enabling the act of bearing witness to take place albeit belatedly, thereby compensating for ‘the survivors’ need for witnesses, as well as for the historical lack of witnessing,’ primarily by providing a site for ‘a reliving, a reoccurrence of the event, in the presence of a witness.’ Autobiographical accounts of trauma, such as the historical testimonies recorded by the Video Archive for Holocaust Testimonies at Yale, Laub argues, ‘set in motion a testimonial process similar in nature to the psychoanalytic process,’ as the Video Archive functions as ‘yet another medium which provides a listener to trauma, another medium of re-externalization – and thus historicization – of the event.’ Theatre, in its presupposition of a listener to the performance of drama as testimony, acts as another such medium. Like the Video Archive, post-war testimonial drama such as Beckett’s helps to create ‘the missing Holocaust witness’ by ‘opening up the historical conceivability (the retrospective condition of possibility), of the Holocaust witness.’

Duggan’s theorisation of the concept of trauma-tragedy and Waterson’s discussion of the issues of trauma and testimony in Southeast Asian theatre pay much attention to the active participation of the audience as a witness to the performance of testimony. Indeed, a key reason why Duggan considers theatre more suited than prose fiction to address, and even provide a representation of trauma, is the ability of the theatrical performance not only to bear witness to trauma but, also, to ‘create the audience as further witness.’ As testimony to trauma in front of an audience, he explains, drama essentially ‘creates the viewer of that “testimony” as second order of witness to the original event.’ Thus, ‘[t]he central difference between being a spectator and being a witness is [...] to do with implication’, since by assuming the role of the witness, the audience becomes ‘part of the theatrical, performance or trauma event, bound up in its action and responsible (in some form) to and for it.’ Waterson addresses the role of the audience in the theatre in similar terms, writing that ‘[i]mplicitly, some work is required of the audience in order to arrive at a satisfactory outcome [...]’; they have their part to play in being actively, not merely passively,

---

76 Ibid.
77 Duggan, Trauma-Tragedy, p.113, my emphasis.
78 Ibid., p.89.
79 Ibid., p.90.
receptive to what is being communicated.'\textsuperscript{80} Thus, by responding to the theatrical performance the audience does not only become engaged in the process of testimony but provides, also, the factor which enables testimony to take place. It is the physical presence of the members of the audience that ultimately makes possible the performance of drama as testimony, particularly since the performance we encounter aspires ‘not to represent a strict imitation of violent trauma’ but ‘to attempt a return to experience through theatrical means’; that is, ‘to bring the effect of trauma into existence’.\textsuperscript{81}

As we have seen, then, Dori Laub’s and Lawrence Langer’s studies on Holocaust testimonies and the value of witnessing, which stress the fundamental role that the listener plays in enabling the process of testimony to take place, together with the recent, influential discussions on the treatment of trauma in the theatre by Duggan and Waterson, demonstrate both the viability and the potential of situating drama within the context of trauma studies. In so doing, these critical studies open up the possibility of approaching Beckett’s major post-war plays as a prominent example of testimonial drama. In light of the argument that trauma is ‘a perpetually present absence’,\textsuperscript{82} my analysis of Waiting for Godot, Endgame and Happy Days in the next section will argue that these plays testify to their historical content precisely through the manner in which they portray both the compelling and continuous return of traumatic memory and experience, as well as the impossibility of ever fully amending the gap in one’s disrupted life narrative. In terms of the permanence of trauma, I share Duggan’s view that Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) emerges perhaps as an inadequate definition of trauma symptoms because ‘they are anything but “past”’, primarily since ‘[t]he perpetual presence of traumatic experience […] creates a schism in one’s understanding of self’, thereby exposing the symptoms that follow as ‘an ever-present doubling of the traumatic wound’.\textsuperscript{83} As I propose to show, Beckett’s plays display this permanence of trauma through the very act of withholding the time period and place in which they are set, as well as through the depiction of a problematic passage of time, depicted in long-

\textsuperscript{80} Waterson, ‘Testimony, Trauma and Performance’, p.514.
\textsuperscript{81} Duggan, Trauma-Tragedy, p.54, original emphasis.
\textsuperscript{82} Ibid., p.23.
\textsuperscript{83} Ibid., p.7, my emphasis.
lasting evenings interrupted by abrupt nightfall in *Waiting for Godot*, in the perpetual grey of the outside world in *Endgame*, and in the eternal blazing daylight of *Happy Days*. Highlighted by the extensive and all-encompassing repetition which defines the trilogy, the perpetual presence of trauma in Beckett is perhaps also implied by the playwright’s own suggestion that each work constitutes the predecessor of the next, with Hamm and Clov being Vladimir and Estragon ‘at a later date, at the end of their lives.’

The presence of trauma in Beckett’s plays, though, is most strikingly – and paradoxically – reinforced by the overwhelming sense of absence. This inextricable bond between the two opposites, presence and absence, in the traumatic aftermath is, I contend, what ultimately shapes each play. That which differentiates absence from loss is extensively addressed by Dominick LaCapra in his essay, ‘Trauma, Absence, Loss’ (1999), wherein he states:

> I would situate [...] absence [...] on a transhistorical level, while situating loss on a historical level. In this transhistorical sense absence is not an event and does not imply tenses (past, present, future). By contrast, the historical past is the scene of losses that may be narrated as well as of specific possibilities that may conceivable be reactivated, reconfigured and transformed in the present or future. The past is misperceived in terms of sheer absence or utter annihilation. *Something of the past always remains, if only as a haunting presence or revenant.*

As my analysis will show, Beckett’s plays do not explicitly evoke specific and identifiable historical losses primarily because the past in Beckett is traumatic and, indeed, traumatising. It is a past which resists integration and is beyond representation, thereby precluding the possibility of ever being fully and coherently articulated. Manifesting in an overwhelming sense of absence, an absence that is most powerfully evoked in the depiction of deprivation and lack, trauma in his plays confronts us primarily in the depiction of the present as nothing more than a remnant of a fragmented, unprocessed past, a past that has

---

84 Samuel Beckett to Jean Martin. Beckett’s exact words to the French actor were: ‘You must realize that Hamm and Clov are Didi and Gogo at a later date, at the end of their lives.’ Quoted in Dougal McMillan and Martha Fehsenfeld, *Beckett in the Theatre: The Author as Practical Playwright and Director* (London: John Calder; New York: Riverrun Press, 1988), p.163.
not *passed* but is instead overpoweringly and persistently present, a part of which always remains, to borrow LaCapra's term, ‘float[ing] up,’ as Winnie says in *Happy Days*, ‘out of the blue.’

As trauma theory and the available criticism on theatre and trauma suggest, the performance of Beckett's major drama as testimony necessitates our active participation in what confronts us as an onstage struggle to testify. The following analysis of the drama trilogy, then, will also discuss the ways in which it invites our active participation in the theatrical performance, and expand further on what acting as witnesses to it entails and results in. Taking into account Freud's argument, also alluded to by Duggan, that ‘an uncanny effect is often and easily produced when the distinction between imagination and reality is effaced,’ my analysis will initially show how, through the particular treatment of form and content, the playwright manages indeed to blur the distinction between imagination and reality to which Freud refers, thereby producing an overwhelming effect of unsettlement in the audience and triggering our involvement as witnesses to the onstage process of testimony. Through the deliberate rejection of conventional theatrical structure, the inclusion of numerous metatheatrical references, and the depiction of unspecified locations alongside the allusions to the very actual and recognisable Eiffel Tower, the Rhône, and the Ardennes region, it is my contention that the plays successfully manage to eliminate the distance between audience and performance while simultaneously exposing the fundamental need for the presence of the other as a witness in the aftermath of a profound historical trauma. By testifying to its historical content, by bearing witness through performance in front of a live audience to the unrepresentability of a historical event it never calls by name, never directly addresses or acknowledges, Beckett's drama mutates into a key site of interaction between theatre, trauma, and history. In so doing, it firmly places us in the position of the belated witness to the emergence of an

---

86 Winnie's exact quote is: ‘[...] all comes back. [Pause.] All? [Pause.] No, not all. [Smile.] No no. [Smile off.] Not quite. [Pause.] A part. [Pause.] Floats up, one fine day, out of the blue.’ In Samuel Beckett, *Happy Days*, in *The Complete Dramatic Works* (1986; London: Faber & Faber, 2006), p.144. All further references to the play will be cited parenthetically in the text, and will be to this edition.

87 Quoted in Duggan, *Trauma-Tragedy*, p.73.
overwhelming, unprocessed history which is 'not over',\textsuperscript{88} a history which intrudes into the present, radically affecting all aspects of the theatrical attempt to convey it. By acting as witnesses, then, we have responsibility for providing the performance with 'enough listening' and 'the right listening'\textsuperscript{89} to enable it not only to question the condition of the individual and, indeed, the condition of art and literature in the aftermath of Second World War, but also to transmit it. That is to say that we carry the responsibility of being involved in, and decisively affected by, the struggle we are confronted with, and which asks us to rethink and reassess ‘what’s the idea of [us],’ what we are meant to mean, as Winnie demands in \textit{Happy Days} (\textit{HD}, 156). Most crucially though, by acting as witnesses to Beckett’s plays we respond to their inherent need for the presence of another human being as a witness in the aftermath of an event which brought about a devastating ‘collapse of witnessing’,\textsuperscript{90} a need that is exposed not only through the status of the works as drama, but also through the simultaneous, onstage depiction of couples, and each protagonist’s perpetual obsession with human company.

2.2. Beside History: Beckett’s Testimonial Drama

Asked if she lives with Auschwitz after the liberation, Holocaust survivor Charlotte Delbo replied: ‘No – I live \textit{beside} it. Auschwitz is there, fixed and unchangeable but wrapped in the impervious skin of memory that segregates itself from the present “me.” Unlike the snake’s skin, the skin of memory doesn’t renew itself.’\textsuperscript{91} In light of the preceding discussion of testimonial literature and the potential of the theatrical genre to bear witness to historical events, I will now argue that Beckett’s major drama, emerging from the ruins of the Second World War, exists in a place beside history that is analogous to Delbo’s place beside the concentration camp from which she survived. His work, I contend, like the lives of so many Holocaust survivors, contains and is driven by an equally traumatic, ever-present but unprocessed memory, which attacks and spreads throughout it like an intruder, ‘a foreign body permanently at work in

\textsuperscript{88} Felman and Laub, ‘Foreword’, p.xiv, original emphasis.
\textsuperscript{89} Laub, ‘An Event Without a Witness’, p.78.
\textsuperscript{90} Ibid., p.80.
\textsuperscript{91} Quoted in Langer, \textit{Holocaust Testimonies}, p.5, my emphasis.
Focusing on the three post-war plays with which my thesis is primarily concerned, I will initially examine how the interrelation they display between form and content, and which I perceive to be founded on a simultaneous internalisation of symptoms of trauma, invites a reading of them as examples of testimonial drama. Consequently, I will concentrate on the emergence of the issue of witnessing as a central concern in Beckett’s oeuvre, one that is exposed through the status of the plays as works of drama, as well as through the onstage depiction of the need for human company, the value of which will constitute the central preoccupation of my analysis in Chapter Four of this thesis.

In his study on the issue of memory in Beckett, entitled Memory & Narrative: The Weave of Life-Writing (1998), James Olney argues that, with the exception of the earlier essays and prose works, the rest of Beckett’s works can be viewed as a unified series. Alluding to a letter of Beckett to George Reavey, in which he wrote, ‘I am now retyping for rejection by the publishers, Malone Meurt, the last I hope of the series Murphy, Watt, Mercier & Camier, Molloy, not to mention the 4 Nouvelles & Eleuthéria,’ Olney proceeds to add to this series The Unnamable (1958; L’Innommable, 1953), Waiting for Godot, and Texts for Nothing (Nouvelles et Textes Pour Rien, 1955; Stories and Texts for Nothing, 1967) before stating his contention that ‘everything after Malone Dies, up to and including Stirrings Still (and going back to catch up Molloy and Malone Dies as well), was part of a single, grand series.’ Indeed, there is much evidence to support Olney’s argument, especially if we take into account the vast number of intertextual references in Beckett’s oeuvre and the resurfacing of similar thematic concerns. Yet, I would like to suggest that that Waiting for Godot, Endgame and Happy Days also constitute a trilogy of their own within this larger collective. The three post-war plays, I contend, expose a number of issues which first appear in earlier writings and find their way into Beckett’s later works, a notable example of which is the preoccupation with perception. Indeed, perception is a central and lasting concern in Beckett’s oeuvre, one that is expressed through the aphorism, ‘Esse est percipi’ (=to be is to be perceived), with which the writer alludes to the work

---

92 Quoted in Duggan, Trauma-Tragedy, p.23.
of eighteenth-century Irish philosopher George Berkeley.\(^{94}\) ‘Esse est percipi’ appears in *Murphy* (1938) and *Film* (1965),\(^{95}\) while the preoccupation with perception is also evoked in the telling phrase, ‘a witness I’d need a witness’\(^{96}\) in *How It Is* (1964; *Comment c’est*, 1961), and is naturally conveyed in the very need of his entire drama for an onlooker.\(^{97}\) At the same time, in their treatment of memory, language and identity, as well as in their depiction of the need for the presence of another human being, the three plays foreshadow the concerns which prevail over the later works. Thus, I argue that *Waiting for Godot*, *Endgame* and *Happy Days* constitute the culmination of Beckett’s quest for ‘a form that accommodates the mess’,\(^{98}\) while simultaneously laying the ground for the later works. With the first two plays written in French, a language which ‘had for [Beckett] no tentacular roots in memory, a language that was therefore safer, more formal and abstract than the intensely charged medium of English,’\(^{99}\) and a language, we may add, that accordingly allowed him to write ‘sans style’\(^{100}\) while simultaneously carrying perhaps the desired associations when received in a post-war European context, Beckett’s drama trilogy, I will argue, ultimately enabled the playwright to provide the appropriate response to history by bearing artistic witness to the actual and compelling limitations imposed, and atrocities inflicted, on humanity.


\(^{97}\) The impact of Berkeley on Beckett, as well as the writer’s lasting preoccupation with, and treatment of, the issue of perception, are discussed in a number of critical essays, one of which is Vincent J. Murphy’s early essay on *Film*, in which he looks at Berkeley’s philosophical concepts alongside Beckett’s treatment of perception and provides an extensive account on the handling of self-perception and extraneous perception. [See Vincent J. Murphy, ‘Being and Perception: Beckett’s *Film*, Modern Drama, Vol. 18, No. 1 (Spring, 1975)]. Beckett’s concerns with the treatment of vision and perception in *Film* are discussed in S. E. Gontarski’s ‘*Film* and Formal Integrity’ (1983), in which the critic draws upon Beckett’s notes on *Film* to explore his struggle with material and medium. [See S. E. Gontarski, ‘*Film* and Formal Integrity’, in Samuel Beckett: *Humanistic Perspectives*, eds. Morris Beja, S. E. Gontarski and Pierre Astier (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1983)]. A particularly notable account on perception and gaze deixis in Beckett is provided by Angela Moorjani in her close examination of the writer’s use of deictics. [See Angela Moorjani, ‘Deictic Projection of the I and Eye in Beckett’s Fiction and *Film*, Journal of Beckett Studies, Vol. 17, No. 1-2 (September, 2008)].


\(^{100}\) Quoted in Brater, *Why Beckett?*, p.47.
Concentrating on the process of testimony and the issue of witnessing in literature and psychoanalysis, Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub propose a reading of literary texts that extends ‘not merely to the texts themselves but to the intellectual, political, historical and biographical context of their actual production,’ in order to illuminate the manner in which ‘issues of biography and history are neither simply represented nor simply reflected, but [...] reinscribed, translated, radically rethought and fundamentally worked over by the text.’

The discussion which follows will pursue a similar approach towards Beckett’s drama, an approach which is primarily driven by the effort to demonstrate how and in what ways a reading of his major post-war plays as testimonial drama can contribute to the existing body of criticism on the writer. Triggered by the resolve to shed light on the purpose and value of human company in Beckett’s works, the following analysis ultimately aims to show how the performance of his drama opens up the possibility for witnessing in the aftermath of a history which precluded its own witnessing, while simultaneously asking for a reassessment of the nature and value of human interaction in contemporary society.

### 2.2.1. Performing Trauma

As I have discussed in the Introduction, Beckett’s views on the treatment of literary form and content were explicitly stated in a number of earlier essays of his, in which he also expressed his opposition to the Irish antiquarian tendency to elevate subject-matter while paying minimal attention to form and style. Applauding James Joyce for managing to produce a work like *Work in Progress* wherein ‘form *is* content, content *is* form’, he himself also strove to achieve the same correlation in his works throughout his career, albeit attempting to differentiate himself from Joyce following his epiphany in 1945. Accordingly, the epiphany awoke Beckett to the realisation that ‘[his] own way was in impoverishment, in lack of knowledge and taking away, in subtracting rather than adding.’

---

102 Samuel Beckett, ‘Dante... Bruno. Vico... Joyce’, in *Disjecta*, ed. Cohn, p.27, original emphasis.
and content in his major drama, I propose to show how the result of his quest for
impoverishment and subtraction manifests in a sense of overwhelming absence,
deprivation and lack, a sense which makes possible a reading of his works next
to trauma theories, and which exposes the aforementioned interrelation as the
result of a simultaneous, extensive internalisation of symptoms of trauma.

Among the first to discuss the playwright’s treatment of form and content
were Theodor Adorno and Martin Esslin. In their instrumental studies, both
critics share Beckett’s perspective towards the two components of the literary
text, and consequently move on to praise the correlation which they trace
between form and content in his works albeit providing different interpretations
of his texts. In his leading study, Aesthetic Theory (1970), Adorno argues that
form and content are of equal value, and that the artistic success relies heavily
on the immersion of each in the other: ‘aesthetic form [is] sedimento content’,
he writes, and as such it ‘can never [...] fully disown its origin. Aesthetic success
is essentially measured by whether the formed object is able to awaken the
content [Inhalt] sedimento in the form.’\textsuperscript{104} Therefore, ‘the hermeneutics of
artworks is the translation of their formal elements into content [Inhalt].’\textsuperscript{105} At
the same time, though, he argues against a precise reproduction of reality in the
work’s subject-matter: ‘content [Inhalt] does not [...] fall directly to art, as if this
content only needed to be gleaned from reality. Rather, it is constituted by way
of a countermovement.’\textsuperscript{106} Content, he contends, shapes the works which
distance themselves from it, and it is in this countermovement that a work gains
its content: ‘Art gains its content [Inhalt] through the latter’s determinate
negation. The more energetic the negation, the more artworks organize
themselves according to an immanent purposiveness, and precisely thereby do
they mold themselves progressively to what they negate.’\textsuperscript{107} This negation of
content, which does indeed affect both the content as much as it affects the form
of the literary work, constitutes for the critic a process that Beckett’s drama

\textsuperscript{105} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{106} Ibid., pp.139-40.
\textsuperscript{107} Ibid., p.140.
manages to epitomise without becoming ‘something simply incomprehensible’.\textsuperscript{108}

In Beckett [...] [a] relation, not identity, operates between the negativity of the metaphysical content and the eclipsing of the aesthetic content. The metaphysical negation no longer permits an aesthetic form that would itself produce metaphysical affirmation; and yet this negation is nevertheless able to become aesthetic content and determine the form.\textsuperscript{109}

For Adorno, this relation which exists between content and form in Beckett is what distinguishes his drama from Existentialist plays. Whereas dramatists like Sartre conceive of form ‘rather traditionally as that of didactic plays, not at all as something audacious but rather oriented toward an effect,’ Beckett’s plays follow a structure in which form ‘absorbs what is expressed and changes it.’\textsuperscript{110} Similarly, the technique of repetition he employs also differentiates his drama from a number of modern works, in which ‘the form [is] artfully held open because they [want] to demonstrate that the unity of form [is] no longer bestowed on them.’\textsuperscript{111} Thus, in his demand for an art which expresses the irrationality of the rational world order and becomes itself ‘the truth of society,’\textsuperscript{112} Adorno concludes that Beckett manages to react against both traditional and modern dramatic categories, which are parodied in his plays yet without being ridiculed.\textsuperscript{113}

In his eminent study, \textit{The Theatre of the Absurd} (1961), Martin Esslin also supports a unity between form and content, though he proceeds to recognise this unity as one of the major qualities of Absurdist theatre. Reaching its peak in the aftermath of the Second World War, Absurdist drama is identified by the critic as the expression of the search for a way in which people can, ‘with dignity, confront a universe deprived of what was once its centre and its living purpose, a world deprived of a generally accepted integrating principle, which has

\textsuperscript{108} Ibid., p.347.
\textsuperscript{109} Ibid., p.348.
\textsuperscript{111} Adorno, \textit{Aesthetic Theory}, p.147.
\textsuperscript{112} Ibid., p.84.
\textsuperscript{113} Adorno, ‘Trying to Understand \textit{Endgame},’ p.136.
become disjointed, purposeless – absurd.’¹¹⁴ Like Adorno, Esslin also separates Beckett’s works, which he considers Absurdist, from Existentialist theatre, arguing that Absurdist theatre ‘has renounced arguing about the absurdity of the human condition; it merely presents it in being’.¹¹⁵ Dramatic works which belong to this category demonstrate a ‘striving for an integration between the subject-matter and the form in which it is expressed,’ and it is this striving which fundamentally separates them from Existentialist theatre.¹¹⁶ Thus, he contends that Absurdist content is not the reproduction of the irrationality of the world; rather, content comes together with the form that expresses it in order to present absurdity ‘in terms of concrete stage images.’ Beckett’s plays, he asserts, are representative of this: ‘Beckett’s plays [...] confront their audience with an organized structure of statements and images that interpenetrate each other and that must be apprehended in their totality.’¹¹⁷

Towards the thematic concerns of Beckett’s drama, though, Adorno and Esslin follow different approaches. Famously, the latter traces in the plays numerous existentialist preoccupations albeit distinguishing them from Existentialist drama in terms of their treatment of form, and proposes that they constitute ‘dramatic statements of the human situation itself.’¹¹⁸ Indeed, for Esslin, a central theme of Beckett’s drama is the pursuit of objectives that neither are nor can ever be achieved and this, in his view, occurs as a reflection of the permanent condition of humanity. Thus, he reads the activities of waiting and travelling in Waiting for Godot, as well as the static situation in Endgame, in the following terms:

The activity of Pozzo and Lucky, the driver and the driven, always on the way from place to place; the waiting of Estragon and Vladimir, whose attention is always focused on the promise of a coming; the defensive position of Hamm, who has built himself a shelter from the world to hold on to his possessions, are all aspects of the same futile preoccupation with objectives and illusory goals.¹¹⁹

¹¹⁵ Ibid., p.25, original emphasis.
¹¹⁶ Ibid.
¹¹⁷ Ibid., p.145.
¹¹⁸ Ibid., p.75.
¹¹⁹ Ibid.
Esslin proceeds to trace ‘a truly astonishing parallel between the Existentialist philosophy of Jean-Paul Sartre and the creative intuition of Beckett,’\textsuperscript{120} a parallel which emerges primarily from the depiction of Vladimir and Estragon’s persistent waiting for Godot in spite of the latter’s non-arrival. He suggests:

‘If, for Beckett as for Sartre, man has the duty of facing the human condition as a recognition that at the root of our being there is nothingness, liberty, and the need of constantly creating ourselves in a succession of choices, then Godot might well become an image of what Sartre calls “bad faith”.’\textsuperscript{121}

Conversely, Adorno dismisses both Esslin’s argument that absurdity in Beckett is to be found in the ‘organized structure of statements and images that interpenetrate each other,’ as well as his contention that the playwright’s drama is strongly evocative of contemporary philosophy. ‘Absurdity in Beckett’, he asserts, ‘is no longer a state of human existence thinned out to a mere idea and then expressed in images.’\textsuperscript{122} Adorno continues: ‘[c]hildish foolishness emerges as the content of philosophy, which degenerates to tautology – to a conceptual duplication of that existence it had intended to comprehend.’\textsuperscript{123} Instead of promoting existentialist ideals, ‘Beckett turns existential philosophy from its head back on its feet’, with his drama offering a critique of ‘the comical and ideological mischief of sentences like: “Courage in the boundary situation is an attitude that lets me view death as an indefinite opportunity to be myself.”’\textsuperscript{124} Thus, he argues against existentialist readings of the plays, maintaining that Beckett’s drama is directly related to the historical period from which it emerges. ‘Artworks’, he writes in \textit{Aesthetic Theory}, ‘sediment historical experiences in their configuration.’\textsuperscript{125} In \textit{Negative Dialectics} (1966) he is more explicit. ‘Beckett’, he contends, ‘has given us the only fitting reaction to the situation of the concentration camps – a situation he never calls by name, as if it were subject to an image ban.’\textsuperscript{126}

\textsuperscript{120} Ibid., p.61.
\textsuperscript{121} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{122} Adorno, ‘Trying to Understand \textit{Endgame},’ p.119.
\textsuperscript{123} Ibid., p.124.
\textsuperscript{124} Ibid., p.130.
\textsuperscript{125} Adorno, \textit{Aesthetic Theory}, p.284, my emphasis.
years or the post-war period becomes, for the critic, the only appropriate way in which they can successfully address it. ‘History is excluded,’ he writes, ‘because it itself has dehydrated the power of consciousness to think history, the power of remembrance. [...] Only the result of history appears – as decline.’

Adorno’s and Esslin’s respective accounts on Beckett’s treatment of form and content provide a valuable background for the development of my reading of his post-war drama trilogy as testimonial drama. Though my approach towards Beckett is more in accordance with Adorno’s than Esslin’s, particularly since it derives from the view that the playwright presents the condition of man as only too affected, too determined by ‘the accidental circumstances of social position or historical context,’ the way in which both critics distinguish his plays from the Existentialist, didactic drama of Sartre in terms of their handling of form is particularly significant. Indeed, the correlation that they both trace in Beckett’s drama between subject-matter and the form in which it is expressed I consider a key aspect of the plays, one that makes possible the argument that the trilogy depicts a widespread internalisation of trauma symptoms and emerges onstage as a performance of testimony. Expanding, then, on Adorno’s and Esslin’s readings, I argue that what we encounter in Beckett is a ‘collapse [of] the linear succession of things’; a collapse which, as Patrick Duggan observes, occurs as the result of the ‘constant performative irruptions’ of trauma symptoms.

Whereas trauma narratives incorporate ‘dissociative symptoms and fragmented identity and memory into their narrative voices,’ Beckett’s drama, I contend, displays dissociation and fragmentation and, indeed, symptoms of repetition and ellipsis in its overall, underlying structure. In this context, the ‘determinate negation’ of content which Adorno identifies as a key feature of Beckett’s drama, I read as the result of an unprocessed, traumatic history which by definition resists integration or coherent articulation. It is a history which, as the critic rightly observes, the plays never call by name yet not because it is subject

128 Esslin argues that Beckett’s drama is concerned with the basic condition of man, ‘stripped of the accidental circumstances of social position or historical context, confronted with the basic choices, the basic situations of existence.’ See Esslin, The Theatre of the Absurd, p.401, my emphasis.
129 Duggan, Trauma-Tragedy, p.5.
130 Vickroy, Trauma and Survival, p.x.
131 Adorno, Aesthetic Theory, p.140.
to an image ban but because it is utterly and devastatingly unspeakable, existing beyond any known frame of reference. Indeed, history in Beckett ‘has dehydrated the power of consciousness to think history,’ as Adorno argues.\textsuperscript{132} What I propose to show, though, is that history in Beckett is not excluded. Rather, history is present everywhere, emerging in the only form available in the aftermath of trauma, namely, in the form of intrusive and overpowering symptoms. ‘The traumatic event,’ Dori Laub asserts, ‘although real, took place outside the parameters of “normal” reality, such as causality, sequence, place and time.’\textsuperscript{133} It is an event which has ‘no beginning, no ending, no before, no during and no after.’\textsuperscript{134} Laub continues: ‘This absence of categories that define it lends it a quality of “otherness,” a salience, a timelessness and a ubiquity that puts it \textit{outside the range of associatively linked experiences, outside the range of comprehension, of recounting and of mastery}.’\textsuperscript{135} Traumatic history, then, is not coherently addressed because it has not been and cannot be processed; it is not truly known. Yet, it is not excluded, but ‘finds its way into [the survivors’] lives, unwittingly, through an uncanny repetition of events that duplicate – in structure and in impact – the traumatic past.’\textsuperscript{136}

Focusing first on the treatment of form in the major post-war drama, I will now examine the manner in which it is radically determined by the impact of unprocessed traumatic memory and the inadequacy of language. These two issues, I will argue, together with the symptoms that the body, the structure, of each work displays, make possible an approach to each play as a performance of trauma. Reading the elements of fragmentation and ellipsis, the breakdown of language, the silences and the overall failure to communicate as in truth an \textit{inability}, a profound \textit{impossibility} to communicate, and interpreting the absence of structure, plot and resolution as a \textit{deprivation} of structure, plot and resolution, I will show that Beckett’s plays convey the victimisation of the dramatic text. Like the human victims of trauma, the plays ‘[are] not truly in touch either with

\textsuperscript{132} Adorno, ‘Trying to Understand \textit{Endgame}, p.125.
\textsuperscript{133} Laub, ‘Bearing Witness’, p.69.
\textsuperscript{134} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{135} Ibid., my emphasis.
\textsuperscript{136} Ibid., p.65.
the core of [their] traumatic reality or with the fatedness of its reenactments, and thereby [remain] entrapped in both.'

Looking at memory, language, and the body as key sites for the manifestation of trauma in Beckett foreshadows the approach that the next chapter will follow in examining the thematic concerns of the trilogy. Chapter Three, which will focus on the internalisation of trauma in the content of the plays, will act as the background against which the subsequent analysis of the need for human company in the traumatic aftermath will take place. In this chapter, though, the concentration on memory, language, and the body serves the purpose of preparing the ground for the argument that in their treatment of form, Beckett’s major post-war plays emerge as testimonial drama, bearing witness to the historical period from which they emerge while simultaneously inviting our participation in the theatrical performance as belated, historical witnesses.

Focusing first on the body of Beckett’s dramatic texts, it is easy to trace the manner in which the playwright dismisses conventional theatrical structure by refraining to provide us with a discernible beginning, climax, and resolution. Waiting for Godot and Happy Days comprise two acts, with the second act occurring to a great extent as a near-identical reproduction of the first, a technique which saw the first of the two works described by Vivian Mercier as a play in which ‘nothing happens – twice.’ Similarly, Endgame, which consists of one single act, begins and ends with two tableaux vivants that differ only in their depiction of Clov’s clothes and onstage position. Before I concentrate on the overwhelming and widespread repetition in the plays, though, I would like to stress the profound sense of absence, which I consider indeed to be the root of repetition.

A beginning, a climax, or a resolution are absent from Beckett’s drama, which may perhaps also be taken as a deprivation of plot. Waiting for Godot revolves around two men waiting for the arrival of the ambiguous title character.

---

137 Ibid., p.69, my emphasis.
138 Quoted in Frederick Busi, The Transformations of Godot (Lexington: The University of Kentucky Press, 1980), p.6, original emphasis.
on two consecutive nights, and are interrupted twice by the same two passers-by. Indeed, the play’s deviation from the expected structure of a dramatic work ignited serious criticism upon its production, which ‘condemned the play for its lack of plot, development, characterization, suspense, or plain common sense.’ Endgame presents a blind, crippled man and his caretaker waiting for something unspecified to end. Happy Days consists of the monologues of the female character, Winnie, and the brief verbal exchanges between her and her partner, Willie, which take place between the bell for waking and the bell for sleep. Similarly, a discernible historical background, a specific time period or location in which the plays unfold, are also withheld. The only certainty, one may then argue, is that the three plays are set in an everlasting present, a time and a place beyond any identifiable time periods and places, yet at once remarkably similar to nearly everything, everywhere. This sense of a disruption of time, which simultaneously echoes the disruption associated with trauma as well as its persistent, compelling nature, is also evoked in the problematic passage of time depicted in each play. ‘Will night never come?’; Vladimir repeats in Waiting for Godot, before tellingly asserting that ‘[t]ime has stopped’ (WFG, 36). Of course, night does eventually fall in the play, yet it does so abruptly, unexpectedly, long after we have been given the impression that the play is set in a never-ending evening. Conversely, in Endgame the time is always ‘[t]he same as usual’; the light ‘is sunk’, the sun is ‘zero’, and the only fitting description of the outside world is ‘GREEY!’ (E, 107). The night does not fall in Endgame and neither does it do so in Happy Days, the setting of which is overwhelmed by permanent, blazing sunlight.

Indeed, the absence of any sense of progress in terms of the structure of the plays may also be paralleled with the absence of onstage props available. The setting of Waiting for Godot, which accordingly depicts an unspecified ‘country road’ (WFG, 12), comprises merely a tree and a low mound, the latter of which also reappears in Happy Days and forms the entirety of the onstage environment. Vladimir’s description of the surrounding landscape to the blind Pozzo in Act

140 Samuel Beckett, Waiting for Godot, in The Complete Dramatic Works, p.33, 35. All further references to the play will be cited parenthetically in the text, and will be to this edition.
141 Samuel Beckett, Endgame, in The Complete Dramatic Works, p.94. All further references to the play will be cited parenthetically in the text, and will be to this edition.
Two is particularly revealing: ‘It’s indescribable. It’s like nothing. There’s nothing. There’s a tree’ (WFG, 81). Though Endgame is set in a room, it nevertheless manages to emit a similar sense of deprivation and denudation. Accordingly, in the world of the play, there are no more ‘bicycle-wheels’, ‘sugar-plums’, ‘navigators’, ‘rugs’, ‘coffins’ (E, 96, 119, 124, 125, 130), there is no more ‘pap’, ‘nature’, ‘tide’ or ‘pain-killer’ (E, 96, 97, 122, 127). Most crucially, there is ‘nowhere else’, and ‘no one else’ (E, 95).

In the images of deprivation and lack, as well as in the widespread sense of absence, Beckett’s major plays convey the image of a world that is nearing its end or, perhaps, a world that has already ended, a world whose current components are simply the remnants of a previous, unprecedented annihilation. Yet the impact of trauma on the trilogy, as well as its immediate relevance to the historical period of its composition, emerges from a consideration of this sense of absence that the plays evoke alongside the depiction of the world in which they are set as threatening and, indeed, cyclical. In Godot, what seems to comprise the world which exists beyond the country road is a number of ditches, where Estragon is beaten every night. This, together with his and Vladimir’s extreme behaviour at the sound of approaching noise, to which they react first by remaining motionless, then by making ‘a sudden rush towards the wings’, and consequently by remaining ‘[h]uddled together, shoulders hunched, cringing away from the menace’ (WFG, 22), portray an image of a sinister outside world which cripples the two protagonists and confines them within the boundaries of the stage. The sense of confinement is heightened once we take into account the return of the two minor characters in the second act of the play. The reappearance of Pozzo and Lucky, who are accordingly on their way to a fair, exposes a cyclical world that seemingly entails travelling in circles and precludes the possibility of reaching a destination.

However, the sense of impeding threat is perhaps more evident in Endgame, which unfolds in what appears to be the sole remaining shelter in the midst of an extensive catastrophe. From Clov’s observation of the outside realm through the two windows on the back wall of the stage we learn that one window faces the earth and that the other is submerged. Other references to the surrounding
world describe it as ‘muckheap’ \( (E, 129) \) – a word that is also employed by Estragon in \textit{Godot} when he describes the scenery \( (WFG, 57) \) - ‘filth’ \( (E, 130) \) and ‘the other hell’ \( (E, 104) \). That is to say, then, that it is a world which comes across as a place of utter destruction and annihilation and, indeed, a place where there is ‘no more nature’ \( (E, 97) \). In short, a place of death, indeed, a charnel house. Perhaps most striking, though, is Clov’s reference to it as ‘corpsed’ \( (E, 106) \), a description that is soon reinforced by Hamm’s contention that ‘[t]he whole place stinks of corpses’ \( (E, 114) \), as well as by the repetition of the telling phrase, ‘outside of here it’s death’ \( (E, 96, 126) \). By \textit{Happy Days}, however, we come across an image of a world which devours its inhabitants. Embedded up to above her waist in the first act, Winnie’s rapid descent into the ‘very tight’ earth \( (HD, 149) \), an earth which has accordingly ‘lost its atmosphere’ \( (HD, 161) \) and leaves her feeling ‘sucked up’ \( (HD, 152) \), is reinforced by her portrayal in Act Two as embedded up to her neck.

It is my contention that Beckett’s response to JoAnne Akalaitis’ 1984 production of \textit{Endgame} in and around a neglected subway carriage further suggests as crucial features of his drama the hostility of the world of the plays and the crippling sense of confinement that this world emits. According to Frederick Neumann, who tried to resolve the conflict between the playwright and Akalaitis, Beckett’s unyielding disapproval of this particular production derived primarily from his objection to the ‘enormous space’ that provided the setting:

Beckett said, “It was meant for a small, tightly confined space.” That was the biggest thing he objected to, this enormous space. You never had the sense of Clov’s enslavement or confinement. Beckett was not going to deny this claustrophobic tightness of space. […] He just talked about it being a room, a small place where everybody was confined.”\(^{142}\)

In order to decode the purpose and value of this sense of confinement, of this perception of the outside world as threatening and ‘corpsed’ \( (E, 106) \), a description that suggests that the earth has been extinguished,\(^{143}\) echoes ‘the

\(^{142}\) Quoted in Oppenheim, \textit{Directing Beckett}, p.37.

\(^{143}\) See Cov’s monologue, delivered shortly before the end of the play, during which he speaks the following lines: ‘I open the door of the cell and go. I am so bowed I only see my feet, if I open my
culture industry’s rubbish book *Corpsed*,\(^{144}\) while simultaneously evoking the European landscape during and in the immediate aftermath of the Second World War, a landscape which one can only imagine as covered with the bodies of those who perished, we might fruitfully draw a parallel between Beckett’s drama and Camus’ *The Plague*, particularly as it is treated in Shoshana Felman’s study. As we have seen above, Camus’ novel is concerned with the fate of a town stricken by a ravaging epidemic, one which for Felman is strongly evocative of the unprecedented, unwarranted genocide which took place during the Second World War. The reason for which the novel employs the metaphor of the plague in order to address this history – and the reason why Beckett’s drama employs vague but foreboding adjectives to address the world of the plays – is precisely the fact that the original, actual event they struggle to address constitutes ‘an event that is *historically impossible: an event without a referent.*’\(^{145}\) It is notable that whereas Camus does manage to find a metaphor in order to allude to the historical content of his novel, Beckett’s drama can only speak of its history by employing interchangeable adjectives and descriptions. In his study on Holocaust testimonies, Langer argues that ‘[w]ritten accounts of victim experience’, with which we could associate Camus’ novel, ‘prod the imagination in ways that speech cannot, striving for analogies to initiate the reader into the particularities of their grim world.’\(^{146}\) Confronting us as speech articulated onstage, Beckett’s major plays can draw no such analogies. Rather, they can only *attempt* to describe their history through the onstage struggle to describe the surrounding world, a world which is ultimately portrayed as barren, desolate and hostile, a world which, according to Adorno, echoes ‘the experience which was cited in the title of the culture industry’s rubbish book *Corpsed.*’\(^{147}\)

Felman argues that what eventually shapes the form of Camus’ novel, which initially aspires to act as a chronicle, is the very nature of the Holocaust as a referential impossibility, one that the work cannot address or communicate without eventually resorting to the employment of metaphor. What shapes the

---

\(^{144}\) Adorno, ‘Trying to Understand *Endgame*’, p.122.

\(^{145}\) Felman, ‘Camus’ *The Plague*’, p.102, original emphasis.

\(^{146}\) Langer, *Holocaust Testimonies*, p.18.

\(^{147}\) Adorno, ‘Trying to Understand *Endgame*’, p.122.
cyclical and repetitive form of Beckett’s drama, I contend, is precisely the struggle of the works to find the correct terms with which to engage with and communicate the history which they embody, a struggle which derives from the repeated failures to address that which emerges as unprocessed, traumatic memory. This brings to attention two further elements that are intertwined with the structure of the texts, namely, memory and language. Yet, with *Waiting for Godot*, *Endgame*, and *Happy Days* being works of drama, it is difficult to draw a distinction between the memory of the protagonists and the memory of each work as text, the language employed by the protagonists and the language employed by the text. Unlike prose fiction, the memory of a play is the memory of the protagonists, and the language employed by it is the language employed by its protagonists. Thus, the analysis of these two aspects relies heavily on what the characters remember or do not remember, on what they say or do not say, as represented on page and stage. Turning our attention to Beckett’s stage directions, which constitute an integral part of his drama and could provide the site for a more informed communication of key issues in each play, we come to encounter the same resistance to identifications, the same inability to provide us with specific time periods or locations. It is precisely this inability of the play as text to provide us with more details, an inability which mirrors the seeming absence of plot in terms of content, which exposes the internalisation of trauma in the form of Beckett’s post-war trilogy.

The repetitive structure of Beckett’s drama derives from its inability to assimilate and therefore communicate the traumatic memory which it embodies, as well as from the simultaneous inadequacy of language to provide the terms with which to address a traumatic history. Not finding expression in stage directions, the historical background of the texts initially surfaces in *Godot* through scattered references to French settings like the Eiffel Tower and the Rhône, and perhaps most prominently through the allusion to the red countryside of Rousillon, where Beckett spent the war years in hiding from the Nazi army. Such references eventually give way to metaphors like ‘this filth’ (*E*, 130) and ‘the other hell’ (*E*, 104) in *Endgame*, which although vague, align the play’s landscape with the pulverised post-war environment of France. The allusion to the Ardennes region and the community of Sedan in the same play
reinforces the correlation between the historical context of *Endgame* and the Second World War, particularly since the Ardennes mountains constituted a well-known area of conflict between the Germans and the Allied Forces or, as Adorno puts it, ‘an area where one army regularly annihilates another.’

Located in the same region, the small town of Sedan was captured by the German troops during the Battle of Sedan in May, 1940, who then went on to win the Battle of France. Indeed, though the bilingual nature of Beckett’s oeuvre demands and deserves such great attention that has caused the present analysis to refrain from addressing this issue in depth, we may note that the inclusion of the references to French places, landmarks and locations in the English-language versions of the two plays is particularly interesting, not only in terms of how it evokes the post-war European setting but also in terms of how it points towards the underlying significance and value of Beckett’s bilingualism.

Unlike *Godot* and *Endgame*, *Happy Days* withholds any references to identifiable locations. However, we may perhaps draw a subtle parallel between the chronic suffering that its protagonists endure under the ‘hellish light’ (*HD*, 140), a light which leaves the earth ‘*scorched*’ (*HD*, 138), and the torture that millions were subjected to in the Nazi crematoria, especially if we also take into account the depiction of Willie in the first draft of the play in striped pyjamas.

Why does Beckett, like Camus, then, refrain from referring directly to the Second World War as the historical context of his drama? The answer to this question is traced in the nature of this history as traumatic, persistently resisting integration and thereby remaining unprocessed, as well as in the inadequacy of language to coherently address it. Beckett’s drama, I have claimed above, is endlessly entrapped in an already doomed struggle *to tell*, yet as Dori Laub rightly asserts, ‘the imperative to tell the story of the Holocaust is inhabited by the impossibility of telling, and therefore, silence about the truth commonly prevails.’

This silence, which in trauma fiction represents ‘a traumatic gap,’ emerges not from the trauma survivor’s reluctance to give voice to his past but

---

148 Ibid., p.142.
150 Knowlson, *Damned to Fame*, p.475.
152 Vickroy, *Trauma and Survival*, p.187.
from the failure of language to ‘provide the terms and positions’ appropriate for addressing it. Lawrence Langer expands on this issue further by drawing attention to the case of trauma survivor Irene W. who, in the aftermath of the war, faced the same problem that most Holocaust survivors faced, namely, ‘the problem’ of ‘how to talk about’ what happened to her and her family ‘to an audience of outsiders.’

Langer’s account is particularly revealing:

[Irene W.] remembers thinking that “My family were killed” was totally inadequate, because “killed,” she says, was a word used for “ordinary” forms of dying. But to say matter of factly that “My mother and brother and two sisters were gassed” as soon as they arrived at Auschwitz seemed equally unsatisfactory, because plain factuality could not convey the enormity of the event. She was especially reluctant to reduce her family's disappearance to a mere statistic [...]. [S]he could not describe it in that way, but her refusal to speak had nothing to do with the oft-repeated view that perhaps silence was the only appropriate response to such catastrophe.

‘Reluctance to speak’, Langer concludes, ‘has little to do with preference for silence.’ Beckett’s post-war plays endure the same predicament. To speak of their history would simultaneously lessen the impact, the profound enormity of this history, but not to speak of it is at the same time not possible. As another Holocaust survivor confesses, ‘[to] speak is impossible, and not to speak is impossible.’ Thus, they refer to the outside world as ‘the other hell’ (E, 104), yet quickly dismiss this description in favour of others, in the hope of finding the most proper word or phrase which may adequately convey its true nature. ‘We describe the camp experience as Hell on earth,’ Langer argues elsewhere, ‘ignoring the simple fact that Hell was a place for the punishment of sins, whereas the Jews of Europe were innocent.’ In their treatment of language, then, Beckett’s plays act out the dilemma of Holocaust survivors, whose suffering did not end with the liberation but continued long after as they came face-to-face with an inevitable truth, namely, that the vocabulary available to them to

---

154 Langer, Holocaust Testimonies, p.61, original emphasis.
155 Ibid.
156 Ibid., original emphasis.
recount the event they endured mocked the event, while the event mocked their vocabulary.\(^\text{159}\)

‘The violence of the unspeakable’, Adorno writes in his essay on *Endgame*, ‘is mirrored in the fear of mentioning it.’\(^\text{160}\) However, I would suggest that the violence of the unspeakable in Beckett’s post-war trilogy does not emerge through the fear but through the *inability* to speak of it, as well as through the simultaneous, persistent and repetitive struggle to address it. It is precisely in this entrapment between the compelling need to speak and the impossibility of doing so that trauma in Beckett gestures towards. I would here allude to Patrick Duggan, who argues in his study on the concept of trauma tragedy that ‘it is the inability to speak of [...] historic trauma that drives the action forward’,\(^\text{161}\) and suggest that it is ultimately this struggle to speak while being unable to do so that shapes the repetitive, cyclical form of the plays. Emerging itself as a symptom of trauma, repetition is pervasive in all three plays. It transforms Beckett’s drama into a performance of an event which, like trauma, ‘has no beginning, no ending, no before, no during and no after.’\(^\text{162}\) As Vickroy argues in her study on trauma fiction, repetition ‘replace[s] memory’,\(^\text{163}\) yet it also establishes this memory as both ubiquitous and convulsive. Driven by a compelling history from which it is impossible to escape, Beckett’s drama exists in a world which evokes the cyclical nature of the Joycean purgatory, while bearing little resemblance to Dante’s conical model. Langer suggests that:

Hitler’s victims had little to do with Dante’s damned, precisely because of the total absence of “expected logic” in their fate. The damned – it is almost too obvious to repeat – suffer the consequences of their sinful actions; cause and effect rule in their destiny. But the Jews are the victims, not the agents of injustice, and during the decade of disaster that consumed them and millions of others, their fate might have been avoided at a dozen different junctures. There is no logic to their destruction at all, neither in history, nor in the art that reflects it.\(^\text{164}\)

\(^{159}\) See ibid., p.9. Langer writes: ‘Vocabulary mocks the event, while the event mocks our vocabulary.’

\(^{160}\) Adorno, ‘Trying to Understand *Endgame*’, p.123.


\(^{162}\) Laub, ‘Bearing Witness’, p.69.

\(^{163}\) Vickroy, *Trauma and Survival*, p.30.

\(^{164}\) Langer, *Versions of Survival*, p.11.
While Langer is right in his observations, I would argue that the cyclical Joycean purgatory, notable for its prevention of progress or ascent, is further manipulated by Beckett to provide an image of what Edith Wyschogrod theorises as the concept of the “death-world.” Employed by Tyrus Miller in his analysis of Beckett’s *Endgame* and *The Lost Ones* (1971; Le Dépeupleur, 1970), the “death-world” is conceived as ‘a new and unique form of social existence in which vast populations are subject to conditions of life simulating imagined conditions of death, conferring upon their inhabitants the status of the living dead.’\(^{165}\) The “death-world” is understood as a key aspect of the “death event,” namely, the impact of the event of man-made mass death on the individual.\(^{166}\) Man-made mass death such as the event of the Holocaust, Miller argues, awakes the individual to the realisation that the event of death is no longer ‘something fundamental, radically individual and individualizing,’ as proposed by Existentialism but, rather, ‘an administered, impersonal, and collective fiat, in which neither the individual nor the community has any real say.’\(^{167}\) Thus, the ‘gradual capitulation of the inhabitants of a confining cylindrical chamber,’ that is narrated in *The Lost Ones*, and the ‘restriction of space’ which ‘emphasizes the temporal immanence of total annihilation’ in *Endgame*, indicate, for Miller, a portrayal of a “death-world.”\(^{168}\)

To these examples I would add the confining space in *Godot*, which limits the movements of the two major protagonists and brings about the perpetual stasis of the two minor characters in spite of their continuous movement, as well as the hostile setting of *Happy Days* which slowly but steadily consumes the two central characters. Emerging itself as traumatised, as the product of a history it repeatedly struggles to convey, Beckett’s drama manages through the internalisation of trauma symptoms in its form to serve as a compelling critique, both of the Existentialist concepts of freedom and death, as well as of the industrialised genocide which brought the first half of the twentieth century to a bloody climax. As my following analysis will show, it is most crucial that Beckett’s drama also manages to provide the means through which we can bear


\(^{166}\) See ibid.

\(^{167}\) Ibid.

\(^{168}\) Ibid., p.51, 52, original emphasis.
witness to a history that precluded its own witnessing. By succumbing itself to the repercussions of history, by emerging itself as traumatised, Beckett’s post-war trilogy manages, in other words, to acquire a form that responds to the lasting problem identified by Langer, namely, ‘[t]he problem’ of how ‘to create a language and imagery that will transform mere knowledge into vision and bear the reader beyond the realm of familiar imagining into the bizarre limbo of atrocity.’

‘All theatre’, writes Marvin Carlson, ‘is a cultural activity deeply involved with memory and haunted by repetition.’ In the impossibility to communicate memory and the persistent effort to do so, Beckett’s drama exposes its history as one of profound impact and, indeed, profound trauma. At the same time, it provides a key site of interaction between history and theatre, between history and the art which struggles to address it. In so doing, in internalising symptoms of trauma in its form and structure rather than merely presenting images of trauma in its content, the post-war trilogy emerges as a prominent critique of art and literature in a time of unprecedented historical, philosophical and ethical crisis, questioning both the condition as well as the purpose of the theatre in the aftermath of the Second World War. As I will now proceed to show, through the process of onstage performance in front of a live audience, Waiting for Godot, Endgame and Happy Days also emerge as testimonies, bearing witness to human atrocity and its chronic traumatic aftermath. Richard Cándida Smith suggests that ‘[m]emory exists in an ongoing process of performance and response.’ In light of this, the following analysis will proceed to expand on the purpose of the performance of Beckett’s testimonial drama, as well as on the value of responding to the onstage struggle through our active participation as witnesses.

### 2.2.2. Performing and Responding to Testimony

As Lois Oppenheim rightly observes, the texts of Beckett’s drama were written, edited and repeatedly modified according to what was to be seen and

---

170 Quoted in Waterson, ‘Testimony, Trauma and Performance’, p.509.
171 Quoted in ibid.
received. In its internalisation and performance of trauma, Beckett’s post-war trilogy emerges as a profound example of testimony, bearing witness to the historical period from which it stems through the very act of being performed in front of an audience. The analysis which follows will expand on my argument that the theatrical genre provided the playwright with the means not only to evoke but also to testify to the history of the Second World War, as his works endure and embody the massive repercussions of this historical event, thereby emerging themselves as victims of the very history which produced them. By focusing first on the manner in which his plays reflect the struggle to bear witness that is inherent in Holocaust testimonies, I will argue that *Waiting for Godot*, *Endgame* and *Happy Days* display the radical and widespread impact of history even at moments during which they appear to be least concerned with history. The Beckett stage can therefore be said to serve as a site for the manifestation of trauma but also as a site for the resurfacing of memory, a memory that exists beyond the known frames of reference, yet which is acted out compellingly and persistently. Thus, I will proceed to discuss the centrality of the issue of witnessing in Beckett by considering the ways in which the plays eliminate the distance between performance and audience. As we will see, in opening up the possibility for witnessing to take place, Beckett’s testimonial drama presents the unrepresentability of its historical context, while simultaneously serving as a profound, artistic form of resistance to a history that precluded its own witnessing.

In my approach of Beckett’s plays as testimonial drama, I agree with David Houston Jones who argues that the ‘dilemma of unspeakability’ in Beckett is directly associated with a deep and pervasive ‘presence of atrocity’. Whereas Jones reads the words spoken by the narrators in the prose works as testimonial attempts, my analysis will maintain that the drama, through the very act of being performed, emerges itself as testimony. In his discussion of *The Unnamable*, Jones argues that ‘[the] narrator speaks from within the knowledge of the impossibility of narration, and yet by embracing that knowledge allows

---

narration to continue.'\textsuperscript{174} While that may be the case in the prose works, Beckett’s drama does not embrace but instead succumbs to the impossibility of narration, or rather, to the impossibility of performance. It is precisely by emerging as a victim of the compelling need to narrate, to perform, that the trilogy acquires its testimonial status, as it is through the impossibility to remain silent that performance is enabled and prolonged. However, while I speak of the performance of his plays as an example of testimony, I do not wish to suggest that the protagonists themselves bear witness to the historical event of the Second World War. Though the following chapter of my thesis will maintain that the protagonists emerge as trauma victims, with their behaviour and reactions being symptomatic of trauma, the situation in which they find themselves or, in which they are entrapped, is exposed, rather, as a period of latency. That is to say that in the portrayal of a situation that mirrors the crippling sense of fear and uncertainty that spread throughout the European continent during the war years, the protagonists are denied the possibility of addressing the trauma of the recent past, a past that remains, in other words, too immediate and too present to be processed or coherently addressed.

\textquote{Beckett’s testimony}, Jones maintains, ‘consists precisely of “writing differently”, and above all anti-referentially.’\textsuperscript{175} Though his argument is expressed with reference to Beckett’s prose works, I believe that it can be applied to his drama as well. As I have discussed above, Beckett’s plays demonstrate a reluctance to be specific, to make clear and identifiable references to times and locales, a reluctance that is analogous to the symptom of memory repression and which thereby exposes an impossibility of reference. What enables a reading of his drama as a performance of testimony, then, is ultimately the profound similarity between it and oral, rather than written, testimonies of trauma. \textquote{Oral survivor testimony}, Langer observes, ‘unfolds before our eyes and ears; we are present at the invention of what, when we speak of written texts, we call style.’\textsuperscript{176} Unlike written testimonies (and, may we add, prose works) which reflect a sense of reassuring wholeness and totality by virtue of the fact that \textquote{[they are] finished when we begin to read [them], [their] opening, middle, and\

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{174} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{175} Ibid., p.2.
\textsuperscript{176} Langer, Holocaust Testimonies, p.58.
\end{flushright}
end already established between the covers of the book’, oral testimony ‘steers a less certain course’. ‘Oral testimony’, Langer argues, emerges more ‘like a fragile craft veering through turbulent waters unsure where a safe harbor lies – or whether one exists at all!’\(^{177}\)

This sense of uncertainty which defines oral survivor testimony is also applicable to Beckett’s post-war plays, due to the seeming absence of structure, plotline and resolution. Moreover, the sense of uncertainty is ultimately what reveals the nature of the trilogy’s history as traumatic, as well as that which condemns the struggle to bear witness to failure and repetition. According to Langer, ‘oral Holocaust testimonies are doomed on one level to remain disrupted narratives [...] by the quintessence of the experiences they record. Instead of leading to further chapters in the autobiography of the witness,’ or to a development of plot and further acts with respect to drama, ‘they exhaust themselves in the telling.’ Oral testimonies, like Beckett’s plays, ‘do not function in time like other narratives,’ and therefore ‘raise few expectations of renewal or hopes of reconciliation.’\(^{178}\)

While Beckett’s drama makes few direct references to its historical context, it nonetheless testifies to the latter by being symptomatic of trauma, by confronting us as an embodiment of unprocessed cultural memory. As Mieke Bal observes, ‘cultural recall is not merely something of which you happen to be a bearer but something that you actually perform, even if, in many instances, such acts are not consciously and wilfully contrived.’\(^{179}\)

Though ‘[t]he end is in the beginning’ (\(E, 126\)), as the cyclical structure of his drama demonstrates and as Hamm in \textit{Endgame} reveals, the performance goes on, exhausting itself, permanently entrapped in the struggle to speak the unspeakable. ‘Some voices seem to choose their memories,’ Langer argues, ‘others to be chosen by them’,\(^{180}\) and it is to this latter category that Beckett’s post-war drama belongs. Entrapped in the struggle which derives from a profoundly thwarted ‘imperative to tell’,\(^{181}\)

\(^{177}\) Ibid., p.17.

\(^{178}\) Ibid., p.xi, my emphasis.

\(^{179}\) Mieke Bal, ‘Introduction’, in \textit{Acts of Memory}, eds. Bal, Crewe and Spitzer, pvii, original emphasis.


\(^{181}\) Dori Laub, ‘An Event Without a Witness’, p.78.
Beckett’s plays acquire their testimonial status as the stage transforms into an ‘arena for the transmission of memories.’

As we have seen above, testimony by definition presupposes the presence of a witness. It is ‘a process that includes the listener.’ In testifying to historical trauma, Beckett’s post-war trilogy exposes the crucial value of the presence of the human other and highlights the centrality of the issue of witnessing in the traumatic aftermath. According to trauma theory, the absence of a witness to the victim’s testimony can act itself as equally traumatising. In his work on testimony and witnessing, Dori Laub alludes to the film, *The Eighty-first Blow* (1974), which depicts the narration of the horrifying story of a Holocaust survivor, the reality of which is doubted by his audience: ‘[a]ll this cannot be true, it could not have happened’, the audience says; ‘[y]ou must have made it up.’ This denial of the listener constitutes what ultimately inflicts the fateful blow, beyond the eighty blows that a man can survive according to the Jewish tradition. ‘The absence of an empathic listener, or more radically, the absence of an addressable other, an other who can hear the anguish of one’s memories and thus affirm and recognize their realness,’ Laub argues, essentially ‘annihilates the story’, decisively affecting the victim who testifies. Beckett’s major plays internalise this sense of anguish, this need to be properly witnessed, which is expressed not only through their very status as works of drama but also through the inclusion of numerous metatheatrical references that acknowledge the presence of the audience and invite its participation in the performance.

The ability of theatrical performances to eliminate or, at least, minimise the distance between them and the audience is addressed by Duggan, who alludes to Hand and Wilson’s work on the theatre to argue that ‘[b]y a simple acknowledgement of the audience... [they] become accessories to the act and,

---

182 See Waterson, ‘Testimony, Trauma and Performance’, p.526. Waterson’s exact argument, expressed in her discussion of trauma in Southeast Asian theatre, is: ‘The stage becomes then the arena for the transmission of memories that even in their own country, cannot necessarily find a ready audience.’
184 Quoted in ibid., p.68.
185 Ibid.
most critically, willing witnesses. In her discussion on Southeast Asian theatre within the context of trauma studies, Roxana Waterson also draws attention to this relationship between performers and audience and argues that by abolishing the boundaries between the two, a play can achieve ‘a peculiar sense of intimacy in which the players’ revelations about themselves have all the more impact for the listeners.’ As I have noted, Beckett’s drama is extensively different to the plays that Duggan and Waterson examine. Yet, during the moments his protagonists mischievously acknowledge the presence of the audience, the plays manage to eliminate the distance between performance and spectators, drawing us in the situation that unfolds onstage as active participants. Waiting for Godot makes one such direct reference to the audience early in the play, moments after Estragon delivers the line, ‘[p]eople are bloody ignorant apes’ (WFG, 15). Walking across the stage and gazing into the distance, as the stage directions indicate, the protagonist then advances to the centre of the stage, faces the auditorium, and describes what he sees as ‘[i]nspiring prospects’ (WFG, 15). Similarly, in Endgame, Clov turns the telescope in his hands towards the auditorium and says: ‘I see... a multitude... in transports... of joy’ (E, 106). Perhaps the most striking metatheatrical reference to the audience, though, occurs in Happy Days during Winnie’s narration of the time that a man and a woman walked by, observing her and questioning her physical state. Delivering what arguably constitute the questions that the woman addressed to the man, Winnie stops filing her nails, raises her head and fixes her eyes on the auditorium: ‘And you, she says, what’s the idea of you, she says, what are you meant to mean?’ (HD, 156). That the Shower/Cooker couple represent the audience is revealed in a letter of the playwright to director Alan Schneider, wherein he writes: ‘Shower & looker [sic] are derived from German “schauen” & kuchen” (to look). They represent the onlooker (audience) wanting to know meaning of things. That’s why [...] she stops filing, raises head & let’s ‘em have it [...]’. The resurfacing of the notion that the protagonists are being watched is equally telling. ‘At me too someone is looking’ (WFG, 84), Vladimir says in Godot,

---

foreshadowing Winnie’s lines, ‘[s]omeone is looking at me still [...] Eyes on my eyes’ (HD, 160). In *Endgame*, this issue is addressed by Hamm, who says, ‘[a]ll kinds of fantasies! That I’m being watched!’ (E, 126). We may perhaps add to these instances, instances during which the boundaries between performance and audience seem to collapse, the moments during which a character onstage shares our perplexity, scepticism and disbelief. In *Theatre Audiences: A Theory of Production and Reception* (1990), Susan Bennett quotes Mukārovský, who contends that the distance between performance and audience is also eliminated when a comedian, for example, ‘makes a co-actor laugh by his performance. Even if we are aware that such laughter can be intentional [...], we cannot but realize that at such a moment the boundary between the stage and the auditorium runs across the stage itself: the laughing actors are on the audience’s side.’

During the moments Estragon asks Vladimir why they do not leave, thereby giving voice to the same question that the members of the audience ask themselves, or when Winnie repeats the questions that the male passer-by arguably asked his companion, namely, why Willie does not dig the female protagonist out of the mound, a profound connection is established between actors/protagonists and the audience who appear to experience the same feelings, the same confusion.

Tracing a history of theatre audiences and the position they assumed in different periods towards the theatrical performance, Susan Bennett refers to the purpose of the chorus in Ancient Greece and argues that its presence in the orchestra shows that ‘no physical barrier separated performer from audience.’ ‘Greek theatre,’ she maintains, ‘clearly illustrates a direct relationship to the society it addresses and, at every level, includes the audience as active participant.’ As she demonstrates in her account, although the status of the audience repeatedly changed over the years, during and after the 1850s ‘theatre design ensured the more sedate behaviour of audiences, and the floodlights first installed in the seventeenth-century private playhouses had become a literal barrier which separated the audience and the stage.’ By acknowledging the presence of the audience through the inclusion of

---

190 Ibid., p.2.
191 Ibid., p.3.
192 Ibid.
metatheatrical references, we may suggest that Beckett’s drama manages a return to the ancient Greek tradition of including the audience as part of the performance, while simultaneously adapting this tradition to the needs of the historical period in which he composed his works; an era, that is, which called for literature to provide the witness to its atrocities, deaths, and trauma. After all, ‘[i]f the Greeks invented tragedy, the Romans the epistle and the Renaissance the sonnet,’ as Elie Wiesel has argued, ‘our generation invented a new literature, that of testimony. We have all been witnesses and we feel we have to bear testimony for the future.’

To act as a witness to testimonial literature and particularly to the theatrical performance, then, entails above all the recognition of what occurs onstage as a struggle to bear witness. This is precisely what Beckett’s plays repeatedly try to expose through the incorporation of metatheatrical references. It is via these repeated attempts to eliminate the distance between performance and audience that his plays demonstrate their inherent need to be witnessed, and it is only by responding to their call that we enable the transmission of their historical contexts. Trauma theorist, Susan Brison writes that ‘how (and even whether) traumatic events are remembered depends on not only how they are initially experienced but also how (whether) they are perceived by others, directly or indirectly, and the extent to which others are able to listen empathically to the survivor’s testimony.’ Lawrence Langer also discusses the role of the witness to testimony, arguing that testimonies often trigger within the audience ‘the instinct to withdraw.’ To reverse the direction of that initial estrangement, he continues, a viewer must find some entry into the realm of disrupted lives and become sensitized to the implications of such disruptions. Though this suggests that the witness – and, may we add, the audience to a theatrical performance – ‘should not come to the encounter unprepared’, the truth is that in most cases we often do. ‘We have little choice’ to act otherwise, Langer concludes. However, ‘[i]t is virtually useless, as we soon discover, to approach

193 Quoted in Felman, ‘Camus’ The Plague’, pp.113-4.
195 Langer, Holocaust Testimonies, p.20.
196 Ibid.
197 Ibid.
the experience’ – or, I would contend, the theatrical performance – ‘from the reservoir of normal values, armed with questions like “Why didn’t they resist?” and “Why didn’t they help one another?”’ To these accordingly futile questions we may add our own: “Why do the protagonists of *Waiting for Godot* not leave after Godot has failed to arrive?”; “Why do Hamm and Clov not exit the shelter?"; “Why does Willie not dig Winnie out of the mound?”; and, indeed, “Why does Beckett’s drama not reach a resolution?” Langer provides a telling response to such questions: ‘under those circumstances, more often than not they couldn’t.’ After all, it is in this very inability to control one’s behaviour, in the impossibility ‘of mastery’ that trauma lies. The witness to testimony and, indeed, the witness to the performance of drama as testimony needs to know that the repetitive and fragmented narration which the trauma victim provides is, in actuality, the only mode available for the articulation of traumatic history. As Laub argues, the witness:

needs to know that the trauma survivor who is bearing witness has no prior knowledge, no comprehension and no memory of what has happened. [...] He needs to know that such knowledge dissolves all barriers, breaks all boundaries of time and place, of self and subjectivity. That the speakers about trauma on some level prefer silence so as to protect themselves from the fear of being listened to – and of listening to themselves. That while silence is defeat, it serves them both as a sanctuary and as a place of bondage. Silence is for them a fated exile, yet also a home, a destination, and a binding oath. To *not* return from this silence is rule rather than exception.”

Laub sums up the role of the witness to testimony, which I suggest also reflects the role of the witness to testimonial drama, with the following, illuminating phrase: the listener must essentially act as ‘a companion in a journey onto an uncharted land, a journey the survivor cannot traverse or return from alone.”

Drawing upon Brison’s argument that emphasises the value of listening ‘empathically’ to the survivor’s testimony, I suggest that by holding its audience in a permanent state of flux due to the ever-changing sense of distance

---

198 Ibid.
199 Ibid., p.21, my emphasis.
201 Ibid., p.58.
202 Ibid., p.59.
towards the performance, Beckett’s drama opens up the possibility for witnessing by triggering within the members of the audience a sense of what Dominick LaCapra also identifies as “empathetic unsettlement.” What I mean by referring to the ever-changing sense of distance towards the performance is the impression that we are at once both included in the performance and excluded from it, particularly due to the onstage situation emerging paradoxically as both familiar and unidentifiable. However, as trauma theorists argue, this kind of relationship between the witness and the victim who testifies occurs as the result of the latter’s certainty that his or her listener will simply ‘not understand’.

When the witness in an oral testimony leans forward toward the camera [...] apparently addressing the interviewer(s) but also speaking to the potential audience of the future – asking: “Do you understand what I’m trying to tell you?” – that witness confirms the vast imaginative space separating what he or she has endured from our capacity to absorb it.

When Clov observes us with his telescope, ironically identifying us as ‘a multitude... in transports... of joy’ (E, 106), or when Winnie raises her head to look at us and asks ‘what’s the idea of [us] [...] what [we] are meant to mean?’ (HD, 156), the plays essentially question our capacity to absorb, to understand their struggle. In these instances, Beckett’s plays, like the performances which Waterson examines in her study, appear to ‘mak[e] a demand on the audience, that they should make the effort of imagination required to enter into the events recounted.’

This imaginative demand is fundamentally a call for empathy, a call asking us to embark on ‘a kind of virtual experience through which one puts oneself in the other’s position while recognizing the difference of that position and hence not taking the other’s place.’ It is ultimately this elimination of the distance between performance and audience and the consequent experience of a sense of empathy that ‘expand[s] the circle of “we”’, that opens up the possibility for witnessing in the aftermath of a historical period which precluded its own witnessing.

Langer, Holocaust Testimonies, p.xiii.
Ibid., p.19.
Waterson, ‘Testimony, Trauma and Performance’, pp.521-2, original emphasis.
Quoted in Waterson, ‘Testimony, Trauma and Performance’, p.509.
My contention is that the implications of approaching Beckett’s major post-war plays as examples of testimonial drama and of acting as witnesses to the performance are crucial. First, the adoption of such a stance towards his drama exposes what confronts us onstage not as a metaphor but as the residue of a compelling history which decisively affects, shapes and, indeed, victimises the performance. It exposes, that is, the onstage performance as a persistent and convulsive struggle to testify, to bear witness to the unrepresentability of history. By demanding our active engagement in this struggle as witnesses, Beckett’s plays emerge as both an artistic and an ethical means of resistance to the overwhelming historical event that was the Holocaust; an event, that is, which precluded its own witnessing and ‘extinguished philosophically the very possibility of address, or of turning to, another.’

Beckett’s trilogy ultimately manages to preserve, as well as to transmit the history which it embodies, and in so doing to also question the value and purpose of art and literature in the aftermath of the trauma of the Second World War. Through the very act of repeating themselves, of succumbing to endless fragmentation and of failing to provide us with a resolution – through the internalisation, that is, of overwhelming trauma symptoms in both form and content – the plays provide us not with an attack on conventional theatrical genres per se but, rather, with a critique of the adequacy and the appropriateness of convention and tradition to address catastrophic history in the wake of the Nazi gas chambers. What they ask the audience to witness, then, is precisely how art and literature can no longer retain structure, coherence and the ability to communicate a story. Indeed, the very notion of how and what art can mean in this context is placed under intense scrutiny and pressure. For Beckett, art and literature have lost their identity, succumbing to the need to provide a witness to the crisis of history, ‘a history that nonetheless remains [...] at once unspeakable and inarticulable – a history that can no longer be accounted for, and formulated, in its own terms.’

Langer argues that:

To some, the testimony of survivors may seem a tribute to the life-force and written proof that moral heroism is redemptive even in Nazi deathcamps; but to others, bearing witness means simply homage to

---

209 Laub, ‘An Event Without a Witness’, p.82.
the dead, a recognition that during the period of history we call the Holocaust the human spirit faltered’.211

It is to this latter category that I believe Beckett's post-war drama belongs.

By incorporating the audience in the struggle to testify, Beckett's post-war trilogy also destabilises our preconceptions about reality, history and humanity and, like all survivor memoirs, our notions of 'what it means to be human in the post-Holocaust era.'212 Like the examples of trauma fiction which Laurie Vickroy examines in her study, these plays 'raise questions about how we define subjectivity as they explore the limits of the Western myth of the highly individuated subject and our ability to deal with loss and fragmentation in our lives.'213 Confronting us from the very beginning with the simple, yet profoundly powerful contention that there is '[n]othing to be done' (WFG, 11), they challenge the prevailing post-war Existentialist concepts of freedom, choice and responsibility but, mostly, they bring to attention the concept of “you cannot do nothing”, a concept which 'is so alien to the self-reliant Western mind (dominated by the idea of the individual as agent of his fate) that its centrality, its blameless centrality to the camp experience continues to leave one morally disoriented.'214 Yet, being works of drama, they also expose us to the inherent, fundamental value of human presence. '[D]rama depends on its audience', Susan Bennett asserts, and it is precisely in the manner in which the theatre presupposes the presence of a witness that the genre emerges as perhaps the most adequate form to 'accommodate the mess.'215 That is to say that as testimonial drama, Beckett's plays create a "Thou" in the aftermath of the historical event of the Holocaust, which constituted 'a world in which the very imagination of the Other was no longer possible', a world in which '[t]here was no longer an other to which one could say “Thou” in the hope of being heard.'216

Permanently existing beside history, Beckett's testimonial drama bears witness to its historical context by ultimately emerging itself as both a symptom

211 Langer, Versions of Survival, p.65.
212 Langer, Holocaust Testimonies, p.38.
213 Vickroy, Trauma and Survival, p.2.
214 Langer, Holocaust Testimonies, p.85, original emphasis.
216 Laub, ‘An Event Without a Witness’, p.81, 82.
of, and a means of resistance to, the unprecedented trauma of the Second World War. As we shall proceed to see in the next chapter through a discussion of the treatment of memory, language, and the body in the post-war trilogy, Beckett’s protagonists ‘become themselves the symptom of a history that they cannot entirely possess.’ In the depiction of their interactions, in the portrayal of the unresolved tension ‘between imposed isolation and the impulse to community,’ Waiting for Godot, Endgame and Happy Days eventually expose, through subject-matter as well as through form, the inherent need for the presence of the human other as a listener and a witness in the aftermath of historical trauma. As I will argue, Beckett’s protagonists do not themselves testify to their past; rather, it is the plays that give voice to the struggle to do so. Too close in time to the original trauma, his protagonists dwell in a perpetual period of latency which makes impossible the assimilation and coherent articulation of the past. Yet, through their persistent need for the presence of another human being, for a companion that will provide solace, support and, most crucially, be the sole source of communality in the midst of traumatic aftermath, Beckett’s post-war trilogy exposes the responsibility of art to culture and society, as well as ‘our relationships and responsibilities to the other.’

---

218 Langer, Holocaust Testimonies, p.23.  
219 Duggan, Trauma-Tragedy, p.186, my emphasis.
3. Acting out the Trauma: Memory, Language and the Body

In light of the previous chapter, which discussed both the viability as well as the value of approaching Beckett’s post-war trilogy as testimonial drama, the following analysis will explore how symptoms of trauma manifest in the protagonists’ condition, reactions and behaviours. Focusing on the treatment of memory, language, and the physical state of Beckett’s characters, this chapter will argue that what takes place in time present is but a continuous re-enactment of a deeply traumatic past, a remnant of a violent, unprocessed and unspeakable history. This analysis therefore aspires to lay the groundwork for my discussion of the representation of human company in the traumatic aftermath, which will take place in Chapter Four.

As we have seen in the previous chapter, trauma in Beckett surfaces in the dialogue between past and present, with the theatrical stage providing the site required for this dialogue to unfold. The value of this dialogue lies in the fact that it simultaneously constitutes a key point of interaction between art and history, between theatre and the cultural and socio-political circumstances that prevail over the period from which the dramatic work emerges. Beckett’s post-war drama does not communicate this dialogue through a rational narration of, or conscious comparison between, past and present, but through the depiction of how the former contaminates the latter by surfacing in the form of symptoms of trauma. The analysis that follows will therefore show how trauma manifests itself in the condition of the protagonists, with memory, language and the body turning into sites in which the traumatic past is perpetually re-enacted. Haunted by a history which cannot be addressed or coherently narrated, Beckett’s protagonists bear witness – not through the process of testimony but through their mental, linguistic and physical state – to a period in time which resists integration into their life narratives and, by extension, to a temporal period which resists integration into world history.

Before my analysis concentrates on memory, language and the body as three different sites in which trauma manifests, we may consider the background of composition, plotline and critical reception of Beckett’s drama.
trilogy, beginning with his most famous play. Written between October 1948 and January 1949, *Waiting for Godot* succeeded what is in many respects its prototype, namely, the 1946 novel *Mercier and Camier*. It would be useful, I contend, to briefly turn our attention to Seán Kennedy’s reading of *Mercier and Camier*, which situates the novel within a political context and examines it against the violent events which surrounded the formation of the Irish Free State. Kennedy’s essay, ‘Cultural Memory in *Mercier and Camier*: The Fate of Noel Lemass’ (2005), examines the implications of the allusion to Noel Lemass in the novel and is especially interesting, particularly in terms of how it demonstrates the overwhelming presence of history in post-war Beckett. Arguing against readings which detect only a ‘trace’ of Ireland in the post-war works,1 he suggests that Beckett’s work is in fact ‘working within historical structures, albeit in a manner that is deliberately obscured’, with the reference to the fate of Noel Lemass serving as an intriguing allusion to ‘Ireland’s violent, colonial and postcolonial history’.2 Focusing on the actions of Mercier and Camier and in particular on their violent assault against a Civic Guard, Kennedy argues that although the protagonists claim to have forgotten the story of Lemass, their ‘cultural amnesia is a good deal more sinister than subversive’, since their actions suggest that ‘they have inherited the gratuitous attitude to violence evinced by the murderers of Noel Lemass’.3 Though my reading of *Waiting for Godot*, *Endgame* and *Happy Days* situates the three plays within a post-war context, I would agree with Kennedy when he suggests that Beckett’s work operates within historical structures and apply this view to the drama trilogy, as well as with his discussion of the impact of historical and socio-political events on Beckett’s protagonists, events which, as we shall see, radically affect the present condition of the individual and throw identity and subjectivity into question.

A tragicomedy in two acts, *Waiting for Godot* depicts two men spending two consecutive evenings on a country road next to a tree, waiting for the arrival of Godot. The couple is interrupted once in each act by the same two passers-by,

---

2 Ibid., p.117.
3 Ibid., p.119.
and by one boy that arrives at the end of each act to postpone Godot’s arrival. A constant subject of study in Beckett criticism and the basis for many interpretations of the work is the figure of Godot himself; who he is, what he stands for, or what his absence may be taken to represent. The very first review of the play suggested Godot as a metaphor for ‘happiness, eternal life, the unattainable quest of all men.’

Subsequent readings considered the absent character as, variously, a representation of God, a diminutive or dethroned god, Love, Death, Silence, Hope, Charles de Gaulle, Pozzo, a Balzac character, a bicycle racer, Time, Future, a Paris street for call-girls, or interpreted him within the context of distasteful images evoked by French words which contain the root god (godailler, to guzzle; godenot, runt; godelureau, bumpkin; godichon, lout).

For William Atkinson, whose 2001 essay, ‘Samuel Beckett and Censorship in the Saorstat’, provides a reading of Beckett’s works within the context of Irish Studies, Godot embodies what the playwright once dismissively identified as ‘the Presence’ in his earlier critique of the antiquarians. Godot constitutes the ‘almost reified Irishness’, Atkinson argues, into which ‘the independent self dissolves,’ and whose avatars are the figures of Irish mythology. Conversely, in her account on the production of the play which she directed in Sarajevo during the siege of the city, Susan Sontag associates the act of waiting for Godot with ‘waiting for Clinton,’ writing that though she and the cast attempted to avoid making such associations, the state in which they found themselves in the besieged city reflected extensively the depiction of Beckett’s protagonists.

Since its composition, Godot has been read in various contexts. The playwright was quick to dismiss nearly all interpretations of the play that critics offered, famously responding to the tendency to interpret the title character as a representation of God with the words, ‘if by Godot I had meant God I would

---

5 See ibid.
6 See my discussion on Beckett’s response to Irish Nationalism and the antiquarians in Introduction, pp.29-31.
[have] said God, and not Godot.'\(^9\) A much-cited account on the play which serves as the basis for the development of many subsequent readings is Martin Esslin’s, as it appears in *The Theatre of the Absurd* (1961). For Esslin, *Godot* 'does not tell a story; it explores a static situation.'\(^10\) Looking at the play next to Balzac’s *Le Faiseur*, better known as *Mercadet* (1948), he initially draws numerous parallels between the two works, parallels which he considers 'too striking to make it probable that this is a mere coincidence.'\(^11\) Approaching *Godot* as a prominent example of Absurdist Theatre, he eventually proposes that '[t]he subject of the play is not Godot but waiting, the act of waiting as an essential and characteristic aspect of the human condition.'\(^12\) Famously, Vivian Mercier read Beckett’s play as a play in which 'nothing happens – twice.'\(^13\) Drawing upon the depiction of the protagonists, he argues that they emerge as 'more shabby-genteel than ragged' and proceeds to identify them as 'clochards', that is, a category of people well-known in Paris, who 'have known better times and have often [...] originally been cultured and educated.'\(^14\) While some critics have shared his view, others have placed the characters within a different context. Declan Kiberd, for example, situates *Godot* in an Irish postcolonial framework and recalls Yeats’ poetry to suggest the term ‘tramp’ as a more fitting description of Beckett’s protagonists, with the figure of the tramp emerging as an allusion to the image of the now-rotten Anglo-Irish, neither Irish nor English, but caught wandering across the no-man's-land between the two cultures.\(^15\)

The first draft of *Endgame* was written in the winter of 1955 in Ussy-sur-Marne, France, six years after the composition of *Godot*. The finished version of the play presents the interactions between the blind and crippled Hamm, his caretaker, Clov, and Hamm’s parents, Nagg and Nell. Comprising of solely one long act – unlike earlier drafts which added a second one – the play depicts the

---

11 Ibid., p.50.
12 Ibid.
13 Quoted in Frederick Busi, *The Transformations of Godot* (Lexington: The University of Kentucky Press, 1980), p.6, original emphasis.
characters eternally confined within the walls of a shelter, commenting on their ill health, their deteriorating bodies, the nature of the outside world, the weather and – metatheatrically – the unavailability of props, while waiting for a kind of ending. In the English version, the play’s closing tableau vivant is a near-identical reflection of its beginning: Hamm rests on his armchair in the centre of the stage, his eyes covered by a handkerchief, whereas Clov stands motionless by the door, his eyes fixed on Hamm. The only difference concerns Clov’s appearance, who is depicted ‘dressed for the road’, in a panama hat and a tweed coat, carrying a raincoat, an umbrella and a bag.\textsuperscript{16} Though the French version ends in the same manner, its opening tableau vivant presents Clov motionless by the armchair, instead of the door; a seemingly minor detail which nonetheless receives much attention in several critical essays on the play.\textsuperscript{17}

After it first premiered at the Royal Court Theatre in London on April 3, 1957, the play received mixed reactions. According to James Knowlson, the first few productions of the play were not particularly well-received, and ‘for many reviewers, the “message” of the play was one of unrelieved despair at the hopelessness and futility of life, when it was not dismissed simply as “weird and wanton drivel.”’\textsuperscript{18} In his biography of the playwright, Knowlson proceeds to draw a parallel between the situation in \textit{Endgame} and Beckett’s own experiences of his brother’s illness which preceded the play’s composition. Beckett had spent the summer of 1954 in Killiney looking after Frank, who suffered from terminal lung cancer, while often recording the latter’s decline in numerous letters. A number of phrases he incorporates in his correspondence to recount Frank’s state, including his view that ‘things drag on, a little more awful every day, and with so many days yet probably to run what awfulness to look forward to’,\textsuperscript{19} as well as the phrase, ‘[w]aiting [is] not so bad if you can fidget about. This is like waiting tied to a chair’, strongly evoke for Knowlson the

\textsuperscript{16} Samuel Beckett, \textit{Endgame}, in \textit{The Complete Dramatic Works} (1986; London: Faber & Faber, 2006), p.132. All further references to the play will be cited parenthetically in the text, and will be to this edition.

\textsuperscript{17} See for example Evan Cory Horowitz, ‘Endgame: Beginning to End’, \textit{Journal of Modern Literature}, Vol. 27, No. 4 (Summer, 2004).

\textsuperscript{18} Knowlson, \textit{Damned to Fame}, p. 458.

world of *Endgame*. Though he refrains from suggesting that the play is simply an autobiographical drama, Knowlson does emphasise the correlation between the dramatic scenario and the playwright’s personal experiences, concluding that *Endgame* ‘followed hard on the heels of Beckett’s experience of the sick room and of waiting for someone to die,’ and, as such, it is ‘not only preoccupied with the slowness of an approaching end but haunted by the tiny, practical details of caring for a dying patient.’

In the attempt to interpret the situation portrayed in *Endgame*, both early and recent critical studies often concentrate on different aspects of the play. In *The Theatre of the Absurd*, Martin Esslin argues that the source of the dramatic tension of *Endgame* is the constant possibility for Clov’s departure: ‘Will Clov have the force to leave Hamm?’, he asks. Consequently, he alludes to Nikolai Evreinov’s *The Theatre of the Soul* (1915), which unfolds inside a human skull and presents the conflicts between the emotional and rational self of its protagonist, to suggest a reading of *Endgame* as a monodrama which depicts ‘the dissolution of personality in the hour of death’. Conversely, Theodor Adorno, in a reading to which I will return at numerous points throughout this chapter, argues that the situation we encounter in the play reflects ‘the fun that the old Germany offered – knocking about between the border markers of Baden and Bavaria, as if they fenced in a realm of freedom.’ Thus, he reads the world of the play as a world in which the survivors endure the results of a lasting decline brought about by humanity itself. ‘[I]t is permanent catastrophe,’ he insists, ‘along with a catastrophic event caused by humans themselves, in which nature has been extinguished and nothing grows any longer.’ In addition to these interpretations of *Endgame*, other critics have argued that the play is ‘directly promoted by the existence of first the atomic bomb and then the hydrogen bomb’; that it acts as a metaphor for the biblical story of the Flood;
and, that it dramatises the dispossession of language and the co-dependency of identity between coloniser and colonised, thereby emerging as an allegory of the colonisation of Ireland.\textsuperscript{27}

*Happy Days*, the first draft of which appeared some fifteen years after the end of the Second World War, was written more than a decade after the composition of *Waiting for Godot*. The play focuses solely on one couple, though it does make a reference to another couple that passed by at some unspecified time in the past. Unlike the two earlier plays, *Happy Days* is largely composed of a monologue delivered by the female protagonist between the bell that sounds for waking and the bell for sleep. What triggered its composition and inspired the depiction of Winnie embedded in a low mound was addressed by Beckett in his words to Brenda Bruce:

> I thought that the most dreadful thing that could happen to anybody would be not to be allowed to sleep so that just as you’re dropping off there’d be a “Dong” and you’d have to keep awake; you’re sinking into the ground and it’s full of ants; and the sun is shining endlessly day and night and there is not a tree... there’d be no shade, nothing, and that bell wakes you up all the time and all you’ve got is a little parcel of things to see you through life. [...] And I thought who could cope with that and go down singing, only a woman.\textsuperscript{28}

For Knowlson, the portrayal of the female character evokes the Unnamable’s vision of Malone, described in the phrase, ‘[t]here are no days here, but I use the expression. I see him from the waist up, he stops at the waist.’\textsuperscript{29} Other possible sources of inspiration for the play, he suggests, may have been Louis Buñuel’s 1928 film, *Un Chien Andalou*, as well as a 1938 photograph of actress Frances Day buried to her waist with a mirror held in someone else’s hand.\textsuperscript{30}

Though *Happy Days* does not feature as prominently in Beckett criticism as *Godot* and *Endgame*, it has been identified as ‘the most surreal in all of Beckett’s

\textsuperscript{27} See Nels C. Pearson, ““Outside of here it’s death”: Codependency and the Ghosts of Decolonization in Beckett’s *Endgame*, ELH, Vol. 68, No. 1 (Spring, 2001).

\textsuperscript{28} Quoted in Knowlson, *Damned to Fame*, pp.501-2.

\textsuperscript{29} Ibid., p.475.

\textsuperscript{30} See ibid., p.475-6.
drama.’

Early interpretations situated the play within an Irish context by drawing upon its first typescript, in which Winnie listens to the song, ‘When Irish Eyes Are Smiling’, instead of the ‘Waltz Duet’ from Franz Lehár’s operetta *The Merry Widow*, and quotes Irish literary works, while Willie reads a newspaper report about an ‘aberrant rocket’ striking Erin. Conversely, for Esslin, who argues that the play derives from the ‘bleak world’ of its predecessors, the image of the female protagonist sinking into the earth serves as a metaphor for the tortured human condition. Through Winnie’s cheerfulness, he writes, Beckett ‘make[s] a deeply pessimistic comment on human life’, while simultaneously exposing ‘man’s courage and nobility’ in the face of death. Actress Billie Whitelaw also expresses a similar view, perceiving the play as a depiction of ‘the human task of *getting through the day*’, and describing the protagonist as ‘terribly brave, terribly courageous.’ Other critical studies have also concentrated primarily on the presentation of the female protagonist, with Andrew Kennedy reading Winnie as a reflection of ‘the humble woman trying to get through her minimal day with as much grace as possible’, thereby serving as both ‘the handicapped woman coping with leftover possessions, words and memories, in a desert of solitude accompanied by a barely present companion’, as well as ‘Everywoman’, that is, ‘the victim of a universe without any sign of Providence, full of speculations about that universe and her own perplexing destiny.’ Conversely, Linda Ben-Zvi situates the protagonist within a social context and argues that Winnie is ‘not only a woman’ but ‘the physical embodiment of the condition of being a woman in her society’, as well as ‘the result of stereotypic views of women.’

---

34 Ibid., p.82.
35 Ibid., p.83.
It is true that the trilogy’s depiction of memory, language and the body as three aspects of human existence that emerge as extensively problematic has received much attention in critical studies. However, despite the valuable insights which psychoanalytic criticism has to offer, and in spite of the growing tendency to apply theories of trauma to the interpretation of prose fiction in the hope of providing a better understanding of the works in question, the existing Beckett criticism peculiarly lacks a sufficient analysis of the post-war drama within the context of trauma studies. Over the years, critics have maintained that the protagonists of the drama trilogy are ‘bereft of [...] their memories,’ that they ‘ha[ve] no language of [their] own, [are] always already an echo,’ with the plays communicating a profound ‘emptying out of language’. Consequently, their behaviours have been said to suggest that ‘[c]haracter is reduced to automatism or programmed configuration of operation.’ Yet a parallel – one that I suggest is viable and would prove profoundly fruitful – is still to be drawn between the condition of Beckett’s protagonists and the manifestation of trauma symptoms. It is precisely this very parallel that is at the heart of the present chapter, which also aims to show how the traumatised condition of the protagonists emerges as a reflection of the condition, the form and structure of the three post-war plays.

Thus, the purpose of the following analysis of the treatment of memory, language and the body in the major drama trilogy is to demonstrate in detail the extent to which we may speak of Beckett’s protagonists as trauma victims. As I have discussed in my Introduction and Chapter Two, the viability of situating Beckett’s works within the context of trauma studies is suggested by a number of critics including David Houston Jones and Jonathan Boulter, both of whom consider Beckett’s texts alongside theories of trauma in their respective essays.

The core task which the following discussion will pursue, then, is to show that memory, language and the body serve as three different sites for the manifestation of traumatic experience. As we shall see, in the portrayal of memory repression and the re-emergence of the past in the form of involuntary and extreme reactions, in the failure of language to provide the terms with which to speak of the past and in the progressive physical deterioration which the protagonists endure, memory, language and the body expose and articulate the trauma which cannot be fully captured in memory or articulated in speech. My effort to provide a comprehensive reading of the drama trilogy within this framework ultimately aims to illuminate the historical relevance of the plays and contribute to our overall understanding of Beckett’s oeuvre.

Trauma theorist Kai Erikson argues that ‘it is how people react to them rather than what they are that give events whatever traumatic quality they can be said to have.’\(^4\)\(^4\) In light of this argument, I will show that the behaviour of Beckett’s protagonists, a behaviour which is not wilfully or consciously performed but mechanically acted out, testifies to the condition of humanity in the aftermath of the unprecedented historical trauma of the Second World War. This might seem like a paradoxical argument, given that the war is nowhere openly addressed in the plays. Yet, we cannot dismiss the magnitude of the references to the Ardennes region, to the communities of Sedan and Rousillon, the depiction of barren landscapes and the perception of the surrounding world as a place of anxiety, annihilation and torture. Nor can we dismiss the characters’ pervasive inability to speak of the past and the impossibility to locate oneself in the world of the present, a world that can only be defined as ‘corpsed’ (E, 106). Having provided a reading of *Waiting for Godot*, *Endgame*, and *Happy Days* as testimonial drama in Chapter Two, the present discussion will then demonstrate how the protagonists’ condition emerges as a second testimony to the condition of humanity in the aftermath of the war years. Thus, this chapter serves as background for my subsequent analysis of the nature, purpose and value of human company in Chapter Four. Theodor Adorno argues that ‘Beckett has given us the only fitting reaction to the situation of the

concentration camps’. This reaction, my thesis will ultimately argue, does not derive solely from the onstage portrayal of a traumatic aftermath or from the depiction that ‘[w]hat is [...] is like a concentration camp’ but, most crucially, from the depiction of human company as a fundamental source of solace, support but primarily witnessing after the latter’s radical collapse.

3.1. Memory

According to trauma theory, “normal” or narrative memory promotes the perception of life as a linear succession of events. Memory, argues Mieke Bal, ‘links the past to the present and future’, while James Olney writes that ‘[i]t is memory [...] that would cause any of us to assert, I am the same person I was forty years ago.’ Focusing now on the treatment of memory in Waiting for Godot, Endgame, and Happy Days, I propose to show that Beckett’s trilogy depicts the manifestation of a memory that is traumatic, a memory which cannot find integration into the life-narrative and resists coherent articulation, yet surfaces time and again to contaminate the present in the form of trauma symptoms. Taking into account instances of voluntary recollection and the deliberate efforts which follow to distance oneself from the past, I will argue against the contention that Beckett’s protagonists display symptoms of amnesia and suggest that the plays present us with the process theorised as memory repression. Bessel A. Van der Kolk and Onno van der Hart describe memory repression by alluding to ‘the image of a subject of a subject actively pushing the unwanted traumatic memory away.’ It is a repeated depiction of this specific image that we encounter in Beckett’s trilogy. Turning then our attention to the emergence of a memory that is involuntary and recursive, a memory which triggers extreme reactions and the resort to monologue, I will argue that what is portrayed as time present constitutes but persistent re-enactment of the symptoms of a traumatic past. ‘Memories of traumatic events’, Susan J. Brison

46 Ibid.
argues, ‘can be themselves traumatic: uncontrollable, intrusive, and frequently somatic. They are experienced by the survivor as inflicted, not chosen – as flashbacks to the events themselves.’ In conveying the image of a present that is radically shaped by one’s deeply traumatic personal history, a present that is endured as inflicted instead of chosen, the trilogy therefore throws into question the viability of concepts like agency and subjectivity. As traumatic memory manifests also in the radical disruption of time, the perpetual stasis and the endless repetition, it communicates both the permanence and timelessness associated with trauma while simultaneously suggesting the impossibility of coping with, or escaping from, the repercussions of history.

The issue of memory in Beckett’s works has so far been discussed within various contexts and receives much emphasis in numerous book-length studies such as Olney’s Memory & Narrative: The Weave of Life-Writing (1998), and Sabine Kozdon’s Memory in Samuel Beckett’s Plays: A Psychological Approach (2005). Though Olney’s study concentrates primarily on the prose works and the later plays, it nonetheless provides useful insights into the manner in which the playwright’s own experiences find their way into his writings as memories of his protagonists. Curiously, in his attempt to trace Beckett’s evolution as a writer Olney considers as crucial moments in his life his 1938 stabbing in Paris, the 1945 epiphany in Dublin and the switch from writing in English to writing in French, but not his experiences of the Second World War or his active participation in the war against fascism. Conversely, Kozdon focuses mainly on the dramatic works and stresses the difference between two types of memory, namely, voluntary and involuntary, which the playwright also discusses in the 1931 essay, ‘Proust’. As my analysis will expand on these two types of memory (albeit approaching involuntary memory in the context of trauma), it is useful to present Beckett’s own conception of the differences between them. The centrality of memory and its ability to determine one’s life appears as a lasting preoccupation of the writer, who wrote to Knowlson in 1972 that ‘all is reminiscence from womb to tomb’, thus suggesting that human subjectivity

51 Olney, Memory & Narrative, p.346.
52 Quoted in ibid., p.339.
and human memory are foundationally linked. Beckett considered voluntary
memory as the deliberate recollection of past events, unlike involuntary
memory which ‘works by means of unconscious association’ and occurs
abruptly and unexpectedly, ‘when an object perceived by chance reactivates
recollections which had long since been considered lost.’\(^\text{53}\) Thus, voluntary
memory, he argues in ‘Proust’, ‘is of no value as an instrument of evocation, and
provides an image as far removed from the real as the myth of our imagination
or the caricature furnished by direct perception.’\(^\text{54}\) It is ‘the uniform memory of
intelligence’, he continues, ‘contain[ing] nothing of the past, merely a blurred
and uniform projection once removed of our anxiety and opportunism – that is
to say, nothing.’\(^\text{55}\) Conversely, involuntary memory is perceived to be of infinite
value, particularly because the sensation that arises upon its occurrence is
powerful enough to ‘engulf the subject in all the beauty of its infallible
proportion.’\(^\text{56}\)

Though it has been argued that Beckett’s protagonists suffer from a
‘profound form of amnesia,’\(^\text{57}\) ‘total amnesia,’\(^\text{58}\) or that they are ‘bereft of [...] their memories,’\(^\text{59}\) a number of references they make to their past suggest
otherwise. We may approach such episodes, episodes which depict the
deliberate recollection of past events, as instances of voluntary memory. In
\textit{Waiting for Godot}, Vladimir alludes to his and Estragon’s visit to the Eiffel
Tower, talks of the time they spent grape-picking in the Macon country, whereas
his companion alludes to the time he threw himself in the Rhône while they
were grape-harvesting. In \textit{Endgame}, Nagg and Nell recall their visit to Lake
Como one April afternoon the day after they got engaged and refer to their
accident in the Ardennes region, whereas in \textit{Happy Days} Winnie alludes to the
days Willie gave her a bag and a sunshade, and remembers her relationship with
one Charlie Hunter, on whose knees she sat ‘in the back garden at Borough

---

\(^{53}\) Sabine Kozdon, \textit{Memory in Samuel Beckett’s Plays: A Psychological Approach} (Münster: LIT
Verlag, 2005), p.27.
\(^{55}\) Ibid., pp.32-3.
\(^{56}\) Ibid., p.72.
\(^{57}\) Quoted in Kozdon, \textit{Memory in Samuel Beckett’s Plays}, p.80.
\(^{58}\) Andrew K. Kennedy, ‘Action and Theatricality in \textit{Waiting for Godot},’ in ‘\textit{Waiting for Godot}’ and
\(^{59}\) Carter, ‘Estragon’s Ancient Wound’, p.130.
Green’. These allusions, albeit brief and occasional, do demonstrate the viability of arguing against interpretations of the protagonists as victims of extensive memory loss. As I will now proceed to show, the reluctance displayed by the characters to evoke or narrate other memories may best be read not as a result of amnesia or forgetfulness but as a product of the traumatic and, indeed, traumatising past, one which they persistently attempt to repress.

Several elements of the plays, from allusions to the past to the characters’ physical appearance to the depiction of a widespread decline that is not abrupt but progressive, suggest that the protagonists have experienced a deterioration from a previously happier state. The presentation of Winnie in a low bodice and pearl necklace and her references to the parties that she and Willie used to host; the implications from Hamm’s chronicle that he was once a ‘busy man’ (E, 117), asked by the poor to take them into his service and provide food for their families; the depiction of Pozzo as a landlord; and the comparison of Vladimir and Estragon to “clochards” all create a contrast between the characters’ present and past status and condition. What triggers the remarkable hesitation to narrate the past in detail, then, may be traced in the almost compulsive efforts to prevent an awakening to the contrast I have identified above. The struggle which a protagonist faces when recalling memories of happier times – memories, that is, which bring to the forefront the present decline – is explicitly addressed in the second act of Godot, which depicts Pozzo returning to the stage blind. The following, revealing conversation occurs as the two protagonists question him about his loss of eyesight:

VLADIMIR: You were saying your sight used to be good, if I heard you right.
POZZO: Wonderful! Wonderful, wonderful eyesight!
[Silence.]
ESTRAGON: [Irritably.] Expand! Expand!
VLADIMIR: Let him alone. Can’t you see he’s thinking of the days when he was happy? [Pause.] *Memoria praeteritorum bonorum* – that must be unpleasant.  

---

60 Samuel Beckett, *Happy Days*, in *The Complete Dramatic Works*, p.142. All further references to the play will be cited parenthetically in the text, and will be to this edition.
61 Samuel Beckett, *Waiting for Godot*, in *The Complete Dramatic Works*, p.80. All further references to the play will be cited parenthetically in the text, and will be to this edition.
It is noteworthy that the Latin phrase which Vladimir alludes to translates as “the past is always recalled to be good”. In addition, his conception of reminiscing as a process that is unpleasant evokes Dante, who writes in Canto V of the *Inferno*: ‘There is no greater sorrow than to recall, in wretchedness, the happy time’. Notably, and as Daniela Caselli observes in her study, Beckett, who owned and consulted Cary’s translation of *The Vision of Dante Alighieri, or Hell, Purgatory and Paradise* (1869), also alludes to this particular incident from the *Inferno* in the story ‘A Wet Night’ that appears in *More Pricks Than Kicks* (1934). It is precisely a great sorrow that overwhelms Pozzo upon recalling the time before he lost his eyesight, a sorrow which derives from the contrast that is at once created between past and present. This reaction of Pozzo and Vladimir’s explanation of it may be seen to indicate, I suggest, the reason why the characters often refrain from revisiting memories of their respective pasts, that reason being that the recollection of the happier past while in a state of decline is unbearable.

To Vladimir and Estragon’s subsequent question about the time Lucky lost his ability to speak, the blind protagonist reacts as follows:

POZZO: [Suddenly furious.] Have you not done tormenting me with your accursed time! It’s abominable! When! When! One day, is that not enough for you, one day like any other day, one day he went dumb, one day I went blind, one day we’ll go deaf, one day we were born, one day we shall die, the same day, the same second, is that not enough for you? (*WFG*, 83)

The profound, indeed traumatising impact that the recollection of the past has on the present state of the protagonist, a recollection that is at once an awakening to the repercussions of time passing, is with this monologue explicitly conveyed. Pozzo’s reaction can also be said to foreshadow the frequent breakdowns Winnie endures in *Happy Days*, and which occur after her brief allusions to her own past. Triggered by her perception of the objects scattered around her, Winnie’s memories occur involuntarily and ’by means of unconscious association’, resulting in the protagonist’s sudden collapse: ‘The

---

63 Kozdon, *Memory in Samuel Beckett’s Plays*, p.27.
bag is there, Willie, as good as ever, the one you gave me that day... to go to the market. [...] That day. [Pause.] What day? [Pause.] I used to pray' (HD, 160-1).

Moments later, she notices the sunshade next to her and reacts in a similar manner: 'The sunshade you gave me... that day... [Pause.]... that day... the lake... the reeds. [Eyes front. Pause.] What day? [Pause.] What reeds? [Pause. Eyes close. Bell rings loudly. Eyes open. Pause. Eyes right.]

As her words reveal, upon the violent resurfacing of the past Winnie falters. Remembering the time she could go to the market or hold a sunshade, the time, that is, that she still had legs and arms and could presumably walk, the female protagonist surrenders to the contrast that her memories create between the past and the present moment. Though otherwise read as ‘terribly courageous’, a protagonist which displays ‘an amazing optimism’, in episodes such as these Winnie falls victim to her overpowering past. That it is the intrusion of memories which awake her to the extensive difference between her previous and present condition that triggers Winnie’s breakdowns is eventually established in another passage from her monologue, which may also be considered a more explicit allusion to Dante’s lines cited above. ‘All I can say for my part’, Winnie tellingly says, ‘is that for me [the natural laws] are not what they were when I was young and... foolish and... [faltering, head down]... beautiful... possibly... lovely... in a way... to look at. [Pause. Head up.] Forgive me, Willie, sorrow keeps breaking in’ (HD, 152, my emphasis).

The traumatising consequences of remembering one’s happier past are further explored in *Endgame*. Nagg and Nell’s allusion to the trip they took to Lake Como, an allusion which juxtaposes their present dwelling in ashbins with the time they were rowing and could still experience the sense of happiness, has catastrophic results, particularly for the female character:

NELL: It was on Lake Como. [Pause.] One April afternoon. [Pause.] Can you believe it?
NAGG: What?
NELL: That we once went rowing on Lake Como. [Pause.] One April afternoon.

NAGG: We had got engaged the day before.
NELL: Engaged!
NAGG: You were in such fits that we capsized. By rights we should have been drowned.
NELL: It was because I felt happy.
NAGG: [...] Happy! Don’t you laugh at it still? Every time I tell it. Happy!
NELL: It was deep, deep. And you could see down to the bottom. So white. So clean.

{Pause. [NAGG] looks at NELL who has remained impassive, her eyes unseeing, breaks into a high forced laugh, cuts it short, pokes his head towards NELL, launches his laugh again.]

[...] NELL: You could see down to the bottom.

[...] NELL: So white.
Hamm: What? What’s she blathering about?
[Clov stoops, takes Nell’s hand, feels her pulse.]

[...] Clov: [Returning to his place beside the chair.] She has no pulse. (E, 102-3)

Initially displayed through her sudden withdrawal and the repetition of her impressions of the lake, Nell’s reaction to the memory of the time she was happy is unexpectedly followed by her death, which Clov confirms only moments later.
It is important to note, I contend, that the above episode is preceded by the following exchange between Nagg and Nell:

NAGG: Do you remember –
NELL: No.
NAGG: When we crashed on our tandem and lost our shanks.
[They laugh heartily.]
NELL: It was in the Ardennes.
[They laugh less heartily.]
NAGG: On the road to Sedan. [They laugh still less heartily.] Are you cold?
NELL: Yes, perished. (E, 99-100)

Nell’s initial negative response to Nagg comes as a surprise, particularly since she is presumably unaware of the second half of his question. The significance of her negative response is therefore highlighted when she makes a reference to the Ardennes with her next line. We may argue, then, that with her impulsive, almost mechanical ‘[n]o’ (E, 99), the female character instinctively attempts to prevent the resurfacing of her past, a past which upon its recollection leaves Nell feeling perished, thereby hauntingly foreshadowing how their next allusion
to Lake Como kills her. What is often read as amnesia, then, gradually emerges as in actuality an attempt to repress one’s memories, an impulse to distance oneself from the past which manifests itself in the compulsive efforts to keep the past at bay. Instead of protagonists suffering from amnesia, protagonists ‘bereft of their memories’, Beckett’s plays confront us with concrete images of ‘subject[s] actively pushing the unwanted traumatic’, or *traumatising*, ‘memory away.’

So far, my discussion of the treatment of memory in the trilogy has focused on recollections of a past that is not particularly violent or traumatic, with the exception of Nagg and Nell’s allusion to their accident in the Ardennes. In emphasising the contrast that exists between the protagonists’ past and present state, these recollections, I have argued, emerge themselves as traumatising. Thus, I have proposed that in the depiction of their protagonists’ compulsive reluctance to give voice to their respective pasts, the plays do not convey images of memory loss but the process of memory repression. Memory repression, or the impulse to push the unwanted memory away, occurs as the result of the efforts to prevent one’s breakdown and collapse. Yet it is a symptom of trauma nonetheless, one which manifests out of the inability to assimilate the past and paradoxically reinforces this inability, leaving one’s personal history lasting disrupted. Before expanding further on the implications of a fragmented, inaccessible personal history and how this reflects the persistently inaccessible historical content of the trilogy itself, I would like to draw attention to several other episodes from the plays which demonstrate that the memories of a happier past paradoxically coexist with the involuntary recollection of a violent and dehumanising history. These episodes, one of which is Nagg and Nell’s

---

66 See also how Clov provides a negative response to Hamm’s question about whether he remembers the time he arrived at the shelter or if he recalls his father (*E*, 110), a negative response which contrasts with the memories he gives voice to during his monologue shortly before the end of the play (*E*, 131-2). In the second act of *Waiting for Godot*, Estragon impulsively claims not to remember the previous arrival of Pozzo and Lucky (*WFG*, 56), the time he and Vladimir went grape-picking in the Macon country (*WFG*, 57), how he and Vladimir spent the previous evening (*WFG*, 61), albeit gradually providing enough details about these events to confirm that he does, indeed, have recollection of them.


accident in the Ardennes region, expose the past as a site of pervasive and often unspeakable trauma.

Involuntary allusions to an unspecified traumatic experience which took place at some point in the past resurface throughout the trilogy. Neither willingly nor consciously revisited, these memories '[float] up, one fine day, out of the blue' (HD, 144). The manner in which they emerge, as well as their decisive impact on the protagonists call to mind the playwright’s conception of involuntary memory as that which 'engulf[s] the subject in all the beauty of its infallible proportion.' Though critics like Kozdon do trace in his plays examples of the manifestation of involuntary memory as defined by Beckett in ‘Proust’, I would parallel his description with the phenomenon of recursive traumatic memory as it is addressed in psychoanalytic criticism. As trauma theorists argue, '[t]he ordinary response to atrocities is to banish them from consciousness.' However, the efforts to do so, the efforts, that is, to repress memory, may also 'paradoxically coexist with the opposite: intruding memories and unbidden repetitive images of traumatic events.' These memories of traumatic events can accordingly ‘be themselves traumatic: uncontrollable, intrusive, and frequently somatic.’

In Beckett’s trilogy, I argue, these uncontrollable and intrusive memories manifest in the form of compulsive, often ambiguous and fragmented monologues, delivered in moments of profound detachment. One such monologue is that of Vladimir, which occurs shortly before the end of Godot. Delivered while Estragon sleeps, the monologue displays the defining characteristics of the re-enactment of traumatic memory which, according to van der Kolk and van der Hart, 'has no social component, 'is not addressed to anybody' and constitutes ‘a solitary activity.' Beginning with the questions, ‘[w]as I sleeping while the others suffered? Am I sleeping now?’ (WFG, 84), it is a

69 Beckett, Proust, p.72.
70 See Kozdon, Memory in Samuel Beckett’s Plays.
72 Quoted in Cathy Caruth, ‘Recapturing the Past: Introduction’, Trauma, ed. Caruth, p.152, original emphasis.
73 Brison, ‘Trauma Narratives’, p.40, my emphasis.
passage which portrays the past as a site of profound violence and suffering. In addition, the monologue suggests that Vladimir was once a witness to atrocity while his present is communicated as one of overpowering, lasting guilt. Although the Second World War is not explicitly invoked here, we may shed light on the particulars of the protagonist’s history by drawing upon Lawrence Langer’s account on the feelings of guilt which torment former Holocaust victims. In his study, Langer argues that trauma victims are often ‘pursued not only by their own earlier traumatic moments but by the traumas of others too.’ Haunted by the trauma inflicted upon them, as well as by the atrocities inflicted upon those ‘who have not survived,’ the surviving victims can therefore only provide with their accounts ‘the beginnings of a permanently unfinished tale, full of incomplete intervals’, that persistently resists closure. Similarly, Vladimir’s recollection of the past is limited to the two questions with which the monologue starts, questions which are succeeded by lines that question the reality of the events that we as audience have watched unfold onstage:

VLADIMIR: [...] Tomorrow, when I wake, or think I do, what shall I say of today? That with Estragon my friend, at this place until the fall of night I waited for Godot? That Pozzo passed, with his carrier, and that he spoke to us? Probably. But in all that what truth will there be? (WFG, 84).

Through the depiction of Vladimir’s monologue, Godot confronts us with the re-enactment of a deeply traumatic memory, one which conveys the protagonist’s inability, his profound impossibility to integrate the events of the past into his life narrative. The difficulty of acknowledging the past is consequently heightened as its events can now only find expression in the form of questions. With Vladimir questioning the reality of the past, then, we may propose that the play ultimately throws into question the very function of memory, its purpose and value in the traumatic aftermath, since memory no longer serves as that which ‘links the past to the present and future.’

---

76 Ibid., p.21, original emphasis.
The function of memory in the traumatic aftermath is an underlying concern in *Endgame* as well. Through the monologues of Hamm and Clov, the play confronts us with a similar recollection of a personal history, one that is overwhelmed by images of violence, suffering and helplessness. These memories, when considered alongside the depiction of the protagonists as the sole survivors of a widespread annihilation, suggest a discernible parallel between the world of the play and the historical background of its composition. The following allusion which Hamm delivers as soon as Clov exits the stage is strongly reminiscent of Vladimir’s monologue, while simultaneously hinting at a correlation between the atrocities Hamm experienced and the sheer magnitude of the events of the Second World War:

HAMM: [...] You weep, and weep, for nothing, so as not to laugh, and little by little... you begin to grieve. [He folds the handkerchief, puts it back in his pocket, raises his head.] All those I might have helped. [Pause.] Helped! [Pause.] Saved. [Pause.] Saved! [Pause.] The place was crawling with them! (E, 125)

It is important to note, first, that Hamm’s references to his past and in particular his ‘chronicle’ (E, 121), the repeated narration of which I will soon move on to examine, suggest that the protagonist does not, in fact, recall his past but reconstructs it. As I will show in Chapter Four, Hamm repeatedly alludes to his past in order to remind of his superiority over Clov, Nagg and Nell, carefully manipulating language as he does so in order to determine and reaffirm his power over the rest of the characters. In other words, Hamm's allusions are intimately tied with his role as a master and a perpetrator, with the protagonist therefore approached as an impersonation of ‘the perfect imperialist’ as a result of his continuous manipulation and reconstruction of not only his, but also Clov’s personal history.

Yet Hamm’s above monologue juxtaposes the image of him as a perpetrator with the image of him as a victim of a deeply traumatic history. A witness to atrocities inflicted on others, Hamm is now haunted by recurring feelings of guilt.

---

and assailed by bouts of inexplicable weeping. Like Vladimir's monologue, his own recollection is incoherent, vague and unfinished. We may say that this is a recollection which forcefully imposes itself onto the protagonist, demanding articulation while momentarily returning him to the scene of his past. Notably, Hamm's – and Vladimir's – past can neither be firmly located in time or place, nor find adequate expression or integration into his life narrative. In other words, it is a past which emerges as not truly his; a period in time which he fails to acknowledge as his own, but which returns, time and again, to remind the protagonist of the minimal authority he possessed over it as history or as memory. 'Use your head, can’t you,' Hamm eventually exclaims with violence; ‘use your head, you’re on earth, there’s no cure for that’ (E, 125), subtly echoing Estragon's first words in Godot that there’s '[n]othing to be done’ (WFG, 11).

Hamm's victimisation by his past and his non-involvement in the events which have shaped his personal history is further suggested in another episode in the play. Not a monologue but an exchange between him and Clov, this episode highlights also the failure of memory to provide a coherent image of the past. ‘Do you know what it is?’ (E, 128), Hamm unexpectedly asks Clov, before the following conversation unfolds:

CLOV: [As before.] Mmm.
HAMM: I was never there. [Pause.] Clov!
CLOV: [Turning towards HAMM, exasperated.] What is it?
HAMM: I was never there.
CLOV: Lucky for you.
[...]
HAMM: Absent, always. It all happened without me. I don’t know what’s happened. [Pause.] Do you know what’s happened? [Pause.] Clov!
[...]
CLOV: When? Where?
HAMM: [Violently.] When! What’s happened! Use your head, can’t you! What has happened?
CLOV: What for Christ’s sake does it matter? (E, 128)

We may first draw attention to the one issue that Hamm's words explicitly address, namely, his absence from his past. This memory of being absent exposes Hamm's victimisation, his minimal involvement in shaping or affecting his life narrative, while simultaneously questioning agency during and after the
traumatic experience. Thus, it also brings to mind the playwright’s own perception of the compelling limitations imposed on man’s freedom of action, limitations which resulted in his inability to escape from, or fight against, the political and social circumstances which radically determine his predicament.\footnote{See conversation between Samuel Beckett and James Knowlson, recounted in John Haynes and James Knowlson, *Images of Beckett* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), p.16, 18.}

The second issue which the above dialogue between the protagonists conveys through Hamm’s question to Clov concerning the particulars of what happened is that the condition of memory has itself fallen victim to the traumatic past. Memory is now inadequate, fragmented and insufficient. It can no longer provide substantial access into one’s past but only return, *involuntarily*, to remind of one’s absence. It is a memory that is experienced as ‘inflicted, not chosen’,\footnote{Brison, ‘Trauma Narratives’, p.40.} an independent entity which forces itself onto the already dehumanised subject.

Psychoanalytic criticism on the human response to trauma states that ‘a feeling of helplessness, of physical or emotional paralysis, is fundamental to making an experience traumatic: the person was unable to take any action that could affect the outcome of events.’\footnote{Van der Kolk and van der Hart, ‘The Intrusive Past’, p.175.} It is precisely one such image of helplessness, of emotional paralysis and of inability to take any action that the memories of the now physically paralysed Hamm evoke. Clov’s monologue, which he delivers shortly before the end of the play, exposes a similar image. A memory of some unidentified ‘they’ who manipulate him, and a memory that largely consists of the words of his masters instead of his own, Clov’s monologue portrays a traumatised subject’s complete, all-encompassing surrender. It is also notable that Clov’s lines, like Vladimir’s monologue which includes the phrase, ‘[a]t me too someone is looking’ (*WFG*, 84), are spoken in a moment of profound metatheatricality while he fixes his eyes on the audience:

*CLOV: [Fixed gaze, tonelessly, towards auditorium.] They said to me, That’s love, yes yes, not a doubt, now you see how – [...] How easy it is. They said to me, That’s friendship, yes yes, no question, you’ve found it. They said to me, Here’s the place, stop, raise your head and look at all that beauty. That order! They said to me, Come now, you’re not a brute beast, think upon these things and you’ll see how all becomes clear. And simple! [...] (E, 131-2)*
A profound example of recursive, irrepresible memory, the monologue overwhelms Clov who, for the first time in the play, cannot obey Hamm’s demand to stop talking. Drawing once more upon Langer’s discussion of traumatic memory within the context of the Holocaust, we may expand further on the nature of monologue. Alluding to the testimony of Holocaust survivor, Moses S., who could not put an end to his narration despite his interviewer’s repeated demands to end the testimony, Langer draws a crucial distinction between telling and re-enacting one’s memories, arguing that the trauma victim ‘does not tell the story; he reenacts it’.\footnote{Langer, \textit{Holocaust Testimonies}, p.27, original emphasis. The testimony of Moses S. is recounted in detail in pp.27-8.} Emerging as a passage that ‘has no social component’ and ‘is not addressed to anybody’,\footnote{Van der Kolk and van der Hart, ‘The Intrusive Past’, p.163.} a passage that is delivered almost mechanically and ‘tonelessly’ (\textit{E}, 131), as if in a state of numb detachment, Clov’s monologue constitutes a compulsive re-enactment of traumatic memory which paralyses the protagonist as it unfolds. His inability to obey Hamm and end his narration indicates, therefore, his complete surrender to memory, his complete surrender to his past, while simultaneously reflecting his complete surrender in his past. Indeed, the distinction between telling and re-enacting the events of the past also sheds light on the status of the performance of Beckett’s drama as testimony. As I have discussed in Chapter Two, the plays do not tell but mechanically perform the ‘imperative to tell’\footnote{Dori Laub, ‘An Event Without a Witness: Truth, Testimony and Survival’, in Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub, \textit{Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History} (London/New York: Routledge, 1992), p.78.} of the story they embody, a story that remains unprocessed and inaccessible. The episode of Clov’s monologue, then, and the particulars of the manner in which it is delivered mirrors the nature of the theatrical performance of \textit{Endgame} and, indeed, of \textit{Godot} and \textit{Happy Days}, performances which do not narrate the past but re-enact it as a result of being, like human trauma victims, ‘not truly in touch either with the core of [their] traumatic reality or with the fatedness of its reenactments, and thereby [remain] entrapped in both’.\footnote{Dori Laub, ‘Bearing Witness or the Vicissitudes of Listening’, in Felman and Laub, \textit{Testimony}, p.69.}

While the performance of each play unfolds in front of an audience, in front of a human other that may act as a willing witness and approach the
performance as a struggle to testify, Clov’s monologue or, rather, his involuntary testimonial attempt, is quickly dismissed by Hamm who orders the servant to end his monologue and refuses to act as a witness. Clov’s complete surrender to his past is therefore firmly established in the second half of his monologue, which occurs in spite of Hamm’s order. In this passage, Clov, who is told by his masters that he is not a ‘brute beast’ (E, 132), resembles little more than an animal in captivity:

CLOV: [As before.] 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. I say to myself – sometimes, Clov, you must be there better than that if you want them to let you go – one day. But I feel too old, and too far, to form new habits. Good, it’ll never end, I’ll never go. [Pause.] Then one day, suddenly, it ends, it changes, I don’t understand, it dies, or it’s me, I don’t understand that either. [...] I say to myself that the earth is extinguished, though I never saw it lit. (E, 132)

Employing van der Kolk and van der Hart’s description of the human response to trauma, we may argue that Clov’s inability ‘to take any action that could affect the outcome of events’ in the past is now mirrored in his inability to fully assimilate it, to express it in his own words or to control the resurfacing of his memories of it. Reducing the character to almost nothing else but a vehicle for its expression, traumatic memory in Endgame ultimately emerges as another oppressive force, one which permanently cripples Clov. ‘Good, it’ll never end,’ he eventually confesses; ‘I’ll never go’ (E, 132).

Unlike the memories of the protagonists in Godot and Endgame, Winnie’s memories do not evoke a history of widespread catastrophe, one which could be read as evocative of the war years. Undoubtedly, Winnie’s physical condition suggests the occurrence of a past traumatic event, one which has brought about her gradual sinking into the earth, yet this event is nowhere alluded to. One event which does find involuntary articulation is the encounter between a little girl called Mildred and a mouse, an encounter that echoes the monologues in Godot and Endgame in terms of its violent resurfacing. Notably, the disjointed narration of the story is frequently interrupted by the protagonist’s desperate yet futile attempts to control herself, attempts which are carried out by calling

Willie’s name in the hope that he may provide some distraction: ‘Suddenly a mouse – [Long pause.] Gently, Winnie. [Long pause. Calling.] Willie! [Pause. Louder.] Willie! [Pause. Mild reproach.] I sometimes find your attitude a little strange, Willie, all this time, it is not like you to be wantonly cruel’ (HD, 163). Though the role Willie is asked to play towards the protagonist will be examined in the analysis of human company in the next chapter, his persistent silence results in Winnie’s surrender to the overpowering force of her memories:


The re-enactment of traumatic memory in the form of a monologue is here portrayed perhaps more vividly than it is in Godot and Endgame, particularly since Winnie acts out the reactions of Mildred. Indeed, this is an irrepresible memory which is also experienced as ‘inflicted, not chosen’, as a flashback to – and a reliving of – the original event.87 A memory of trauma, it is ‘uncontrollable, intrusive’, as well as ‘somatic’88 since the female protagonist ‘gives us the screams’ of Mildred, ‘which are her screams too.’89

As in Godot and Endgame, recursive memory in Happy Days points towards a traumatic, unprocessed past, one which cannot find coherent articulation in the present. The audience never finds out what the encounter between Mildred and the mouse resulted in, what it truly stands for, or what the relationship between Mildred and Winnie really is. Was Mildred a relative of Winnie, or, is Mildred a second self of Winnie? In other words, is this memory an example of what trauma theory identifies as dissociation or splitting, namely, the creation of a second self following the occurrence of an extreme traumatic event, onto

88 Ibid.
89 Lawley, ‘Stages of Identity’, p.98, original emphasis.
which the victim projects their pain? The play leaves these questions unanswered, thereby reflecting Winnie’s inability to gain access into her personal history. Winnie, I argue, does not disclose more details because she does not know any more details, she is a traumatised, ‘interrupted being.’ By employing Mieke Bal’s phrase, then, we may suggest that the traumatising event which happened to Mildred is ‘mechanically re-enacted as drama rather than synthetically narrated by the memorizing agent who “masters” [it].’ ‘[N]ot all [comes back]’, Winnie says; ‘No no. […] Not quite. […] A part […] Floats up, one fine day, out of the blue’ (HD, 144); the rest, to borrow Bal’s term, remain “outside” her.

In my examination of memory in the trilogy within a context of trauma studies, I have attempted to shed light on its problematic condition, to explore the specifics of its resurfacing, to expose the implications it carries concerning the protagonists’ past, and to show its traumatising repercussions. Drawing upon the analysis I have provided above, I will now attempt to expand further on how traumatic memory brings to light the protagonists’ radically disrupted life narratives, thereby questioning the condition of personal history in the traumatic aftermath.

‘Traumatic memory’, Brison argues, is not only characterised by its irrepresible and intrusive re-emergence but also ‘by a destruction of a sense of the self as continuing over time.’ That is to say that the trauma victim, unable to come to terms with the atrocities inflicted upon him or her, often becomes entrapped in a chronic struggle to assimilate what he or she perceives as the self of the past, a self that is fundamentally severed from the self of the present. Testimonies of Holocaust victims give many examples of this. For instance, the Italian writer and Holocaust survivor Primo Levi confesses that ‘[a]t a distance of thirty years I find it difficult to reconstruct the sort of human being that corresponded, in November 1944, to my name or, better, to my number:

---
93 Ibid.
94 Brison, ‘Trauma Narratives’, p.43.
Similarly, Charlotte Delbo says, ‘the “self” who was in the camp isn’t me, isn’t the person who is here, opposite you. No, it’s too unbelievable. And everything that happened to this other “self,” the one from Auschwitz, doesn’t touch me now, me, doesn’t concern me […],’ whereas another female survivor, Sally H., admits: ‘I split myself. […] [I]t wasn’t me there. It just wasn’t me. I was somebody else.’

Indeed, the difficulty of integrating past and present is a common theme in Beckett’s drama. From *Krapp’s Last Tape* (1958), the protagonist of which spends his time listening to recordings of his younger selves before making another recording which begins with the line, ‘[j]ust been listening to that stupid bastard I took myself for thirty years ago, hard to believe I was ever as bad as that’, to Mouth’s perpetual recounting of memories that she ascribes to another female in *Not I* (1973), Beckett’s oeuvre is crowded with characters who struggle with their respective personal histories. In *Godot* this struggle is demonstrated through the emergence of symptoms of memory repression, as the protagonists repeatedly claim to have forgotten details of their past. In the few moments where the past is consciously evoked by one of the characters, the other is quick to dismiss it: ‘There’s no good harking back on that’ (*WFG*, 52), Vladimir tells his companion when the latter alludes to the time he jumped in the Rhône. Conversely, in *Happy Days* Winnie addresses her radically disrupted personal history in explicit terms. ‘Then... now... what difficulties here, for the mind’ (*HD*, 161), she says. Evoking Levi, Delbo and Sally H., she continues: ‘To have been always what I am – and so changed from what I was. [Pause.] I am the one, I say the one, then the other. [Pause.] Now the one, then the other’ (*HD*, 161).

Perhaps the most profound example of the impact of traumatic memory on the condition of personal history is provided in *Endgame*, in the portrayal of Hamm’s repeated efforts to recreate his past in the form of a ‘chronicle’ (*E*, 121). As I have discussed above, the play includes a number of episodes during which Hamm alludes to a violent history, a history inflicted upon him while he was

---

95 Quoted in Olney, *Memory & Narrative*, p.262.
96 Quoted in Langer, *Holocaust Testimonies*, p.5, original emphasis.
97 Quoted in ibid., p.48, emphasis in Langer’s original.
‘absent’ (E, 128), a history, that is, of which he was the victim. Without a discernible life narrative to explain or justify the particulars of the present moment, Hamm attempts to fill the gaps in his personal history by reconstructing the events of the past using the terms most suitable to replace his non-involvement with the assumption of a position of authority. It would be useful, I believe, to look at how the playwright described Hamm’s narration of his chronicle, since his comments show the story to be a product of the protagonist’s imagination, a fictitious tale which Hamm desperately tries to acknowledge as an actual historical fact. Beckett said: ‘First Hamm carries on a monologue, second, he speaks to the beggar *he is imagining* lying at his feet, third, he lends the latter his own voice, and he uses the fourth [voice] to recite the epic, linking text of *his own story*.’

Hamm’s chronicle is a story that seems to explain the origins of life in the shelter. The following chapter, which concentrates on the depiction of human company in the trilogy, will revisit this story so as to expand further on the insights it offers into Hamm’s relationship with Clov. Now, though, I would like to concentrate on the manner in which the story is delivered. As Beckett points out, the narration of the chronicle demands the employment of different, distinct voices. As the play further exposes, the chronicle is not delivered as a solid and coherent narration of the past but as ‘a myth, or an old fable,’ one which is continuously modified by Hamm. The protagonist’s perspective towards his past has crucial implications, therefore, particularly since the ongoing narration of his story serves a much greater purpose than simply passing the time. This persistent preoccupation with constructing and finishing the chronicle, I argue, mirrors the impossibility of coming to terms with one’s traumatic past, a past which appears unprocessed and inaccessible, as much as it demonstrates Hamm’s desperate efforts to reconstruct his and Clov’s past so as to retain his authority over the servant. In other words, Hamm’s ongoing preoccupation with the chronicle exposes, contrasts and intertwines the

---


100 ‘I’ll tell my story in the past none the less, as though it were a myth, or an old fable, for this evening I need another age, that age to become another age in which I became what I was.’ Samuel Beckett, *The Calmative*, in *First Love and Other Novellas* (1977; London: Penguin, 2000), p.48.
protagonist's paradoxical roles, namely, his role as a victim of the past and his role as a perpetrator. In always remaining unfinished, then, the chronicle reflects the chronic struggle to deal with the gaps in one's life narrative while simultaneously suggesting the fundamental relation between personal history and individual identity. As Gontarski argues, Hamm's story is a means of ‘connecting ends to origins’, of ‘making sense [...] through narratives’ not so much of a ‘lost, forgotten past,’101 as the critic calls it but of an unprocessed, repressed past. It is an effort 'to create continuities between origins and endings [...] [so as to] give meaning to the present',102 yet it is also the means by which Hamm validates his role as a perpetrator, as the master of the shelter. Though the centrality of the chronicle in the construction of Hamm’s identity as an oppressor will be further examined in Chapter Four, I would here argue that his repeated efforts to complete his story and the failure of doing so suggest not only his inability to trace his origins – to trace, that is, the origins of the endgame in which he finds himself – but also his permanent entrapment in a victimising past. Foreshadowing Krapp, Mouth, Henry in Embers (1959), the protagonists of Play (1963), and so many other figures in Beckett’s later texts, Hamm becomes one of the first victims of traumatic memory in Beckett’s drama. Chronically involved in a struggle against his past, he embodies the repercussions of traumatic memory, one which dictates the present moment and decisively impairs the condition of one’s personal history.

In the trilogy the decisive impact of traumatic memory on the condition of personal history is inextricably intertwined with the radical disruption of time. Where memory acts as that which fundamentally ‘links the past to present and future’,103 traumatic memory disrupts any such sense of continuation and progress. As I have shown in my previous chapter, the withholding of specifics concerning the time period in which the three works are set, coupled with their cyclical structure, recursive action and the absence of resolution evoke a sense of a perpetual present which is associated with the permanence of trauma. This

---

102 Ibid.
sense of everlasting present, I suggest, is reinforced by the protagonists’ inability to speak of yesterday in relation to today, to speak of today in relation to tomorrow. Vladimir’s monologue, which I have looked at above, in which he contemplates what he shall ‘say of today’ when he wakes up tomorrow (WFG, 84), aptly highlights the problematic notion of time we encounter throughout the trilogy, as does Pozzo’s response to the questions he is asked about the time Lucky lost his ability to speak. ‘Have you not done tormenting me with your accursed time’ (WFG, 83), Pozzo says in a passage I have already cited above and which emphasises the paradoxical contrast between the temporal quality of a rapidly deteriorating life and the seeming permanently static nature of time. ‘[O]ne day like any other day,’ Pozzo says, ‘one day he went dumb, one day I went blind, one day we’ll go deaf, one day we were born, one day we shall die, the same day, the same second’ (WFG, 83, my emphasis).

‘Trauma stops the chronological clock and fixes the moment permanently in memory and imagination,’ Langer argues, ‘immune to the vicissitudes of time.’104 It is precisely such an image which the trilogy presents, the image of a world in where there are no more chronological clocks. ‘The blind have no notion of time’, Pozzo says elsewhere in Godot, yet neither do the two major protagonists, of whom Vladimir tellingly asserts that ‘[t]ime has stopped’ and repeatedly asks, ‘[w]ill night never come?’ (WFG, 80, 33, 35). In the world of Endgame, a world in which time is always ‘[t]he same as usual’ and the protagonists endure ‘a day like any other day’ (E, 105, 114), the blind Hamm addresses ‘what awfulness’ he and Clov ‘look forward to’,105 in a passage that extensively echoes Pozzo’s lines:

HAMM: […] One day you’ll be blind, like me. You’ll be sitting there, a speck in the void, in the dark, for ever, like me. [Pause.] One day you’ll say to yourself, I’m tired, I’ll sit down, and you’ll go and sit down. Then you’ll say, I’m hungry, I’ll get up and get something to eat. But you won’t get up. You’ll say, I shouldn’t have sat down, but since I have I’ll sit on a little longer, then I’ll get up and get something to eat. But you won’t get up and you won’t get anything to eat. [Pause.] You’ll look at the wall a while, then you’ll say, I’ll close my eyes, perhaps have a little

104 Langer, Holocaust Testimonies, p.112.
105 ‘[T]hings drag on, a little more awful every day, and with so many days yet probably to run what awfulness to look forward to.’ Samuel Beckett to Pamela Mitchell, 27 Aug. 1954. Quoted in Knowlson, Damned to Fame, p.402.
sleep, after that I’ll feel better, and you’ll close them. And when you open them again there’ll be no wall any more. [Pause.] Infinite emptiness will be all around you [...]. (E, 109).

In contrast to *Godot*, which features a second act and eventually depicts the arrival of night as the moon rises, time in *Endgame* is experienced as profoundly static. ‘Yesterday! What does that mean? Yesterday!’ Hamm asks, to which Clov violently replies, ‘[t]hat means that bloody awful day, long ago, before this bloody awful day’ (E, 113). As Pozzo’s and Hamm’s above lines suggest, the passage of time is therefore not measured in hours or seconds but in terms of the progress of physical decline, which recalls George Steiner’s description of the Nazi concentration camps as ‘a complete, coherent world’ which ‘had [its] own measure of time, which is pain.’

The contrast between stasis and the increase in pain is also addressed in *Happy Days*. Soon after the play commences, Winnie repeats twice the following, revealing line: ‘[...] no better, no worse [...] no change [...] no pain’ (HD, 139, 141). The sense of stasis which derives from the endless sunlight and the incorporation of the bell that sounds for waking and for sleep receives much attention in several critical works on the play. P. H. Collins argues that ‘Winnie’s “day” [...] is no day of the week; it bears no relationship to exterior conditions’, whereas Toni O’Brien Johnson writes that in *Happy Days*, ‘[days] are not dictated by the rising and setting of the sun, for the sun never sets on Winnie. [...] Thus the term “day” as used by Winnie no longer has the received meaning attributed to it: its meaning is destabilized.’ Like the protagonists of *Godot* and *Endgame*, Winnie and Willie appear to inhabit a world which exists outside time, a world in which chronological clocks have been replaced by a bell which sounds for waking and a bell which sounds for sleep. This is a world, we may add, in which past, present and future are so deeply intertwined that they have become one and the same. ‘May one still speak of time? (HD, 160), Winnie

---

107 The second time Winnie speaks this line, it appears as follows: ‘No better, no worse, no change. [Pause. Do.] No pain.’
wonders, since the word “time” no longer has any definitive meaning attached to it. The fundamental interconnection between traumatic memory and the passage of time is reinforced in the following passage:

WINNIE: [...] did I ever know a temperate time? [Pause.] No. [Pause.] I speak of temperate times and torrid times, they are empty words. [Pause.] I speak of when I was not yet caught – in this way – and had my legs and had the use of my legs, and could seek out a shady place, like you, when I was tired of the sun, or a sunny place when I was tired of the shade, like you, and they are all empty words. [Pause.] It is no hotter today than yesterday, it will be no hotter tomorrow than today, how could it, and so on back into the far past, forward into the far future. [Pause.] And should one day the earth cover my breasts, then I shall never have seen my breasts, no one ever seen my breasts. (HD, 154)

A key passage to which I will return in my analysis of the impact of trauma on the condition of language, it exposes how the memory of a traumatic, unprocessed past is so violent and persistent that it permanently contaminates what is experienced as present. Caught in an unidentifiable period somewhere between past, present and future, Winnie can only measure the passage of time in terms of her further decline, her further sinking into the earth.

The discussion above allows us to conclude, then, that approaching memory in Beckett’s post-war trilogy from a trauma studies perspective helps to illuminate the role it plays as a key site for the re-enactment of the traumatic past. Throughout the trilogy, memory emerges as an irrevocably and intrusive entity which has a habit of assailing the protagonists, positioning them against a past they can neither escape from, nor integrate into their personal histories or biographies. As Vladimir asserts, time has indeed come to a standstill, such that what unfolds onstage is neither the past nor the present, merely a bleak preview of what the next day has in store for the protagonists, which is nothing new. Past, present and future have no resonance in this denuded universe, a universe which seems to exist outside time yet bears a subtle but powerful resemblance to the foreboding atmosphere which prevailed over Europe during the post-war period. Perhaps the most fitting description we could apply to the era in which the plays unfold, then, is that it is a period of latency, a period defined by the successive movement from the traumatic event of the past to its repression to
its return. Thus, traumatic memory suggests what is depicted as time present as but an involuntary, compulsive re-enactment of the past, a re-enactment which dictates all aspects of the protagonists' existence and throws into question the possibility of ever recovering a coherent and accessible personal history in the traumatic aftermath.

Furthermore, it is my contention that recursive memory in Beckett's post-war trilogy acts as a means through which his drama questions agency and subjectivity in the post-war era, thereby exposing the dilemma of whether the historical events which informed their composition can ever be considered to be truly over. I would then suggest the possibility of fruitfully aligning the onstage portrayal of the repercussions of a deeply traumatic past with the trilogy's historical context, a context that cannot find explicit narration yet remains omnipresent. In rethinking the condition and purpose of memory in the traumatic aftermath, the plays expose the historical period from which they emerge as a period that is still struggling to come to terms with the unspeakable events that preceded it, while simultaneously testifying to its catastrophic impact on personal history and individual identity. Can the surviving victims of the Holocaust ever gain sufficient access into their personal histories? Can personal history ever be fully captured, processed, or articulated when it is profoundly deformed by the experience of unprecedented trauma? Can we as audience accept the transmission of this history and fully grasp its brutal reality? These are the questions that Beckett's plays confront us with, while offering a glimpse into what it means to be human in the post-war era.

In the next section of this chapter I wish to explore the correlation between traumatic memory and language. Having discussed how images of the past emerge suddenly and uncontrollably in the form of monologues, I will argue that language provides another site for the manifestation of traumatic memory and experience. Drawing upon psychoanalytic theories which stress the interconnections between trauma, memory and language, my analysis will also show how language is paradoxically indispensible to memory repression, as the

110 Caruth defines latency as conceived by Freud as 'the successive movement from an event to its repression to its return.' See Cathy Caruth, 'Trauma and Experience: Introduction,' *Trauma*, ed. Caruth, p.7.
employment of dialogue provides the means through which the traumatic past is temporarily kept at bay. At the same time, language serves another purpose, namely, that of constructing and establishing a new reality that is in all aspects disconnected from the traumatic event of the past. As Vladimir and Estragon’s purpose to wait for Godot, their determination to be happy, and Hamm’s purpose to complete his chronicle emerge in their repetition as performative utterances, the trilogy eventually questions the overall value of language by rethinking the role it plays in the traumatic aftermath.

3.2. Language

The nature and purpose of language in Beckett’s post-war trilogy is profoundly paradoxical. The reason for this, I argue, is that language embodies the symptoms of the same traumatic history which haunts the protagonists. It, too, emerges as decisively shaped by traumatic memory and experience. Thus, language gives form to the compelling, yet involuntary ‘imperative to tell’ \(^{111}\) the story of the past, at the same time as it provides the protagonists with the means through which they may temporarily achieve its repression. Language is inadequate, ‘empty’ (\textit{HD}, 154), yet it is also the only means of communication between the protagonists.

Focusing on specific episodes from the three plays, my analysis will initially demonstrate how language is employed as a distraction or shelter from the enemy that is the past. In other words, language serves as that which brings the present moment into the foreground and as that which works against a linguistic collapse into the continuous recollection of memories, a collapse to which the protagonists of \textit{Not I} and \textit{That Time} (1975) fall victim. In acting as a distraction, language also contributes to the continuous efforts to create a new reality, one that is wholly disconnected from the traumatic and, indeed, traumatising past. This is primarily achieved through the endless repetition of the particulars which define the protagonists’ current state, which indicates the viability of approaching their words as performative utterances.

\(^{111}\) Laub, ‘An Event Without a Witness’, p.78.
While providing a distraction from the past, language is paradoxically also a medium through which traumatic memory and experience gain access into the present. As my previous discussion of traumatic memory has shown, images of violence, atrocity and suffering surface most prominently in monologues. Thus, language emerges as another intrusive entity which assails the protagonists, returning them to the scene of the original trauma. Suggesting the possibility of reading the protagonists’ monologues as involuntary testimonial attempts, I will then turn my attention to how language is overwhelmed by repetition, ellipsis and fragmentation, thereby surfacing as an inadequate means for addressing or narrating the traumatic past. Through the depiction of its present condition, then, I will argue that the post-war trilogy questions the ability of language to address trauma, its ability to narrate the events of the war years, while simultaneously testifying to the horrors of the Second World War by positioning it as a historical event which exists beyond any known frame of reference.

The need to distance oneself from the traumatic past by means of a distraction is perhaps most explicitly addressed in *Godot*, in the following exchange between Vladimir and Estragon:

**VLADIMIR:** What do [the dead voices] say?
**ESTRAGON:** They talk about their lives.
**VLADIMIR:** To have lived is not enough for them.
**ESTRAGON:** They have to talk about it. (*WFG*, 58)

Providing a brief glimpse into the worlds of Beckett’s later plays, Estragon’s last line also conveys the impulse to repress the past. This impulse, I argue, manifests itself in the perpetual dialogues on seemingly trivial subject-matters, dialogues which divert their attention to the present moment. Thus, Vladimir and Estragon repeatedly evoke their purpose to wait for Godot, allude to the biblical story of the two thieves, consider hanging themselves from the tree and verbally abuse each other, all of which are carried out with the purpose of ‘prevent[ing] [their] reason from foundering’ (*WFG*, 75). Similarly, Hamm and Clov talk about the nature of the outside realm, the weather, their ill health and the unavailability of props, while Winnie comments on Willie’s condition and that of her environment, says her prayers and quotes passages from literary works. In these instances, the plays rethink the value of language since the
words that are articulated on stage are – to borrow Winnie’s phrase – ‘empty’ 
(*HD*, 154). Yet the plays do not devalue language, not do they reduce it to ‘meaningless buzzing’, to ‘a mere game to pass the time.’\(^\text{112}\) Rather, they portray language as that which in the traumatic aftermath conceals that which cannot be spoken, the history which permanently resists articulation, the history which the protagonists desperately try to fight against.

Yet under such pressure language eventually fails, condemning the characters to a state of profound linguistic repetition, fragmentation and, ultimately, silence. A telling example of this takes place in *Godot*, shortly after the allusion to the ‘dead voices’:

[Long silence.]
VLADIMIR: Say something!
ESTRAGON: I'm trying.
[Long silence.]
VLADIMIR: *In anguish.* Say anything at all! (*WFG*, 59)
ESTRAGON: What do we do now?
VLADIMIR: Wait for Godot.
ESTRAGON: Ah!
[Silence.]
VLADIMIR: This is awful!
ESTRAGON: Sing something!
VLADIMIR: No, no! *[He reflects.]* We could start all over again perhaps. (*WFG*, 59, my emphasis)

Vladimir and Estragon’s desperate struggle against silence is conveyed throughout the above dialogue and highlighted with Vladimir’s striking suggestion to repeat everything that has already been said. A similar image of the present condition of language is portrayed in *Endgame*, in which the characters perpetually repeat ‘the old questions, the old answers’ (*E*, 110), while *Happy Days* presents the reduction of language to a disjointed, often incoherent logorrhoea, with Winnie admitting that ‘[w]ords fail, there are times when even they fail’ (*HD*, 147). To expand further on nature of language in the trilogy we may turn our attention to Adorno’s reading of *Endgame*, in which he argues that ‘the syntactic form of question and answer [in *Endgame*] is undermined.’\(^\text{113}\) The reason for this, he continues, is that the question-and-answer format

\(^\text{112}\) Esslin, *The Theatre of the Absurd*, p.84, 87.
\(^\text{113}\) Adorno, ‘Trying to Understand *Endgame*’, p.140.
‘presupposes an openness of what is to be spoken’, an openness which in *Endgame* – and I would here add *Godot* as well – ‘no longer exists’.114 Thus, ‘[i]n the question one already hears already the anticipated answer, and that condemns the game of question and answer to empty deception’.115 Indeed, there is no openness, no linguistic freedom in Beckett’s trilogy. What is spoken onstage is but a substitute for that which cannot be spoken, that which is unprocessed, inaccessible and exists beyond any frame of reference. Thus, in a world in which language provides the only means of communication between the protagonists while at once playing a fundamental part in providing a distraction from the traumatic past, language itself emerges as symptomatic of trauma as it loses all coherence and meaning.

Paradoxically, this empty language is also employed to construct and establish a new reality, a reality that is not affected by past trauma. While this suggests the viability of considering language within a framework of performativity, I believe that the views of Holocaust survivors on the use of language in the traumatic aftermath are also pertinent in this context. Addressing her inability to revisit the time she spent in the concentration camps, Holocaust survivor Bessie K. says: ‘I didn’t want to talk about it, and I didn’t want to admit to myself that this happened to me.’116 As her remark implies, to put an experience into words has crucial implications since it establishes its reality, it confirms that the experience has undeniably taken place or, in Bessie K.’s case, it confirms how she was a victim of, and a witness to, the Nazi atrocities. Desperate to prevent a narration of their respective histories in a post-war trilogy in which ‘[t]he violence of the unspeakable is mimicked by the timidity to mention it’,117 Beckett’s protagonists employ the authority which language possesses in validating the truth of an event to construct a new reality that explains the situation in which they find themselves while simultaneously eradicating any sense of victimisation.

114 Ibid.
115 Ibid.
116 Quoted in Langer, *Holocaust Testimonies*, p.49, my emphasis.
Theorising performativity, Judith Butler argues that performativity is not ‘a singular or deliberate “act,” but, rather, [...] the reiterative and citational practice by which discourse produces the effects that it names.’\(^{118}\) Taking into account the analysis I have so far provided of language in Beckett’s trilogy as symptomatic of trauma, I would slightly modify Butler’s words and argue that the plays present the reiterative and citational practice by which discourse attempts to produce the effects that it names. A notable example of this is provided in *Godot*, in the repeated efforts of Vladimir and Estragon to justify their perpetual stasis by alluding to the appointment they have to keep. Their purpose to wait for Godot may indeed be read as a performative utterance, since it is repeated nine times during the course of the play. Perhaps this also constitutes the only example in the trilogy of how ‘discourse produces the effects it names’,\(^{119}\) since Vladimir’s persistent allusions to their appointment result in Estragon – who often forgets of their appointment – finally admitting that he, too, is waiting for Godot (*WFG*, 81). Another example of how language in *Godot* is employed to construct reality is the following:

Vladimir and Estragon are happy and they are waiting for Godot. This is the reality which the two protagonists desperately insist upon, in the hope that language will alter their moods and mindsets, or the truth of their situation. As Vladimir confesses, though this may be a reality that is not true, the frequent repetition of its particulars may soon give the impression that it is.


\(^{119}\) Ibid., my emphasis.
In *Endgame*, the most profound example of how language is employed to construct reality is provided in Hamm’s narration of his chronicle. Essentially a reconstruction of his and Clov’s life narratives, the chronicle is continuously modified and revisited only if at least one of the other characters is present. The perceived potential of language to manipulate reality is then vividly depicted in the following dialogue:

Hamm: Do you remember when you came here?
Clov: No. Too small, you told me.
Hamm: Do you remember your father?
Clov: [Wearily.] Same answer. [Pause.] You’ve asked me these questions millions of times.
Hamm: I love the old questions. [With fervour.] Ah the old questions, the old answers, there’s nothing like them! [Pause.] It was I was a father to you.
Clov: Yes. [He looks at Hamm fixedly.] You were that to me.
Hamm: My house a home for you.
Clov: Yes. [He looks about him.] This was that for me. (E, 110).

In the previous section of this chapter, I examined Hamm’s reconstruction of his personal history within the context of traumatic memory and proposed that the chronicle is perceived by the protagonist as the means through which he may fill the gaps in his life narrative and the means through which he may replace his victimisation, his absence, by attributing to himself a position of authority. The above dialogue between him and Clov therefore demonstrates how in the traumatic aftermath, language is perceived as that which contributes to the process of repressing and even rejecting past trauma. Personal history, then, emerges as not a history that is experienced but a history that is constructed and rehearsed ‘millions of times’ (E, 110): ‘It was I was a father to you’, Hamm says, reprimanding Clov for not providing the much-repeated answer.

The profoundly paradoxical nature of language in Beckett’s trilogy comes to light once we turn our attention to the monologues of his protagonists. In the previous section I proposed that the monologues occur involuntarily and are delivered compulsively, thereby emerging as a re-enactment of traumatic memory and experience. Language, I will now argue, constitutes the medium through which traumatic memory and experience surface to contaminate the present. In other words, while often employed as a distraction from the past,
language is also the site for its violent manifestation. Like traumatic memory, language also emerges as intrusive and irrepressible. For the duration of each monologue, language is not employed by the protagonist but instead *employs* the protagonist, reducing him or her to a mouthpiece by which traumatic history returns to engulf the present. In order to expand on this argument, I would like to draw attention first to Dori Laub, who argues that ‘[n]one find peace in silence, even when it is their choice to remain silent.’\(^{120}\) Laub continues:

> The “not-telling” of the story [of the traumatic past] serves as a perpetuation of its tyranny. The events become more and more distorted in their silent retention and pervasively invade and contaminate the survivor’s daily life. The longer the story remains untold, the more distorted it becomes in the survivor’s conception of it, so much so that the survivor doubts the reality of the actual events.\(^{121}\)

Paradoxically, then, the impulse to repress the past by employing language as a distraction serves only to reinforce the protagonists’ entrapment in a perpetual struggle against it. As their monologues demonstrate, the past ultimately does find expression, intruding into the present in the form of a compulsive and fragmented logorrhoea, one that testifies to the minimal control that the protagonists possess over it.

I believe it is important here to also comment on how the state of profound detachment in which the monologues are delivered evokes what Robert Jay Lifton addresses as “psychic numbing,” as well as what other theorists like Caruth refer to as “amnesiac re-enactment”. Psychic numbing describes the state of minimal involvement, a state that is primarily defined by ‘a cessation of feeling’,\(^{122}\) in which the trauma victim compulsively gives voice to the traumatic experience. This is an image that we encounter in all three plays. From Vladimir’s memory of ‘the others’ who suffered (*WFG*, 84), to Clov’s allusion to his past manipulation and to Winnie’s story of Mildred and the mouse, the monologues of the trilogy are almost in their entirety delivered in a state of numb detachment. Beckett’s suggestion to Alan Schneider that Winnie should

\(^{120}\) Laub, ‘An Event Without a Witness’, p.79.
\(^{121}\) Ibid.
speak in a ‘mild tone’ that achieves ‘vocal monotony’ further emphasises her minimal emotional engagement in what is being articulated, while also perhaps indicating a correlation between the trilogy’s monologues and Holocaust testimonies which, according to Ernst van Alphen, are often delivered without sentiment or compassion, ‘almost mechanically’.

Overwhelmed by fragmentation, ellipsis and repetition, language in the trilogy eventually emerges as inadequate. Approaching the monologues as compulsive re-enactments of traumatic memory and experience, as involuntary testimonial attempts, we may argue that in the traumatic aftermath, language can neither effectively repress, nor coherently address past trauma. Notably, van Alphen traces as a crucial dilemma of Holocaust survivors their realisation that ‘language did not provide the terms and positions in which to experience [the lived events]’. Similarly, in Beckett’s trilogy ‘[w]ords fail, there are times when even they fail’ (HD, 147). Thus, Hamm says that ‘[i]t all happened without [him]’ (E, 128), unable to provide more details as to what exactly it is that happened or when. Winnie is more explicit: ‘There is so little one can speak of’, she says, that ‘one speaks of it all. […] All one can’ (HD, 145, 160). Later in the play she slightly modifies her words and adds a striking sentence at the end: ‘There is so little one can say, one says it all. [Pause.] All one can. [Pause.] And no truth in it anywhere’ (HD, 161, my emphasis). What one says, Winnie implies, is based both on the linguistic terms available to him or her and on the ability of the protagonist to ‘admit’ to himself or herself ‘that this happened to me’, thereby enabling the play to communicate that trauma, memory and language are all inextricably intertwined.

The paradoxical nature of language in the trilogy, I argue, ultimately communicates the fate of humanity and the fate of art and literature in the immediate post-war era. In its depiction of protagonists who attempt to
manipulate language while at the same time struggling with its inadequacy, with its reduction to a violent logorrhoea, the trilogy conveys the impossibility of coming to terms with past trauma. As both Vladimir and Winnie confess, there is no ‘truth’ (WFG, 84; HD, 161), in the words they speak. What is uttered is merely a substitute for what remains unspoken. As Laub argues, in the aftermath of atrocity the trauma victim becomes entrapped between the ‘imperative to tell’ and ‘the impossibility of telling’\textsuperscript{127} the story of the past, with this impossibility deriving largely from the inadequacy of language. ‘There are never enough words or the right words,’ he writes, ‘… to articulate the story that cannot be fully captured in thought, memory and speech.’\textsuperscript{128} This was what Holocaust survivors had to face after the liberation, and this is what Beckett’s protagonists chronically endure.

The artwork that emerges from this period endures the same predicament. Unable to narrate or represent the events of its historical context, the theatrical work can only employ language to testify to their magnitude, to expose them as events which exist beyond any known frame of reference. Yet while other writers like Camus resort to the employment of metaphor to convey the history which the literary text or the character embodies, Beckett obstinately refrains from such methods. Writing on \textit{The Plague}, Shoshana Felman argues that ‘[i]t is precisely because history as holocaust proceeds from a failure to imagine, that it takes an imaginative medium like the Plague to gain an insight into its historical reality, as well as into the attested historicity of its unimaginability.’\textsuperscript{129} Conversely, Beckett’s testimonial drama testifies only to the failure to imagine. For the playwright, no metaphor can adequately evoke the enormity of the history embodied in each of his texts, and it is precisely in this absence of metaphor that his drama exposes the true sense of ‘unimaginability.’

Despite the inadequacy of language to address traumatic experience, Laub argues, the pressure to tell the story of the past ‘continues unremittingly, and if words are not trustworthy or adequate, the life that is chosen can become the

\textsuperscript{127} Laub, ‘An Event Without a Witness’, p.78, 79.
\textsuperscript{128} Ibid., p.78, original emphasis.
\textsuperscript{129} Shoshana Felman, ‘Camus’ \textit{The Plague}, or a Monument to Witnessing’, in Felman and Laub, Testimony, p.105, original emphasis.
vehicle by which the struggle to tell continues.'\textsuperscript{130} In light of this argument, the next section will concentrate on the condition of the human body and the situation of the protagonists and argue that the trauma which memory and language cannot assimilate or coherently address manifests itself in bodily symptoms, reactions and behaviours. That is to say that the body becomes the vehicle by which struggle to testify continues, the medium through which trauma is perhaps more vividly expressed. Emerging as another site for the manifestation of traumatic memory and experience, the human body in Beckett succumbs to the repercussions of history, endlessly acting out its symptoms.

3.3. The Body

The image of a dysfunctional, deteriorating and often disappearing human body reappears throughout Beckett’s drama. From the portrayal of Krapp as ‘a wearish old man’ that is ‘very near-sighted’ and ‘hard of hearing’, with a white face, purple nose and grey hair,\textsuperscript{131} to the depiction of protagonists with urns for bodies and faces ‘so lost to age and aspect as to seem almost part of urns’ in\textsuperscript{132} to the reduction of characters to single body parts in Not I and That Time, the emphasis on physical decline is relentless. The post-war trilogy displays a similar treatment of the human body, while the progressive physical deterioration of certain characters brings us face to face with the impending threat of total annihilation.

As we shall now see, the body serves as another site for the manifestation of trauma symptoms, thus reflecting the condition of memory and language. Where theatre constitutes ‘the one literary genre mediated by the body,’\textsuperscript{133} the onstage depiction of corporeal decline serves to express perhaps more vividly the trauma that cannot be fully integrated in personal history, captured in memory or coherently articulated in speech. Mirroring also through its fragmentation the condition of the body of the dramatic text, the human body

\textsuperscript{130} Laub, ‘An Event Without a Witness’, p.78, my emphasis.
\textsuperscript{131} Beckett,\textit{Krapp’s Last Tape}, p.216.
emerges, then, as an aspect of the characters that is ‘perfectly decodable’\textsuperscript{134} and therefore profoundly capable of personifying the trauma.

My analysis of the human body in the trilogy will be followed by a discussion of the physical situation of the protagonists, wherein I will read the prevailing sense of stasis and confinement as further evidence of the traumatised condition. Character behaviour, I will argue, is radically affected by the traumatic past, thus emerging as a means by which trauma is incessantly acted out. ‘In acting-out,’ LaCapra argues, ‘the past is performatively regenerated or relived as if it were fully present rather than represented in memory and inscription,’ thereby ‘hauntingly return[ing] as the repressed.’\textsuperscript{135} Reading character behaviour as extensively symptomatic of constriction and hyperarousal, I will suggest that the reduction of life to chronic repetition is simultaneously an entrapment in the perpetual struggle to express past trauma.

My contention is that the protagonists in Beckett’s post-war trilogy are permanently enduring the psychic and somatic effects of past trauma. Yet, while past trauma cannot be captured in memory or speech, the human body seems to have processed this past traumatic experience, an experience which is ultimately remembered in and through the body. Susan Brison provides some valuable insights on somatic memory:

A primary distinguishing factor of traumatic memories is that they are more tied to the body than are narrative memories. Indeed, traumatic memory can be viewed as a kind of somatic memory [...]. Traumatic memory blurs the Cartesian mind-body distinction that continues to inform our cultural narrative about the nature of the self. [...] The intermingling of mind and body is apparent in traumatic memories that remain in the body, in each of the senses, in the heart that races and skin that crawls whenever something resurrects the only slightly buried terror.\textsuperscript{136}

\textsuperscript{134} Irene Kacandes, ‘Narrative Witnessing as Memory Work: Reading Gertrud Kolmar’s A Jewish Mother’, in Acts of Memory, eds. Bal, Crewe and Spitzer, p.57.
\textsuperscript{136} Brison, ‘Trauma Narratives’, p.42.
In my attempt to read the ‘perfectly decodable’ sign that is the body of the protagonists, then, I will return to Brison with the purpose of further illuminating the interconnections between trauma, memory and the corporeal aspect.

Writing on *Endgame*, Adorno observes that ‘[n]one of [the characters] still has a properly functioning body’. Indeed, Hamm is blind and crippled; Clov suffers from a failing eyesight, inability to sit and ‘unbelievable’ pains in his legs (*E*, 115); Nagg and Nell, of whom the latter dies during the course of the play, have lost their legs in an accident in the Ardennes region, ‘[o]n the road to Sedan’ (*E*, 100), in what during the war years constituted ‘an area where one army regularly annihilates another.’ References to their deteriorating condition appear throughout the play as Hamm repeatedly asks for his pain-killer and questions Clov about the condition of his eyes and legs, Nagg loses his tooth and talks with Nell about their hearing and their own failing eyesight. Adorno’s argument, though, may also be applied to the protagonists of *Godot* and *Happy Days*. In the first of the two plays, Estragon suffers from aching feet and Vladimir from prostate problems, while Pozzo loses his eyesight and Lucky the ability to speak between the two acts of the play. In *Happy Days*, Winnie is in the first act embedded up to her waist in a mound, while the second act finds her embedded up to her neck. Indeed, this is a gradual physical disappearance onto which the playwright sought to add much emphasis, writing to director Alan Schneider that the actress that should portray Winnie should have ‘desirable fleshness’, so as for the audience to ‘miss this gleaming opulent flesh’ once she sinks further into the earth. Conversely, Willie crawls on the ground behind her, remaining for the most part of the play only partly visible. What is also notable is that his initial appearance is strongly evocative of Hamm’s, whose face is covered with ‘a large blood-stained handkerchief’ (*E*, 93) at the beginning of *Endgame*. According to the stage directions, the first time we catch a glimpse of Willie we see only his ‘bald head, trickling blood’, before his hand appears with a handkerchief that he ‘spreads [...] on skull’ (*HD*, 141, 142).
I would first like to draw attention to the way in which the dysfunctional body limits the protagonists’ abilities, constrains their interaction with the world and extensively determines their behaviour exposes the level of authority it possesses over their overall condition. Indeed, we may speak of the body in Beckett’s drama as an independent entity, one that is perceived as radically dissociated from the self and which, like memory and language, causes further victimisation by being symptomatic of trauma. Evidence of the authority which the body possesses over a protagonist can be traced throughout Beckett’s oeuvre, yet this issue is perhaps most explicitly addressed in a particular passage from *Mercier and Camier*, the prototype for *Waiting for Godot*:

*Where do our feet think they are taking us? said Camier. They would seem to be heading for the canal, said Mercier. Already? said Camier.*

These motifs of the personification of the body and the subjection of the characters to it are further developed in the post-war trilogy. In *Godot*, Estragon’s feet force him to seek a place to sit and consequently prevent him from standing up, whereas Vladimir’s prostate problem sends him offstage in the middle of a conversation. Pozzo’s blindness necessitates the presence of one to guide him and deprives him of the ability to distinguish between reality and fantasy: ‘Sometimes I wonder’, he confesses, ‘if I’m not still asleep’ (*WFG*, 80). Enduring the rapid decline of his own body, Clov in *Endgame* passively ‘see[s] [his] light dying’ (*E*, 98), while the three other characters, as well as Winnie and Willie, surrender to a state of permanent stasis due to lifeless legs, amputated limbs, or physical entrapment. Despite the argument that she is ‘less interested in her bodily condition’, the female protagonist of *Happy Days* breaks down when left unable to read the inscription on her toothbrush because of those ‘[o]ld things. [...] Old eyes’ (*HD*, 140), while the repercussions of her physical entrapment are perhaps best suggested by the playwright himself, who described her as ‘a bird that can’t fly, a bird with a broken wing’, and ‘a bird with oil on her feathers’.

---

Deteriorating bodies in Beckett may be seen as further suggestive of trauma, and as such to constitute a reflection of unprocessed memory. Drawing upon Brison’s analysis we may argue that traumatic memory and experience are in the trilogy ‘tied to the body’ of the protagonists, and ‘remain in the body, in each of the senses,’ manifesting themselves in corporeal decline. Indeed, the protagonists’ repeated complaints about their ill health, as well as their perception of the body as an uncontrollable, dissociated entity, also echo Judith Herman when she argues that trauma victims ‘perceive their bodies as having turned against them.’ Herman’s and Brison’s respective accounts, I argue, can significantly contribute to our understanding of the protagonists’ attitude towards the human body, enabling us to read their behaviour as decisively shaped by past trauma. The authority which the body assumes over their condition, an authority which I suggest is mirrored in the sheer volume of stage directions that dictate their every movement, foregrounds, therefore, a profound level of dehumanisation, reducing the protagonists to almost inanimate props.

In light of Brison’s argument that traumatic memory is inextricably tied to the body, I wish now to propose that the fragmentation of the human body constitutes a reflection of unprocessed personal history, thus transforming the characters into mere embodiments of the traumatic past. Happy Days addresses most startlingly the fragmentation of the body through Winnie’s following lines:

WINNIE: [...] And now? [Long Pause.] The face. [Pause.] The nose. [She squints down.] I can see it... [squinting down]... the tip... the nostrils... breath of life... that curve you so admired... [pouts]... a hint of lip... [pouts again] if I pout them out... [sticks out tongue]... the tongue of course... you so admired... if I stick it out... [sticks it out again]... the tip... [eyes up]... suspicion of brow... eyebrow... imagination possibly... [eyes left]... cheek... no... [eyes right]... no... [distends cheeks]... even if I puff them out... [eyes left, distends cheeks again]... no... (HD, 161-2)

Where ‘traumatic memory can be viewed as a kind of somatic memory,’ the body in Beckett’s trilogy emerges as another site for the manifestation of past

\textsuperscript{145} Brison, ‘Trauma Narratives’, p.42.
\textsuperscript{146} Herman, \textit{Trauma and Recovery}, p.86.
\textsuperscript{147} Brison, ‘Trauma Narratives’, p.42.
trauma, expressing the condition of memory, and by extension that of personal history, more discernibly. Its further deterioration, anticipated in the monologues of Pozzo and Hamm, and in Winnie’s further sinking into the earth, may then be seen as indicative of the complete surrender of the self to trauma. Indeed, if there is any certainty in the world of the plays, it is that of terminal dissolution. ‘Shall I myself not melt perhaps in the end,’ Winnie says at a moment of profound self-consciousness, before adding, ‘oh, I do not mean necessarily burst into flames, no, just little by little be charred to a black cinder, all this – [ample gesture of arms] – visible flesh’ (HD, 154). Expanding, then, on the crucial interconnection between memory and the body, we may argue that the gradual disappearance of the latter foreshadows the dissolution of the self and its complete withdrawal into the past, an image all too familiar when we recall the condition of Mouth in Not I or the Listener in That Time.

We may here proceed to argue, then, that the physical situation of the protagonists – the perpetual entrapment in stasis and repetition – has its roots in the traumatic past, emerging as a profound acting-out of trauma. In contrast to the process of working-through trauma, which often manifests in the form of mourning and allows for ‘critical judgment and a reinvestment in life’ by involving the conscious recognition of the difference between past and present,148 the process of acting-out is aligned with Freud’s theorisation of melancholia, thereby occurring as ‘an arrested process in which the depressed, self-berating, and traumatized self, locked in compulsive repetition, is possessed by the past’ and ‘faces a future of impasses’.149 This definition of the process of acting out the trauma also justifies and illuminates Adorno’s contention that ‘Beckett’s figures behave primitively and behavioristically, corresponding to conditions after the catastrophe, which has mutilated them to such an extent that they cannot react differently’.150 Indeed, by stressing the impact of the traumatic past, or of the ‘catastrophe’, as he calls it, on the condition of the protagonists in the present, Adorno’s argument provides an invaluable context for my discussion of their behaviours and reactions. By repositioning his thesis that the protagonists of Endgame are ‘flies that twitch after the swatter has half

149 Ibid., p.713, my emphasis.
150 Adorno, ‘Trying to Understand Endgame’, p.128, my emphasis.
smashed them'\textsuperscript{151} within the context of trauma studies, and by extending its application to the characters of \textit{Godot} and \textit{Happy Days}, I propose to show that through the depiction of a behaviour that is symptomatic of trauma, the trilogy lays bare the repercussions of violent subjugation and extreme dehumanisation, thus conveying the experience of living in the aftermath of the Nazi gas chambers.

In his study, James Olney draws a distinct parallel between the landscapes of the trilogy and the European environment after the end of the Second World War. Alluding to the experiences of Primo Levi after the liberation, Olney writes:

\begin{quote} [...] Primo Levi gives a vivid account of his own nearly endless shuttling through Poland, the Soviet Union, Romania, Hungary, Czechoslovakia, Austria, and Germany as he tried to make his way back to Turin after the liberation from the concentration camp at Buna. Many of the figures he describes along the way – their dress, their bewilderment, their going on in the face of the impossibility of going on – could easily have come out of Beckett. [...] This was the scene that Beckett presumably saw in making his way from Rousillon back to Paris, then again when he visited bombed-out London, and most of all during the months he spent in Saint-Lô; it is in many ways the scene that we have come to think of as and to call Beckettian, the landscape of \textit{Waiting for Godot}, \textit{Endgame}, \textit{Happy Days}.
\end{quote}

Here, Olney traces a reasonable correlation between the ruins that the war years left behind and the barren and inhospitable settings in Beckett’ drama. However, I contend that what mostly evokes the post-war atmosphere is the protagonists’ perception of, and reaction to, the world in which they find themselves. That is to say that it is precisely the way in which the characters refer to the world which surrounds them, as well as the way in which they interact within it, that establishes it as a site of violence, fear, and danger.

The post-war trilogy repeatedly confronts us with the protagonists’ striking inability to sufficiently locate themselves in their respective settings. From Estragon’s assertion that he and Vladimir are ‘not from these parts’, his description of the scenery as ‘muckheap’, and the reference to the onstage world

\begin{footnotes}
\item[\textsuperscript{151}] Ibid.
\item[\textsuperscript{152}] Olney, \textit{Memory & Narrative}, p.395.
\end{footnotes}
as either ‘the wrong place’ or ‘the right place’ to wait for Godot (WFG, 24, 57, 16, 66), to Clov’s own description of the outside world in Endgame as ‘muckheap’, ‘zero’, ‘grey’, and ‘filth’ (E, 129, 106, 107, 130), and to Winnie’s strongly evocative allusion to the earth which engulfs her as the ‘old extinguisher’ (HD, 153), Beckett’s drama seems ultimately to convey the impossibility of belonging to the world in the present. Evoking Jean Améry and his telling argument that ‘[w]hoever has succumbed to torture can no longer feel at home in the world’, the plays expose the very world in which they are set as one deformed by an unnamed and unnameable, overwhelmingly violent trauma, one that has brought about a complete collapse of social structures and manners, of human community and of the meaning-making capacity of language.

‘[I]t is how people react to them rather than what they are that give events whatever traumatic quality they can be said to have,’ asserts Kai Erikson. His argument, I believe, sheds light on the interconnections between the behaviour of the protagonists and the condition of the Beckett world, while also exposing the decisive impact of the traumatic past on the present situation we encounter. A defining characteristic of the trilogy is the overwhelming sense of chronic stasis that is emphasised by the continuous returns to the same setting or by the characters’ persistent reluctance to abandon their present location. Waiting for Godot exemplifies both attitudes. Its two major protagonists return to the stage at the beginning of the two acts, exit during each act for different reasons before returning once more, while Pozzo and Lucky – who have arguably passed from the onstage setting in the past – reappear in the second act despite their purpose to reach a fair. The reluctance to abandon the setting is evoked by Vladimir’s assumption that Godot would punish him and Estragon if they ‘dropped him’ (WFG, 87), as well as by the identical endings of the two acts which see the two protagonists remaining motionless despite their resolution to leave. This profound reluctance is reinforced by Pozzo’s striking remark, delivered shortly after his decision to depart: ‘I don’t seem to be able… [Long hesitation]… to depart’ (WFG, 46), he says. Similarly, Endgame depicts Clov postponing his departure because ‘[t]here’s nowhere else’ for him to go and

153 Quoted in Brison, ‘Trauma Narratives’, p.44.
154 Erikson, ‘Notes on Trauma and Community’, p.184, original emphasis.
Hamm remaining in the shelter despite his decision to leave because of the possibility that ‘there [will] be sharks’ (E, 95, 109), whereas Happy Days refrains from providing an answer as to why Willie does not dig Winnie out of the mound.

By situating the protagonists’ behaviour within the context of trauma studies we can trace a profound similarity between their chronic confinement and what psychoanalytic theory understands as constrictive symptoms. Herman theorises the constriction as ‘a state of surrender that is detected as a symptom in cases of trauma, and which occurs when a person is completely powerless and any form of resistance seems futile.’\(^{155}\) Accordingly, constrictive symptoms apply to the entire field of purposeful action and initiative and manifest primarily in the manner in which trauma victims impose numerous limitations upon themselves, thereby restricting their lives ‘[i]n an attempt to create some sense of safety and to control their pervasive fear.’\(^{156}\) The cases to which Herman alludes within the context of her analysis, namely, the real-life situation of a combat veteran who admits to spending endless hours at work in order to suppress his fears and the case of a rape survivor whose feelings of terror prevent her from leaving her house,\(^{157}\) may therefore be paralleled to the behaviour which the protagonists of the trilogy display. Indeed, the image of chronic stasis gradually emerges as the result of fear, as a symptom of the traumatic past which sheds light on the Beckett world as the site of extreme violence that both literally and metaphorically cripples the protagonists. This permanent entrapment also evokes the image of a cyclical world or, as I have maintained in Chapter Two, the image of a death-world. Where the death-world manifests as a result of man-made mass slaughter, and of the realisation that the event of death is no longer ‘something fundamental, radically individual and individualizing’ but ‘an administered, impersonal, and collective fiat, in which neither the individual nor the community has any real say’,\(^{158}\) the fact of the characters’ confinement reinforces the underlying significance of the

\(^{155}\) Herman, *Trauma and Recovery*, p.42.

\(^{156}\) Ibid., p.46.

\(^{157}\) Ibid.

\(^{158}\) Miller, ‘Dismantling Authenticity’, p.50.
industrialised genocide of the Second World War as the primary historical context of each play.

The viability of approaching the behaviour of Beckett’s protagonists as symptomatic of traumatic experience, and of expressing the argument that it occurs as a response to a violent, traumatic past, is further emphasised by the manifestation of extreme, seemingly out-of-context reactions. Kai Erikson provides a telling discussion of the relation between traumatic histories and extreme reactions to ordinary, present-day events, which I suggest is strongly evocative of the situation we encounter in the trilogy. Erikson argues:

Traumatized people often scan the surrounding world anxiously for signs of danger, breaking into explosive rages and reacting with a start to ordinary sights and sounds, but at the same time, all that nervous activity takes place against a numbed gray background of depression, feelings of helplessness and a general closing off of the spirit, as the mind tries to insulate itself from further harm.\(^{159}\)

Erikson’s analysis, and his contention that such extreme reactions occur as a result of the perception of trauma victims that ‘they have lost a natural immunity to misfortune and that something awful is almost bound to happen’,\(^{160}\) can illuminate a number of episodes in Godot which depict Vladimir and Estragon’s response to approaching sounds. Their reaction to the sound of Pozzo and Lucky entering the stage, as described in the stage directions, is particularly revealing:

[ESTRAGON drops the carrot. They remain motionless, then together make a sudden rush towards the wings. ESTRAGON stops half-way, runs back, picks up the carrot, stuffs it in his pocket, runs toward VLADIMIR who is waiting for him, stops again, runs back, picks up his boot, runs to rejoin VLADIMIR. Huddled together, shoulders hunched, cringing away from the menace, they wait.] (WFG, 22)

One can only characterise that as a profoundly irrational response, which is echoed in a later scene:

ESTRAGON: They’re coming!

\(^{159}\) Erikson, ‘Notes on Trauma and Community’, p.184.
\(^{160}\) Ibid., p.194, original emphasis.
VLADIMIR: Who?
ESTRAGON: I don’t know.
VLADIMIR: How many?
ESTRAGON: I don’t know.
VLADIMIR: {...} He drags ESTRAGON towards the wings. ESTRAGON resists, pulls himself free, exit right. {...} Enter ESTRAGON right, he hastens towards VLADIMIR, falls into his arms.
[...]
ESTRAGON: They’re coming there too!
VLADIMIR: We’re surrounded! [ESTRAGON makes a rush towards back.] Imbecile! There’s no way out there. [He takes ESTRAGON by the arm and drags him towards front. Gesture towards front.] There! Not a soul in sight! [...]
[...]
ESTRAGON: [Calmer.] I lost my head. Forgive me. It won’t happen again. Tell me what to do. (WFG, 68-9)

Indeed, the play provides no justification of the sense of fear which overwhelms the protagonists and does not explain why – to borrow Erikson’s terms – they ‘scan the surrounding world anxiously for signs of danger’,161 After all, the only characters that ever enter the stage are the comic figure of a landlord, his quiet, submissive servant, and two young boys who arrive at the end of each act to postpone Godot’s arrival.

The protagonists in Endgame exhibit a similar reaction to the world which lies beyond the boundaries of the stage. Confined within the walls of the shelter, Clov is also depicted ‘scan[ning] the surrounding world anxiously for signs of danger,’162 while he and Hamm continuously worry that something or someone may exist outside. Thus, Clov’s unexpected remark that he has ‘[n]ever seen anything like that’ (E, 106) as he looks through one of the windows, results in the following conversation:

CLOV: [Looking.] The light is sunk.
HAMM: [Relieved.] Pah! We all knew that. (E, 106)

Hamm’s growing anxiety upon the possibility that his companion has detected signs of life in the otherwise ‘corpsed’ (E, 106) outside realm quickly subsides,

161 Ibid., p.184.
162 Ibid.
yet it is triggered once more after Clov sees a young boy. Strikingly, Clov’s initial reaction is to exit the shelter and kill him:

CLOV: [Dismayed.] Looks like a small boy!  
HAMM: [Sarcastic.] A small...boy!  
CLOV: I’ll go and see. [He gets down, drops the telescope, goes towards door, turns.] I’ll take the gaff.  
[He looks for the gaff, sees it, picks it up, hastens towards door.]  
HAMM: No!  
[CLOV halts.]  
CLOV: No? A potential procreator?  
HAMM: If he exists he’ll die there or he’ll come here. And if he doesn’t... [Pause.] (E, 130-1)

It is indeed notable that what Hamm objects to is not Clov’s decision to kill the boy but the idea of him exiting the shelter and entering a world in which death is the only certainty. An earlier draft of the play, which includes a lengthier discussion between the two protagonists, gives particular evidence of this. In it, Clov’s reference to the boy he detects outside is followed by Hamm’s following lines: ‘Well, go and exterminate him! [CLOV gets down from the stool.] Somebody! [With trembling voice.] Do your duty!’

The nervous, uncontrollable response to sights and sounds depicted in Endgame and Godot evokes what Herman theorises as hyperarousal. Manifesting itself in the aftermath of the traumatic experience, hyperarousal is ‘the persistent expectation of danger’ which occurs as ‘the human system of self-preservation seems to go onto permanent alert.’ Thus, like Beckett’s protagonists, the trauma victim ‘startles easily, reacts irritably to small provocations’, yet his or her reactions derive not from the events of the present but are dictated, rather, by the atrocities endured in the past. More than attesting to the condition of the characters as victims of trauma, the symptoms of hyperarousal and constriction also testify to the fact that their behaviour constitutes a site for the re-enactment of traumatic memory. ‘[T]raumatic memory’, van der Kolk and van der Hart argue, ‘is evoked under particular conditions. It occurs automatically in situations which are reminiscent of the

---

164 Herman, Trauma and Recovery, p.35.  
165 Ibid.
original traumatic situation.’ Vladimir and Estragon’s pervasive fear at the approaching sounds of Pozzo and Lucky, and Hamm and Clov’s response to the sight of the young boy outside, may be seen to indicate, therefore, the nature of the event which memory cannot assimilate and language fails to articulate.

‘To be traumatized’, Cathy Caruth argues, ‘is precisely to be possessed by an image or event.’ The repercussions of the traumatic past in the trilogy, a past which always ‘hauntingly returns as the repressed’, are registered in the ultimate reduction of life to a process of relentless acting-out and entrapment in dehumanising routine. The issue of routine or habit in Beckett’s drama has received much attention in critical studies, with Eric P. Levy asserting in his essay on *Endgame* that characters are ‘reduced to automatism or programmed configuration of operation’. ‘[C]haracter’, he maintains, ‘is reduced to habit.’

Emphasised by the overwhelming gestural and linguistic repetition, the depiction of life as routine is explicitly addressed by Hamm, who responds to Clov’s question, ‘[w]hy this farce, day after day?’, with the telling phrase, ‘Routine. One never knows’ (*E*, 107). Hamm's words also echo Vladimir’s following, particularly revealing line: ‘All I know is that the hours are long under these conditions,’ he says, ‘and constrain us to beguile them with proceedings which – how shall I say – which may at first sight seem reasonable, until they become a habit’ (*WFG*, 75). Thus, Vladimir and Estragon continue to wait for Godot despite his failure to arrive, and Hamm and Clov continue to wait for ‘something’ to ‘tak[e] its course’ (*E*, 98, 107). Entrapped in a world in which ‘[t]here is so little one can do’ that ‘[o]ne does it all’ (*HD*, 145, original emphasis), Winnie and Willie are also depicted eternally preoccupied with carrying out the same actions: Willie sleeps, crawls, reads the newspaper, or resorts to inappropriate, vulgar actions; Winnie prays, sings, takes care of her looks, and keeps herself busy with the items in her bag. Notably, spontaneous acts such as laughing, love-making and even thinking are also reduced to habit and occur only after reflection: ‘Don’t we laugh?’(*E*, 97, 106), Hamm and Clov ask each other; ‘[w]hat is it, my pet? [...] Time for love?’, Nell asks Nagg; ‘[t]hink of

---

167 Caruth, ‘Trauma and Experience’, pp.4-5.
something. [...] An idea, have an idea. [Angrily.] A bright idea!’ (E, 99, 114), Hamm tells Clov, echoing Pozzo ordering Lucky to ‘[t]hink’ (WFG, 41). Taking into account the physical entrapment of the protagonists, as well as the manifestation of symptoms of constriction and hyperarousal, we may propose, then, that what lies at the root of habit, what constitutes the ‘exterior force’ which directs the characters in the trilogy, is trauma. Repetition, in other words, becomes the only available response to trauma, one that is carried out not as a result of ‘programmed configuration of operation’ but, rather, as a consequence of the perpetual efforts to repress the past, to ‘actively [push] the unwanted traumatic memory away.’

As I have shown, memory, language and the body in Beckett’s post-war trilogy serve as three sites for the manifestation and re-enactment of trauma. Emerging as decisively shaped by a violent, dehumanising history, memory, language and the body are fundamentally interconnected, thereby communicating time present as a mere remnant of a traumatic past. Time in the post-war drama has stopped, just like it had stopped for the prisoners in the Nazi concentration camps: ‘we had not only forgotten our country and our culture,’ Holocaust survivors say, ‘but also our family, our past, the future we had imagined for ourselves, because, like animals, we were confined to the present moment.’ It is that present moment, the moment of utter dehumanisation and defeat, that eternally haunts Beckett’s protagonists and is perpetually enacted onstage. The underlying significance of the presence of trauma in the post-war trilogy, I contend, is that it enables each play to address and respond to the historical events of the Second World War without explicitly naming them. The three plays do not explicitly refer to the war; indeed, the word “war” itself is wholly absent from these plays. Yet, by internalising its symptoms, by embodying the very failure to speak of it, they paradoxically manage both to address and to respond to the repercussions of history as holocaust. The condition of the protagonists in the trilogy convey the condition

---

173 Quoted in Brison, ‘Trauma Narratives’, p. 43, my emphasis.
of humanity ‘vegetat[ing] along, crawling, after events which even the survivors cannot really survive, on a pile of ruins which even renders futile self-reflection of one’s own battered state.’

By reducing the characters to mere parasites on this earth and by rendering self-reflection impossible rather than merely futile, the three plays emerge as a compelling critique of agency, authority and subjectivity, questioning not only the condition but also the availability of personal history and, indeed, identity, in the aftermath of a historical period which reduced millions to smoke.

Twice in *Endgame* the protagonists allude to the paradox of Zeno of Elea. ‘Grain upon grain, one by one, and one day, suddenly, there’s a heap, a little heap, the impossible heap’ (*E*, 93), Clov says shortly after the play begins. Hamm’s line sheds more light on the centrality of this paradox to Beckett’s drama: ‘Moment upon moment, pattering down, like the millet grains of [...] that old Greek, and all life long you wait for that to mount up to a life’ (*E*, 126). Condemned to endure a fragmented personal history, to speak a fragmented language, and to suffer from a fragmented body, Beckett’s protagonists are entrapped in a fragmented existence that comprises only moments. Life in the world is no longer a linear succession of events, but ‘the accumulation of temporal units which remain extraneous to the subject enduring through them.’

Life, in other words, is the accumulation of past trauma, a burden which resists integration and cripples the characters, a heap which by *Happy Days* grows into a mound and swallows the protagonist.

In the aftermath of the historical trauma of the Second World War, though, life is also that which, like the grains of millet, gradually returns to the earth without making a sound. Life unfolds without being witnessed. Moving on in the next chapter to concentrate on the dynamics of human company in the trilogy, I will argue that the physical presence of the human other provides a listener to the sound which the millet grains make as they fall to the ground. It provides a

---

witness to one's existence, that is, in the aftermath of a historical period which 'precluded its own witnessing'.

177 Laub, 'An Event Without a Witness', p.80.
4. Reclaiming Witnessing in the Post-war Period: Human Company in Beckett’s Drama Trilogy

Starting from the premise that Samuel Beckett’s major post-war plays are fundamentally related to the historical period from which they have emerged, my thesis has so far argued that the form and dramatic scenarios of *Waiting for Godot*, *Endgame*, and *Happy Days* are radically shaped by the events of the Second World War. In Chapter Two and Chapter Three I endeavoured to shed light on the widespread internalisation of the symptoms, rhythms and processes of trauma in the trilogy, first by closely examining its structure and then by considering the protagonists’ behaviours and reactions alongside trauma theories. This overwhelming presence of trauma which I have detected in the trilogy and attempted to decode, together with the presence of the human other which the status of the plays as works of drama presupposes and necessitates, have in turn enabled me to propose the viability and potential of reading the three plays as testimonial drama. As I have shown, the need for the presence of the human other as audience is reinforced by the profusion of metatheatrical references, as well as by the notable level of ambiguity and withholding of particulars which make a demand on the onlookers, namely, the demand that it is they that should connect means to ends. Thus, Beckett’s drama effectively exposes the relationship between audience and performance as one that is fundamentally interdependent. It is with his or her very physical presence that the human other enables the onstage performance to transform into an act of bearing historical witness, to address and respond to the reality of an unimaginable history which precluded its own witnessing. Thus, I have proposed that by assuming the position of the belated witness to the performance of drama as testimony, we as audience can trigger the transformation of the theatrical experience into a site of interaction between art and history.

The need for a human other, one whose physical presence acts as a catalyst for the transformation of the post-war drama into a compelling historical critique, is mirrored in the onstage depiction of compulsively maintained relationships. As I have discussed in the Introduction, human company emerges
as a key trope of particularly the works that the playwright composed in the aftermath of the Second World War, appearing initially as a central theme in the 1946 novel, *Mercier and Camier*. It is not by coincidence, I suggest, that Beckett’s lasting textual preoccupation with the physical presence of another human being, portrayed not only in the drama trilogy but also in the radio play *Embers* (written 1957; broadcast 1959), the stage play *Rough for Theatre I* (1961), and the novella *Company* (1980), among others, surfaced for the first time upon the end of a period of profound atrocity, a period which radically impaired communality and almost eliminated the possibility to speak of the existence of “we.” ‘On the less weak let the weaker always lean,’ Beckett writes about the protagonists in the prototype for *Waiting for Godot*, for ‘[t]hey might conceivably be valiant together’,¹ explicitly communicating the value of company as a vital source of solace, support and communality in the immediate aftermath of the Holocaust. Rather than resorting to the use of metaphor like Camus, for example, whose novel, *The Plague* (*La Peste*, 1947), employs the event of a ravaging epidemic as an allegory of the mass deaths in the Nazi concentration camps,² Beckett responds to the historical trauma of the Second World War by proposing human company as a means of resistance to totalitarianism and extreme dehumanisation. It is only through the presence of a human other, his plays suggest, that communality and the possibility to bear witness can be restored, in the same manner that it was the belief in the ‘time-honoured concept of humanity’ that helped rebuild the town of Saint-Lô, thereby providing in the ruins of the war ‘an inkling of the terms in which our condition is to be thought again.’³

The following analysis of the issue of human company in Beckett’s drama trilogy is divided into two sections. The first focuses on the depiction of human company as a product of past trauma, one which manifests in the persistent, obsessive longing for the physical presence of another human being and in the profound inability to exist in solitude. This compelling need for the physical

---

presence of the other I will read as fundamentally related to the perception of
the world of the plays as the site of unspeakable, massive trauma which, as I
have discussed in Chapter Three, has resulted in the collapse of social structures
and manners and radically impaired the sense of communality. In his work on
trauma and community, Kai Erikson argues that ‘trauma can create community’
since the shared traumatic experience which originally damaged the bonds
between people can paradoxically serve also as ‘a source of communality in the
same way that common languages and common backgrounds can.’ In light of
his argument, I will suggest that human company in the post-war trilogy is
compulsively sought and maintained as that which may restore a sense of
belonging to the world and compensate for the impaired sense of communality.
Concentrating on the portrayal of relationships in the form of protector/victim,
master/servant, caretaker/dependent, I will then argue that human company
derives from the reduction of individual identity to a role, perpetually acted out
towards the other with the purpose of maintaining interdependence. Role-play,
I will eventually conclude, constitutes a vital means through which the plays
respond to their historical contexts, throwing into question the construction of
individual identity in the traumatic aftermath and revealing the experience of
the Second World War as one in which human beings are, above all, wholly
interchangeable.

The second section of this chapter will show that while human company
emerges as a product of trauma, the physical presence of the human other
paradoxically constitutes, also, a fundamental means of resistance to the
horrors of the original traumatic experience. More particularly, I will argue that
in the aftermath of a historical, collective trauma like the trauma of the Second
World War, during a period which decisively impaired the sense of
communality, the resolute commitment to maintaining human company
constitutes a compelling image of human perseverance, of ‘humanity in ruins’. In
addition, the physical presence of the human other in a period which

---

4 Kai Erikson, ‘Notes on Trauma and Community’, in Trauma: Explorations in memory, ed. Cathy
'precluded its own witnessing, even by its very victims',\textsuperscript{6} opens up the possibility to reclaim the ability to bear witness, thereby enabling the true experience and repercussions of history to come to light. Thus, the potential granted to the plays to serve as testimonial drama by means of being performed in front of an audience is mirrored in the way each protagonist is provided with a spectator and a listener, one who may indeed serve as a witness to his or her predicament. In a world seemingly devoid of society, where God ‘doesn’t exist’\textsuperscript{7} and no one else is left to act as a witness to the protagonists’ existence,\textsuperscript{8} in a world in which life is reduced to moments ‘pattering down, like the millet grains of... [...] ...that old Greek’ (\textit{E}, 126), silently and aimlessly, human company ultimately anticipates the possibility that ‘perhaps it won’t all have been for nothing’ (\textit{E}, 108).

My discussion of human company works together with my theorisation of the post-war plays as testimonial drama – as works, that is, which demand the active participate of the audience as the witness to the performance of drama as testimony – so as to illuminate the purpose and value of the human other in Beckett’s oeuvre. Through the relentless emphasis it adds onto the physical presence of the human other, Beckett’s trilogy, I will ultimately argue, emerges not only as an invaluable literary achievement but also as a profound, albeit often overlooked, ethical response to its history.

4.1. Human Company and Trauma

In light of Chapter Three, which discussed the behaviour of Beckett’s protagonists as extensively symptomatic of trauma, I will now show that the need for human company emerges as a product of the past traumatic experience. Where trauma turns the victim’s life into ‘the vehicle by which the


\textsuperscript{7} Samuel Beckett, \textit{Endgame}, in \textit{The Complete Dramatic Works} (1986; London: Faber & Faber, 2006), p.119. All further references to the play will be cited parenthetically in the text, and will be to this edition.

\textsuperscript{8} See the following conversation between Hamm and Clov in \textit{Endgame}:

\texttt{CLOV: Why do you keep me?}
\texttt{HAMM: There’s no one else. (E, 95)
struggle to tell [the story of the past] continues',\(^9\) the perpetual efforts to maintain the physical presence of the human other which radically shape the protagonists' lives – and, may we add, the dramatic scenarios of the three plays – expose a vital connection between company and trauma. Focusing first on the manner in which the plays portray the compelling need for the physical presence of the human other, I will argue that company is perceived by Beckett's protagonists as the means through which they may preserve a sense of communality, the means through which they may perhaps experience a sense of belonging in what is now a desolate and barren world. The very nature of human company, then, is dictated by the past traumatic experience and is decisively shaped by the profound inability of the protagonists to exist in solitude.

The nature of human relationships in Beckett's trilogy, the examination of which constitutes the second area of focus in this section, reinforces my contention that company is fundamentally associated with trauma. Approaching the position that each protagonist assumes towards his or her partner as a product of the shared need to maintain a sense of interdependence, I will argue that human company constitutes, essentially, a form of role-play. Carried out in effort to ascertain and perpetuate the physical presence of the human other, role-play is also that which brings the present into the foreground, thereby serving as a means through which the violent resurfacing of the traumatic past may, if only temporarily, be repressed. In this context, human company questions both the construction and the purpose of individual identity in the traumatic aftermath, and emerges itself as a compelling critique of the condition of humanity in the post-war era.

Due to the depiction of couples instead of solitary protagonists, *Waiting for Godot*, *Endgame* and *Happy Days* stand apart from the majority of Beckett's dramatic works. Indeed, the emphasis added onto the physical presence of the human other in the trilogy is relentless, with the need for the other heightened as a result of each protagonist's paradoxical disappointment with his or her counterpart. *Godot* includes numerous episodes during which a character

---

\(^9\) Laub, 'An Event Without a Witness', p.78.
complains about his partner. 'You see,' Estragon tells Vladimir shortly after the beginning of the second act, 'you feel worse when I'm with you. I feel better alone, too.'

Albeit having spent '[f]ifty years' together, the two protagonists still consider the possibility of parting since they 'weren't made for the same road' (WFG, 51, 52). The tension between the two minor characters, Pozzo and Lucky, is perhaps more explicitly conveyed. Indeed, Pozzo's treatment of his servant often reduces the latter to tears, while Lucky is accused of driving his master mad: 'I can't bear it...any longer...', Pozzo confesses while clutching his head in agitation; 'the way he goes on...you've no idea...it's terrible...he must go... [...] I'm going mad... [...] I can't bear it...any longer... [...] He used to be so kind... [...] and now...he's killing me' (WFG, 34).

In Endgame, the disappointment of the two protagonists with each other is taken a step further. Beckett would speak of the relationship between Hamm and Clov as a violent one, saying that '[t]here must be maximum aggression between them from the first exchange of words onward' so as to fully communicate that '[t]heir war is the nucleus of the play.' During the Schiller rehearsals, the playwright employed the motifs of fire and ashes to explain to Ernst Schroeder that the conflict between Hamm and Clov is 'ignited, smothered and ignited' time and again. That Clov angers Hamm and vice-versa, and that Nagg and Nell anger the two protagonists and vice-versa is made explicit throughout the play, while the stage directions which describe their reactions and tone of voice establish the tension which spreads onstage. In a short exchange of lines which stresses the conflict between the two protagonists despite their prolonged coexistence, Hamm says that he keeps Clov in the shelter simply because '[t]here's no one else' left to replace him, while the latter reveals that he stays only because '[t]here's nowhere else' (E, 95) for him to go. Nevertheless, Clov frequently threatens either to exit the stage or leave the refuge, addressing Hamm with the line, 'I'll leave you', a total of eleven times during the course of the play (E, 96, 97, 110, 111, 112, 115, 120, 125, 131).

10 Samuel Beckett, Waiting for Godot, in The Complete Dramatic Works, p.55. All further references to the play will be cited parenthetically in the text, and will be to this edition.
12 Quoted in ibid., p.201.
Albeit neither as violent nor as aggressive, the relationship between the two protagonists of *Happy Days* has likewise reached an impasse. In contrast to the couples in *Godot* and *Endgame* Winnie and Willie never consider parting, yet we may perhaps attribute this to the particulars of their physical situation. However, that the two are upset by the behaviour of the other is frequently conveyed. For the notably loquacious Winnie, the protracted silences of her counterpart are especially troubling: ‘One does not appear to be asking a great deal, indeed at times it would seem hardly possible – [voice breaks, falls to a murmur] – to ask less – of a fellow-creature’,\(^1\) she says when Willie fails to respond. Ceaselessly tending to her looks, she frequently pities Willie’s deterioration: ‘Poor Willie’, she repeats, ‘running out [...] no zest [...] no interest [...] in life [...] poor dear Willie [...] sleep for ever’ (*HD*, 139). Not ‘the crawler’ he used to be, the one she gave her heart to, Willie then appals his partner with his vulgar behaviour: ‘Oh, Willie, you’re not eating it!’, she shouts to him; ‘Spit it out, dear, spit it out!’ (*HD*, 158, 156). Though the male protagonist does not give voice to his thoughts about Winnie, the one-word replies and grunts with which he responds to her may well indicate his perception of her. Indeed, Winnie expresses her partner’s irritation in her own monologue: ‘Oh I can well imagine what is passing through your mind,’ she says, submissively; ‘it is not enough to have to listen to the woman, now I must look at her as well. [...] Well it is very understandable’ (*HD*, 149).

As I have mentioned above, the protagonists’ frustration with their respective counterparts contrasts extensively with the simultaneous efforts to perpetuate the state of company. This contrast, I suggest, exposed in each play via different means, draws attention to the image of human company and highlights its centrality in all three dramatic scenarios. Most crucially, the compelling need for the human other, which notably receives much attention in psychoanalytic criticism, reinforces the viability of arguing that company in Beckett emerges as a product of trauma. As we shall see, the incessant, almost compulsive attempts to perpetuate company do not occur as the consequence of a conscious choice to remain in the company of one particular other. Rather,\(^1\)

---

\(^1\) Samuel Beckett, *Happy Days*, in *The Complete Dramatic Works*, p.149. All further references to the play will be cited parenthetically in the text, and will be to this edition.
they emerge as an overpowering tendency to ‘gather into groups with others of like mind’,\(^{14}\) thereby echoing the trauma victims’ chronic, ‘anxious clinging to others.’\(^{15}\) Before I expand on the correlation between company and trauma in Beckett’s trilogy, though, I believe it is useful to focus on particular episodes from the three plays which reveal an overwhelming, persistent obsession with the physical presence of the human other.

In *Waiting for Godot*, Vladimir and Estragon’s thoughts of separating are juxtaposed with the manner in which they reunite at the beginning of each act. Shortly after Vladimir enters the stage for the first time, the following conversation occurs:

VLADIMIR: I’m glad to see you back. I thought you were gone forever.
ESTRAGON: Me too.
VLADIMIR: Together again at last! We’ll have to celebrate this. But how? 
*[He reflects.] Get up till I embrace you. (WFG, 11)*

The beginning of Act Two sees Vladimir singing while a distraught Estragon enters the stage. ‘That finished me’, the latter says; ‘I said to myself, he’s all alone, he thinks I’m gone for ever, and he sings’ (WFG, 55). The dynamics of their relationship are further exposed in the following exchange, which precedes Estragon’s aforementioned line:

VLADIMIR: Do you want me to go away? [...] 
ESTRAGON: Don’t touch me! Don’t question me! Don’t speak to me! Stay with me! 
VLADIMIR: Did I ever leave you? 
ESTRAGON: You let me go. (WFG, 54)

Images of physical presence and absence contrast repeatedly in the above dialogue, which serves to highlight the perpetuation of human company between the protagonists. ‘It’d be better if we parted’, Estragon asserts soon after the episode cited above, to which Vladimir replies with, ‘[y]ou always say that, and you always come crawling back’ (WFG, 57, 58). Notably, the latter is just as concerned with the physical presence of his partner: ‘There you are again

\(^{14}\) Erikson, ‘Notes on Trauma and Community’, p.194.
at last', he exclaims after Estragon returns onstage following a brief exit; ‘[w]here were you! I thought you were gone for ever’ (WFG, 68).

Albeit upsetting and indeed often violent, the relationship between Pozzo and Lucky is also prolonged, as is that between Hamm and Clov in Endgame. While Pozzo says in the first act that he is taking his servant to a fair where he ‘hope[s] to get a good price for him’ (WFG, 32), the second act sees the couple appearing onstage once more. Indeed, the depiction of the two minor characters in Act Two reinforces the centrality of human company as a theme in Godot since Lucky has by this point become indispensable to the blind Pozzo and, while seemingly capable of escaping servitude, retains his submissive position. Endgame confronts us with a similar image as Clov remains with Hamm in spite of his repeated threats to leave. Another contrast is then created between Hamm's frustration with Clov and his repeated attempts to prevent the latter from leaving. 'Gone from me you'd be dead', he tells Clov, while also repeating twice his infamous line, '[o]utside of here it's death' (E, 126, 96, 126) with the intention of forcing the servant to stay.

However, it is Happy Days that most effectively portrays the obsession with the physical presence of the human other. Indeed, Winnie’s need to ensure her counterpart’s presence is depicted from the very beginning of the play as she wakes him immediately after she opens her own eyes. Consequently, the play expands on the condition of the blind Pozzo and the blind Hamm, for whom the presence of the human other necessarily depends on the latter’s ability to speak and to listen, by explicitly demonstrating that the need for the human other fundamentally constitutes a need for a listener. The preoccupation with Willie’s presence within hearing distance remains a constant concern for Winnie and features at the centre of the following passage which, tellingly, constitutes by far the lengthiest exchange of lines between the two protagonists:

WINNIE: [...] Can you hear me? [Pause.] I beseech you, Willie, just yes or no, can you hear me, just yes or nothing.
[Pause.]
WILLIE: Yes.
WINNIE: [Turning front, same voice.] And now?
WILLIE: [Irritated.] Yes.
WINNIE: [Less loud.] And now?
WILLIE: [More irritated.] Yes.
WINNIE: [Still less loud.] And now? [A little louder.] And now?
WILLIE: [Violently.] Yes!
WINNIE: [Same voice.] Fear no more the heat o’ the sun. [Pause.] Did you hear that?
WILLIE: [Irritated.] Yes.
WINNIE: [Same voice.] What? [Pause.] What?
WILLIE: [More irritated.] Fear no more.
[Pause.]
WINNIE: [Same voice.] No more what? [Pause.] Fear no more what?
WILLIE: [Violently.] Fear no more!
WINNIE: [Normal voice, gabbled.] Bless you Willie [...]. (HD, 147-8)

Arguably rather comic but indeed profoundly significant, the above dialogue highlights the centrality of human company, exposing it as a compelling and irrepressible necessity. Preceded by Winnie’s pleas to Willie to remain awake, telling him, ‘[d]on’t go off on me again now dear will you please, I may need you’ (HD, 141), the dialogue also foreshadows other passages which stress her lasting preoccupation with Willie’s presence within hearing distance. The following lines, delivered as a response to Willie’s protracted silence, are particularly telling:

WINNIE: [...] Have you gone off on me again? [Pause.] I do not ask if you are alive to all that is going on, I merely ask if you have not gone off on me again. [Pause.] Your eyes appear to be closed, but that has no particular significance we know. [Pause.] Raise a finger, dear, will you please, if you are not quite senseless. [Pause.] Do that for me, Willie please, just the little finger if you are still conscious. [Pause. Joyful.] Oh all five, you are a darling today, now I may continue with an easy mind. [Back front.] (HD, 153-4)

It is particularly noteworthy, I suggest, that Winnie cares not only about Willie’s physical presence but also about whether he can hear her. This is further emphasised in the few instances that the male character unexpectedly speaks, instances which simultaneously highlight the effect of company by portraying Winnie’s near ecstatic response. One such episode is the following:

WINNIE: [...] The hair on your head, Willie, what would you say speaking of the hair on your head, them or it? [Long pause.]
WILLIE: It.
WINNIE: [Turning back front, joyful.] Oh you are going to talk to me today, this is going to be a happy day! (HD, 146)

Winnie’s reaction to the sound of her partner’s one-word reply is particularly striking and echoes her later line, delivered after Willie explains the meaning of the word ‘hog’ as ‘[c]astrated male swine [...] [r]eared for slaughter’: ‘Oh this is a happy day! This will have been another happy day!’ (HD, 159, original emphasis), she says, seemingly oblivious to the substance of Willie’s words. The playwright summed up Winnie’s attitude in a letter to Alan Schneider, while simultaneously highlighting the massive impact of the physical presence of the other: ‘Winnie happy because Willie has answered’, Beckett writes; ‘Doesn’t matter to her what he says, as long as he he [sic] speaks to her.’ In contrast to the protagonists of Godot and Endgame, then, Winnie herself proceeds not solely to imply but also to communicate in explicit terms her compelling need for human company, around the perpetuation of which her entire days revolve: ‘[...] just lie back now and relax’, she tells Willie after he confirms that he can hear her; ‘I shall not trouble you again unless I am compelled to, just to know you are there within hearing and conceivably on the semi-alert is...er...paradise enow’ (HD, 150-1).

Through Winnie’s words, Happy Days conveys human company as a fundamental, inherent need, one that manifests prominently and often compulsively in the traumatic aftermath. ‘[J]ust to know that in theory you can hear me even though in fact you don’t is all I need, just to feel you there within earshot and conceivably on the qui vive is all I ask,’ she tells Willie elsewhere before repeating, shortly after, ‘what a joy in any case to know you are there, as usual, and perhaps awake, and perhaps taking all this in, some of all this, what a happy day for me...it will have been’ (HD, 148, 152). Here, I would like to suggest that Winnie puts into words a perspective towards company that is prevalent in all three plays, yet which Didi and Gogo, Lucky and Pozzo, Hamm and Clov do not verbally address as extensively or as explicitly. Situating what emerges as a compelling, irrepressible need for the physical presence of the human other

---

within the context of trauma studies, we may illuminate further the
interconnections between company and trauma in the trilogy.

Judith Herman’s and Kai Erikson’s respective studies are particularly useful
for our purpose to shed light on the issue of company in Beckett’s post-war
drama, as both theorists expand on the correlation between the traumatic
experience and the consequent inclination to seek the physical presence of
another human being. Herman writes:

> In the immediate aftermath of trauma, rebuilding of some minimal form
> of trust is the primary task. Assurances of safety and protection are of
> the greatest importance. *The survivor who is often in terror of being left
> alone craves the simple presence of a sympathetic person*. Having once
> experienced the sense of total isolation, the survivor is immensely
> aware of the fragility of all human connections in the face of danger.17

Describing the need for company in the traumatic aftermath in terms of an
‘anxious clinging to others’,18 a description which I believe strongly evokes the
situations depicted in *Godot*, *Endgame* and *Happy Days*, Herman’s discussion
reveals the ways in which the traumatic experience can trigger a compulsive
need for communality. Whereas collective trauma may ‘impair[r] the prevailing
sense of communality’,19 the traumatic experience can paradoxically also
‘becom[e] almost like a common culture, a source of kinship’20 that strengthens
the bond between the surviving victims. The condition of Beckett’s protagonists
in the barren, almost deserted world which surrounds them may best be
paralleled with the description that Kai Erikson provides of the dynamics of
relationships among trauma victims. Erikson writes:

> Persons who survive severe disasters [...] often come to feel estranged
> from the rest of humanity and gather into groups with others of like
> mind. They are not drawn together by feelings of affection [...] but by a
> shared set of perspectives and rhythms and moods that derive from the
> sense of being apart.21

---

17 Herman, *Trauma and Recovery*, pp.61-2, my emphasis.
18 Ibid., p.56.
19 Kai Erikson, *Everything in its Path: The Destruction of Community in the Buffalo Creek Flood*
20 Erikson, ‘Notes on Trauma and Community’, p.190.
21 Ibid., p.194, my emphasis.
Trauma studies, and Erikson’s above argument in particular, contribute significantly to our understanding of the treatment of company in Beckett, enabling us to speak of the obsessive need for the physical presence of the human other as a persistent struggle against solitude. Indeed, many passages from the trilogy including the ones discussed above expose the need for company as a simultaneous effort to prevent the feelings and reactions, the ‘rhythms and moods’, which accompany ‘the sense of being apart’.22 From Vladimir asking Estragon, ‘[w]here were you! I thought you were gone for ever’ (WFG, 68), while the latter falls into his arms after briefly exiting the stage in Godot, to Hamm repeatedly summoning Clov back onto the stage when the latter withdraws to his kitchen in Endgame, the emphasis added onto the protagonists’ inability to remain alone is persistent. Yet, through Winnie’s frequent breakdowns and the resurfacing of traumatic memory, Happy Days depicts the impact of solitude perhaps more vividly and more extensively than the two earlier plays. As we have seen, for the female protagonist the human other is fully present only when he confirms that he can hear her. The breakdowns she endures, breakdowns which occur when Willie fails to respond and echo the violent, compulsive emergence of Vladimir’s monologue during the time Estragon is asleep in Godot, may then be taken as a true manifestation of ‘the sense of being apart’.23 The second act of the play, the majority of which Willie spends in silence, is particularly indicative of the impact of solitude on the female protagonist. Repeatedly calling her partner’s name, Winnie loses her composure and almost all control over language as her voice breaks and is reduced to a murmur, while her monologue mutates into a compulsive, disjointed and often incoherent logorrhoea. Indeed, Act Two seems to provide a glimpse into the world of Not I (1973): ‘Last human kind – to stray this way. [Pause.] Up to date’, Winnie says, overpowered by the traumatic past, and continues, ‘[a]nd now? [Pause. Low.] Help. [Pause. Do.] Help, Willie [Pause. Do.] No? [Long pause. Narrative.] Suddenly a mouse’ (HD, 165). As Paul Lawley writes in his work on the play, when Winnie thinks of the possibility that Willie is no longer listening to her, ‘she suffers what Beckett as director called “crises

22 Ibid.
23 Ibid.
of loquaciousness”, in which she gives way to a panicked gabble.’

24 Failing to provide her with a response or, indeed, a distraction, Willie is temporarily absent from Winnie’s life. It is precisely this experience of the absence of the human other, the absence of company, which causes the loss of control over language and triggers the return of the haunting story of Milly.

We may argue, then, that Beckett’s protagonists invest in human company in order to repress the traumatic past, in order to actively push, that is, ‘the unwanted traumatic memory away.’

25 As the violent return of the story of Milly or, indeed, the emergence of Vladimir’s monologue in Godot expose, the physical presence of the human other within hearing distance is attributed with the purpose of providing a distraction from one’s traumatic, personal history, in the hope of preventing the intrusion of the past into the moment that is the present. It is in this context, then, that we may begin to theorise human company in Beckett as a product of trauma, a state of existence fundamentally necessitated and dictated by the disturbing, victimising nature of the past. ‘[T]rauma can create community’,

26 Erikson writes, and the depiction of human company in Beckett’s drama trilogy provides a striking glimpse into the dynamics of this process despite the notable fact that an image of community is never portrayed onstage. The protagonists, like trauma victims, ‘are not drawn together by feelings of affection’;

27 the passages I have examined above demonstrate extensively the conflict which often exists between the couples. Yet, in the wake of horrendous atrocity, dehumanisation and death, human company emerges as the core necessity of the surviving victim, one which may, if only temporarily, restore a sense of communality and enable the preservation of life.

Focusing primarily on Waiting for Godot and Endgame, I will now discuss the implications of human company emerging in the form of master/servant, protector/victim, caretaker/dependent. An analysis of these dichotomous relationships will enable me to expand on the status of company as a product of

26 Erikson, ‘Notes on Trauma and Community’, p.185.
27 Ibid., p.194.
trauma, and to suggest that individual identity falls victim to the overpowering impulse to repress the past, an impulse which manifests in the desperate attempts to maintain the physical presence of the human other. In her discussion of trauma fiction, Laurie Vickroy comments on the frequent depiction of protagonists who, in the traumatic aftermath, 'attempt to survive by creating enabling stories and self-concepts, thereby recovering a sense of self and agency in the face of devastating losses.'

A close examination of the nature of relationships in Beckett's drama trilogy exposes the development of a similar situation. In their attempts to cope with the traumatic past, the protagonists create enabling stories, self-concepts but primarily new identities, new roles, which they perpetually enact, modify and adapt to the role assumed by their counterparts. Contrary to the works that Vickroy examines, the identities assumed by the protagonists in Beckett do not derive solely from the need to recover a sense of self and agency in the traumatic aftermath but, most crucially, from the need to maintain interdependence and therefore ensure the prolongation of human company.

The analysis of human company as role-play, then, will be carried out with two core purposes, the first being to assess the condition of company in the traumatic aftermath and to determine the extent to which it may be considered a response to the trilogy's historical context. Dori Laub argues that '[i]n the wake of the atrocities and of the trauma that took place in the Second World War, cultural values, political conventions, social mores, national identities, investments, families and institutions have lost their meaning, have lost their context.'

Through the reduction of human company to essentially role-play, Beckett's trilogy, I will argue, exemplifies how human interaction has also lost its meaning and context. Though the plays provide a glimpse into the process that sees past trauma manifesting itself in a present, desperate need for the presence of the human other, they do not offer an image of authentic community or human interaction. Rather, they portray a need for the human other that is inherent as it is compulsive, thereby reducing company to a state of role-play.

---

29 Dori Laub, 'Bearing Witness or the Vicissitudes of Listening', in Felman and Laub, *Testimony*, p.74.
while community as a concept or an image is never achieved in the Beckett universe. Though it may be true that no protagonist exists in complete isolation, the couples depicted fundamentally exist outside society.

Crucial for the development of my analysis of human company are the following questions: (a) what is the reason for which the relationships in Beckett emerge in the form of master/servant, protector/victim or caretaker/dependent, thereby fundamentally necessitating the physical presence of the human other?; (b) why and in what ways does each relationship internalise the dynamics of domination and subordination, and to what extent does this constitute a compulsive re-enactment of the trilogy’s historical context? Focusing now on the nature of human company and determining the extent to which it emerges as a product of trauma, I propose to show that the lasting preoccupation with the physical presence of the human other in Beckett exposes the inherent human need to experience a sense of belonging, to restore a sense of communality in a universe devoid of authentic community. At the same time, the reduction of company to role-play emerges as a compelling critique of totalitarianism, the vehicle, that is, by which the trilogy exposes the condition of social networks and, by expansion, the condition of humanity during the very actual historical and socio-political circumstances which prevailed over the immediate post-war period.

The second purpose of my discussion is to explore the implications of the reduction of human company to role-play in terms of the condition of individual identity. As we have seen in the preceding chapters, psychoanalytic theorists and literary critics agree on the fact that the traumatic experience, and in particular the experience of massive historical trauma like the trauma of the Second World War, can decisively affect individual identity. ‘[I]nevitably’, Vickroy asserts, ‘an ambivalent sense of identity and conscience arise out of such traumatic contexts, where humans were daily reduced to animal or object status.’ The third chapter of my thesis, which examined the condition of memory, language and the body in the trilogy within the context of trauma studies, has shown how these three aspects of human existence are radically

---

30 Ibid., p.34.
shaped by the past, with the protagonists’ behaviours and reactions emerging as profoundly symptomatic of trauma. Yet, by portraying human company as a form of role-play, the trilogy questions not only the condition but also the very availability of individuality in the traumatic aftermath. In a period defined by the occurrence of unprecedented historical trauma, the plays ask, where ‘what particular human experience clings to is mediated, determined’\(^3\) is individuality at all possible? Can the surviving victim of such atrocity, subjugation and dehumanisation still trust in religious or philosophical concepts, work towards differentiation and self-definition in the hope of achieving true Existence? In a period marked by the event of the Holocaust, the depiction of human company as role-play in Beckett ultimately throws into question the viability of religion and philosophy, while simultaneously exposing the reality of the Second World War as one in which human beings are wholly interchangeable.

Writing on *Waiting for Godot*, Martin Esslin provides a detailed account of the qualities which define each of the two protagonists. Though he does not read their relationship in terms of role-play, his contention that ‘Vladimir and Estragon have complementary personalities’\(^3\) is crucial to the development of my argument. It would therefore be useful to look at Esslin’s discussion which, albeit rather lengthy, is indeed particularly informative:

Vladimir is the more practical of the two, and Estragon claims to have been a poet. [...] Estragon is volatile, Vladimir persistent. Estragon dreams, Vladimir cannot stand hearing about dreams. [...] Vladimir remembers past events, Estragon tends to forget them as soon as they have happened. Estragon likes telling funny stories, Vladimir is upset by them. It is mainly Vladimir who voices the hope that Godot will come and that his coming will change their situation, while Estragon remains sceptical throughout and at times even forgets the name of Godot. [...] Estragon is the weaker of the two; he is beaten up by mysterious strangers every night. Vladimir at times acts as his protector, sings him to sleep with a lullaby, and covers him with his coat. The opposition of their temperaments is the cause of endless bickering between them and often leads to the suggestion that they should part. Yet, being

---


complementary natures, they also are dependent on each other and have to stay together.\textsuperscript{33}

Esslin’s description of Vladimir and Estragon’s respective characteristics contributes to my suggestion that the identity of each protagonist constitutes in actuality a role, endlessly enacted towards the human other. As the critic rightly observes, more than solely causing tension between them, their complementary personalities reveal the necessity for the physical presence of the other since Vladimir and Estragon are depicted as fundamentally interdependent. Of vital significance, though, is also the observation that Estragon emerges as ‘the weaker of the two’, while Vladimir ‘acts as his protector’.\textsuperscript{34} It is precisely through the portrayal of the former as a victim and his partner as a protector, I suggest, that the play exposes the interactions between the protagonists not as an authentic form of human company but, rather, as a form of role-play.

Estragon’s anguish is established as soon as the play commences, with Act One beginning with the protagonist’s complaints about being beaten offstage during the night. It is of course notable that he never appears wounded. Yet, what is particularly strange and key to our understanding of how his victimisation is but an aspect of role-play, is the manner in which Vladimir anticipates his partner’s suffering. The following dialogue takes place soon after the beginning of the play:

VLADIMIR: [...] May one inquire where His Highness spent the night?  
ESTRAGON: In a ditch.  
[...]  
VLADIMIR: And they didn’t beat you?  
ESTRAGON: Beat me? Certainly they bet me.  
VLADIMIR: The same lot as usual?  
ESTRAGON: The same? I don’t know. (WFG, 11)

I would first draw attention to Vladimir’s last two questions, which reveal the event of Estragon being beaten during the nights as ongoing. This is also supported by the beginning of the second act, which sees Estragon entering the stage in great distress. ‘Who beat you? Tell me’ (WFG, 54), Vladimir soon asks

\textsuperscript{33} Ibid., pp.47-8, my emphasis.  
\textsuperscript{34} Ibid., p.48.
his counterpart. Why, may one then ask, do the two protagonists spend the nights apart, thereby putting Estragon's life at risk?

As I have mentioned above, what is perhaps of greater significance here and may indeed provide the reason why the two characters separate at night is the way in which Vladimir anticipates Estragon's suffering. 'Who beat you?' (WFG, 54), he asks his companion in the second act, presupposing the occurrence of the event. By taking into account the lines he proceeds to deliver, we may suggest that Estragon's assumed suffering in the hands of others is precisely that which enables Vladimir to assume the role of the protector while his partner retains his victimised position:

Vladimir's above lines echo his previous reaction to the arguably beaten Estragon: 'When I think of it...' he reflects almost mechanically shortly after Act One commences, 'all these years...but for me...where would you be...? [Decisively.] You'd be nothing more than a little heap of bones at the present minute, no doubt about it' (WFG, 11). Through his words, the play gradually exposes the relationship between its two protagonists as one that is fundamentally based on maintaining Estragon's need for safety and protection. The sense of interdependence between the two characters emerges, therefore, as a vital aspect of their relationship, one that is continuously emphasised as Vladimir advises Estragon to remove his boots, consoles him when he has nightmares, provides him with food and, as Esslin observes, reminds him of their purpose to wait for Godot, 'sings him to sleep with a lullaby, and covers him with his coat.'35 In this context, a potential separation would have detrimental circumstances. 'There are times when I wonder if it wouldn't be better for us to part', Estragon says in Act One, to which Vladimir replies, '[y]ou wouldn't go far' (WFG, 17).

35 Ibid.
Judith Herman writes that ‘the terror of the traumatic event intensifies the need for protective attachments’,\(^\text{36}\) while the traumatic aftermath may also be defined by the victim’s ‘repeated failures of self-protection’ and trigger a ‘repeated search for rescuer’.\(^\text{37}\) My assertion is that the nature of the relationship between the two protagonists in *Godot* exemplifies just that. By arguing, then, that the identities of Vladimir and Estragon as protector and victim respectively are perpetually acted out as role-play, I do not mean to counteract the analysis I have provided in Chapter Three, which discussed the depiction of the protagonists as victims of a violent, traumatic past. That is to say that the interpretation of identity as a perpetually enacted role is not carried out with the intention to undermine the victimisation of the two protagonists. Rather, what I am proposing is that in the traumatic aftermath, the physical presence of the human other emerges as such a fundamental necessity that it reduces identity to role-play, perpetually carried out with the purpose to maintain a state of human company that naturally emerges as problematic, as not authentic. As the above discussion of the relationship between Vladimir and Estragon has demonstrated, it is the latter’s constant need for safety and his counterpart’s readiness to offer protection that prolongs their coexistence. A passage from Vladimir’s monologue, delivered shortly before the end of the play, reinforces the interpretation of human company as role-play: ‘He’ll know nothing’, Vladimir says of Estragon while anticipating the events of the day that is still to come; ‘[h]e’ll tell me about the blows he received and I’ll give him a carrot’ (*WFG*, 84). The protagonist then proceeds to deliver one of his most notable lines: ‘But *habit* is a great deadener’ (*WFG*, 84, my emphasis), he says, revealing the extent to which human company derives from the mechanical re-enactment of identity.

The relationship between Pozzo and Lucky in *Godot*, as well as that between Hamm and Clov in *Endgame*, solidify the image of a problematic human interaction and reinforce the viability of arguing that human company in Beckett constitutes as a form of role-play. Emerging in a master/servant form, both relationships comprise a character in a position of superiority who

\(^{36}\) Herman, *Trauma and Recovery*, p.56.
\(^{37}\) Ibid., p.121.
exercises his power over the submissive human other. A close examination of each relationship, though, reveals that the servant often possesses the same, if not a greater level of authority over the depicted master. The frequent depiction of what appears to be a striking reversal of roles ultimately challenges the view that 'Pozzo is the sadistic master, Lucky the submissive slave', and throws into question the interpretation of the relationship between Hamm and Clov as one in which the former 'is selfish, sensuous, domineering', while the latter 'hates Hamm and wants to leave him, but [...] must obey his orders.'

Pozzo’s violent exploitation of his servant is at times so appalling that it not only reduces Lucky to tears but also triggers the reaction of Vladimir and Estragon, who respectively consider it ‘a scandal’ and ‘a disgrace’ (WFG, 28). During the time that the minor couple spend onstage, Pozzo tells of his purpose to sell Lucky, orders him to dance and to think, dictates his every movement, while calling him ‘hog’ (WFG, 24, 31, 39), ‘misery’ (WFG, 39), and ‘pig’ (WFG, 30, 37, 41, 44, 46, 82). Yet, the following incident, which takes place shortly after the couple enter the stage for the first time, demonstrates what I suggest is Lucky’s readiness to maintain his inferiority:

POZZO: [To LUCKY.] Coat! [LUCKY puts down the bag, advances, gives the coat, goes back to his place takes the bag.] Hold that! [POZZO holds out the whip. LUCKY advances and, both his hands being occupied, takes the whip in his mouth, then goes back to his place. POZZO begins to put on his coat, stops.] Coat! [LUCKY puts down bag, basket and stool, advances, helps POZZO on with his coat, goes back to his place and takes up bag, basket and stool.] [...] Whip! [LUCKY advances, stoops, POZZO snatches the whip from his mouth, LUCKY goes back to his place.] (WFG, 25)

While Pozzo’s depiction as a tyrannical master slowly fades, with the protagonist gradually emerging as a rather comic caricature of a landlord, Lucky is presented to have wholly accepted his enslavement. As the above episode demonstrates through the portrayal of the servant in possession of the master’s whip, Lucky’s subordination is not forcefully imposed. Rather, the servant appears to have adapted to his inferior position, a position that, as Pozzo explains, Lucky desperately tries to maintain:

---

POZZO: [...] Why doesn’t he make himself comfortable? Let’s try and get it clear. Has he not the right to? Certainly he has. It follows that he doesn’t want to. [...] And why doesn’t he want to? [...] He wants to impress me, so that I’ll keep him. [...] He wants to mollify me, so that I’ll give up the idea of parting with him. (WFG, 31)

The depiction of Lucky as a faithful servant who ceaselessly and painfully retains his inferiority is reinforced in Act Two, during which we learn that Pozzo has lost his eyesight. Why, then, does Lucky not escape slavery? What lies behind the perpetuation of the two protagonists’ coexistence? These two questions, which I consider key to our understanding of the relationship between the two characters, challenge the construction of identity and suggest that the relationship between Pozzo and Lucky constitutes neither an image of authentic interaction, nor a glimpse into conventional conceptions of community but, rather, a representation of being chronically caught in a game of reciprocal role-play. Through the depiction of their relationship, then, I suggest that Godot brings to the foreground the irrepressible need for the physical presence of one human other, the compulsive need for human company, the reduction of the state of company to role-play, while also foreshadowing the relationship between the two protagonists of Endgame.

Without necessarily dismissing Beckett’s assertion that ‘Hamm and Clov are Didi and Gogo at a later date, at the end of their lives’,39 I would agree with Esslin’s argument that ‘Hamm and Clov [...] in some ways resemble Pozzo and Lucky.’40 The way in which the protagonists of Endgame resemble the minor couple in Godot is to be traced in the nature of the relationship between each pair. As I have shown, Pozzo and Lucky initially emerge as master and servant respectively, yet as the play progresses it exposes the level of authority which the latter possesses over the former. In so doing, Godot conveys individual identity as in actuality a role, the re-enactment of which effectively establishes a sense of interdependence between the protagonists and ensures the perpetuation of what is, in fact, a notably problematic form of human company. The relationship between Hamm and Clov in Endgame is based on a similar process, a process which sees identity reduced to a role, continuously

39 Quoted in McMillan and Fehsenfeld, Beckett in the Theatre, p.163.
performed in the context of what emerges as a game of authority. Expanding, then, on the analysis of Chapter Three which approached the behaviour of Beckett’s protagonists as profoundly symptomatic of trauma, I will now show that while the master/servant relationship between Hamm and Clov constitutes a game of authority, authority is in fact possessed by none but continuously manipulated by both characters. *Endgame* thus manages to effectively destabilise the very concept of authority, thereby exposing in a manner similar to *Godot* the compelling need for human company and the problematic nature of this concept in the traumatic aftermath.

The notion that *Endgame* revolves around the progress of a game is conveyed by the very title of the work, as well as by numerous lines delivered during the course of the play which include Hamm’s revealing first words: ‘Me – [...] to play’ (*E*, 93). A number of critics, whose readings of the work inform to some extent my own, raise this issue as well. Drawing upon Adorno’s and Cavell’s respective critical works, Michael Springer discusses the interactions between Hamm and Clov within the context of a ‘sadomasochistic relationship’ that manifests in the form of a game, and argues that what the two protagonists ‘finally desire is not to end the game, but to play it their own way.’41 Evan Cory Horowitz also traces a notable tendency to perpetuate the game in which both Hamm and Clov are involved, asserting in his own work that ‘[t]he only risk’ to each character ‘is that one of the other characters will simply stop playing’.42 Drawing a parallel between the game that is the situation in the play and human company, I would agree with Springer and Horowitz when they detect the impulse to continue playing and suggest that to continue playing is simultaneously to maintain the physical presence of the human other. Chronically participating in what is between the master and the servant a game of authority, Hamm and Clov perform their respective roles and preserve the tension between them, while at once maintaining the prolongation of the physical presence of each other.

Endgame exemplifies the reduction of individual identity to a role mainly through the continuous manipulation of language and Hamm’s repeated efforts to complete the reconstruction of his and Clov’s past. Firmly emplaced in the centre of the room, Hamm the master – but also the blind and paralysed dependent – repeatedly reminds of his superiority by revisiting his chronicle. A story which I have examined in Chapter Three in the context of traumatic memory and problematic personal history, the chronicle narrates the origins of Hamm’s relationship with Clov, who is both the servant and the caretaker on which Hamm fundamentally depends. Delivered in a manner which seems to validate Hamm’s power over Clov, the chronicle enables the former to recreate not only his own life narrative but also that of his servant and to portray the latter as eternally indebted to his master. The answers which Clov provides to Hamm’s questions concerning their past are therefore particularly revealing:

HAMM: Do you remember when you came here?
CLOV: No. Too small, you told me.
HAMM: Do you remember your father?
CLOV: [Wearily.] Same answer. [Pause.] You’ve asked me these questions millions of times.
HAMM: I love the old questions. [With fervour.] Ah the old questions, the old answers, there’s nothing like them! [Pause.] It was I was a father to you.
CLOV: Yes. [He looks at HAMM fixedly.] You were that to me.
HAMM: My house a home for you.
CLOV: Yes. [He looks about him.] This was that for me. (E, 110).

Notably, Clov’s memories of his past are replaced by events which Hamm claims to have happened, yet of which the servant has no recollection. As the above dialogue reveals, it is Hamm who constructs the servant’s entire personal history, dictates and ascribes it onto him in a manner which places Clov in eternal debt to his master, thereby wholly determining Clov’s role in the present moment. Thus, we may indeed read the way in which Hamm ‘asks and answers all of the questions concerning what happened’ as a fundamental means through which he exercises his power over his servant since, by so doing, he effectively ‘silenc[es] the actual voices involved in the original incident.’

---

What is also notable, though, is that Clov nowhere questions the events which Hamm's chronicle presents as facts. Rather, he accepts the past which Hamm constructs for him and obediently provides the answers his master desires to hear, with his behaviour echoing Lucky's readiness to obey Pozzo's commands. With Clov's physical presence necessitated because of the need to maintain the dialogue, verbal exchanges in *Endgame* are therefore based on a process which sees Hamm asking 'the old questions' and Clov delivering 'the old answers' (*E*, 110). The servant's role, then, is neither to express his opinion nor to provide an unbiased reply to Hamm's queries, but simply to ascertain the latter's worldview. The following dialogue constitutes but one example of this process:

HAMM: [...] Is it light?
CLOV: It isn't dark.
HAMM: [Angrily.] I'm asking you is it light?
CLOV: Yes. (*E*, 123)

A brief exchange earlier in the play reinforces Hamm's authority, as well as the role he plays in determining the facts of the situation in *Endgame*. 'That old doctor, he’s dead, naturally?', he asks, to which Clov replies with the following, telling line: 'Naturally. [...] You ask me that?' (*E*, 104, original emphasis). Hamm's profound exploitation of his servant through the manipulation of language and personal history, as well as Clov's utter submission to his master, are eventually established with the following, much-cited exchange:

HAMM: Yesterday! What does that mean? Yesterday!
CLOV: [Violently.] [...] I use the words you taught me. If they don't mean anything any more, teach me others. Or let me be silent. (*E*, 113)

The dynamics of the relationship between the protagonists of *Endgame* are discussed in several critical essays, albeit not in the context of trauma studies. In their majority, these essays stress Hamm's superiority over Clov while paying minimal attention to the power that I suggest the servant possesses over the depicted master. S. E. Gontarski, for example, argues in an essay which focuses

---

44 See the following exchange between Hamm and Clov:
CLOV: What is there to keep me here?
HAMM: The dialogue. (*E*, 120-1)
on the treatment of language that Clov ‘has no language to call his own’, emerges as ‘always already an echo,’ with ‘apparently [...] no substance, and so no character of his own.’ Elsewhere, he draws attention to the manner in which Hamm constructs his servant’s personal history by means of the chronicle and concludes that ‘Clov’s history and so his memory are simply Hamm’s afterthought.’ Situating the play within a postcolonial framework, Nels C. Pearson provides a similar analysis of Hamm’s superiority. Approaching the dialogue between the two protagonists as ‘a static question/answer dialectic’ where ‘[n]early all of the questions [...] have answers predetermined by the source of the question’, he argues that Hamm’s ‘egocentric narratives [...] work to silence any voices whose presence might offer an alternative interpretation of Hamm and Clov’s history.’ The servant’s total submission to Hamm is therefore conveyed when he ‘answers Hamm’s questions as if by rote memorization’. A recent essay by Karine Germoni and Pascale Sardin which draws upon Pearson’s study also expands on what the two critics read as Hamm’s superiority, tracing in him an impersonation of ‘the perfect imperialist’, one who ‘asks and answers all the questions concerning Clov’s past, questions which feed his hegemonic and unending narrative, thereby silencing [...] the voice of the subaltern.’

Though my analysis does not dismiss readings of *Endgame* that emphasise Hamm’s power over Clov, I contend that it is crucial we stressed the servant’s readiness to retain his inferiority in spite of the power which he possess and is indeed capable of exercising over Hamm. This view can be supported by looking at several episodes that occur during the course of the play and which reveal

---


48 Ibid., p.221.

49 Ibid., p.224.

that Clav, like Lucky in *Godot*, is not subjected to his master’s authority but persistently and knowingly allows him, rather, to act out his role. I would draw attention, then, to the contrast between the physical condition of Hamm and that of Clav, and suggest that the latter is at least physically superior to his master. Clav, we may argue, could easily put an end to his years of servitude by leaving the shelter or, even, by killing Hamm. Though he says he keeps his master alive because he himself does not know ‘the combination to the larder’ (*E*, 96), Hamm’s physical state alone is enough to counteract his excuse. The closing tableau vivant, which depicts the servant ‘by the door [...] impassive and motionless’ while ‘dressed for the road’ (*E*, 133, 132), ultimately comes to establish how authority is manipulated in the play by placing Clav in a decisive position of power. Read as a departure that is ‘both imminent and impossible, not an either/or but a both/and’,51 the final portrayal of the servant echoes the following, particularly revealing exchange:

Hamm: Gone from me you’d be dead.
Clav: And vice-versa. (*E*, 126, original emphasis)

The profound ambivalence which prevails over the ending as Clav both leaves and stays, indicates the underlying sense of interdependence by bestowing upon both protagonists the exact same level of authority, thereby concretising the implication that Hamm and Clav are, in fact, indispensable to one another.

In his analysis of Beckett’s drama, Esslin writes that *Waiting for Godot* and *Endgame* group their characters ‘in symmetrical pairs’.52 Using his argument as a starting point while situating the plays within the context of trauma studies, I have attempted to shed light on this sense of symmetry which defines the depiction of human company. Focusing first on *Godot*, I have shown that the relationship between each couple is fundamentally based on a continuous enactment of roles which aims at preserving interdependence and necessitating the physical presence of the human other. Concentrating then on *Endgame*, my analysis has proposed that the relationship between Hamm and Clav expands on that between Pozzo and Lucky and emerges as essentially a game of constant

---

manipulation of authority. Through the depiction of a servant frequently abused by his master, a servant who could easily escape his confinement but does not, the play stresses the paradoxical perpetuation and problematic nature of human company and exposes the physical presence of the human other as a compulsive, seemingly irrational but permanent need. Taking into account the manipulation of authority in *Endgame*, I would then argue against the interpretation of Hamm as ‘the perfect imperialist’,\(^5\) one who enjoys absolute and indisputable superiority to his subjects. Similarly, it is not my contention that Clov is but Hamm’s victim, entirely deprived of, or possessing only minimal power over his position towards his master. Rather, by portraying the reduction of individual identity to a role and communicating company as essentially role-play, *Endgame* reveals that both Hamm and Clov are endlessly enduring the repercussions of a traumatic, dehumanising history, that both master and servant are victims of an imperialistic game played by others.

Though he situates *Endgame* within a postcolonial framework, I believe that Pearson is right to note that ‘the important thing is that, for some inexplicable reason, [the] relationship [between Hamm and Clov] still persists while all else of substance is gone.’\(^5\) It is precisely the nature of this otherwise inexplicable reason that my discussion has attempted to illuminate. As I have shown, it is through the desperate attempts to maintain the physical presence of the human other, through this paradoxical staying together despite the seeming capability and proclaimed desire to part, that Beckett’s drama emphasises the unwavering need for human company and questions both its authenticity as well as its perpetuation. Through the protagonists’ simultaneous struggle with a disturbing personal history, one which manifests in the violent resurfacing of memories that are irrepressible, fragmented and unprocessed, I contend that the plays expose company as itself a product of trauma, the symptom of a history which has radically impaired the sense of communality. In the aftermath of massive historical trauma, human company is no longer based on feelings of affection or on a conscious decision to remain in the physical presence of one particular human other. It is not, in other words, a glimpse into an authentic

---

\(^5\) Pearson, ‘“Outside of here it’s death”’, p.219.
form of human interaction or community. Rather, it derives from the continuous struggle against solitude and the compelling, irrepressible need to seek solace and support in a world that is both traumatised and traumatising. Through the depiction of company as fundamentally a game between opposite forces, between superiority and inferiority, authority and subordination, the plays consequently destabilise the meaning of human relationships, confronting us with a striking internalisation of the dynamics between the oppressor and the oppressed.

By so doing, by absorbing and unremittingly re-enacting the dynamics of authority and subordination, the plays expose the permanence and decisive persistence of historical trauma, the symptoms of which manifest themselves long after the occurrence of the traumatic event in the nature of human relationships and daily interactions. Thus, contrary to the tendency to approach Beckett’s couples as ‘sadistic pseudocouples’,55 couples that dwell in a relationship that is above all a ‘sadomasochistic relationship’,56 I propose that Vladimir and Estragon, Pozzo and Lucky, Hamm and Clov endure the repercussions of a dehumanising history, a history that decisively affects all aspects of the moment that is the present, a history, that is, that is not yet over. The nature of human company, then, is a perpetual dramatisation of this history, with the emphasis added on the prevailing sense of interdependence between the protagonists emerging itself as a critique of the very concepts of authority and subordination.

Yet, my contention is that through this particular treatment of company, Beckett’s plays do more than simply demonstrate the interdependent relationship between opposite forces, between the oppressor and the oppressed. What they also expose, I suggest, is an impulse to community despite the fact that community is never achieved onstage and always remains but an absent concept, as well as a predominant desire to preserve company – that is, the physical presence of the human other – and communality, a desire which not

only remains intact but is also profoundly strengthened in the traumatic aftermath. The means by which they manage this is – perhaps paradoxically – to be traced in the reduction of individual identity to a role. Viewed on its own, the reduction of identity to a re-enacted role that internalises the dynamics of a victimising history, constitutes a compelling response to the historical context of Beckett’s drama. In a period which treats human beings as interchangeable, a period in which, as Pozzo says, the master ‘might just as well have been in [Lucky’s] shoes, and he in [Pozzo’s]’ (WFG, 32), is individuality still viable as a notion, and can it fulfil any particular purpose? Yet, by firmly correlating the chronic re-enactment of roles to the perpetuation of human company, the plays pose another question: in the aftermath of massive historical trauma, they ask, is the conscious construction of individual identity at all possible when the surviving victims are above all desperate not to maintain a sense of individuality but to preserve intimacy, to restore communality in an attempt to find solace and support, safety and protection? As the very notion of individuality is sacrificed on the altar of human needs that emerge as more necessary and more basic, the physical presence of the human other emerges not as that which opens up the possibility for Existentialist self-differentiation but as that which may instil into each human victim the courage to persevere, the courage to go on living.

Adorno argues that in Beckett’s drama, ‘Existential conformity – that one should be what one is – is [...] rejected along with the ease of its representation.’\(^{57}\) Crucially, that one should be what one is presupposes that one is alive. Sharing Adorno’s view, I suggest that it is precisely against this presupposition of the continuation of life that the post-war trilogy reacts. Surfacing from a period of mass slaughter, a period which awoke humanity to the realisation that the light only gleams an instant before it is night once more,\(^{58}\) Beckett’s drama stops at portraying the struggle simply to cope. The very role that the human other ultimately plays when physically present in the traumatic aftermath may be traced in the following dialogue between X and F,

\(^{57}\) Adorno, ‘Trying to Understand Endgame’, p.119.

\(^{58}\) See Pozzo’s final monologue, which includes the following line: ‘They give birth astride of a grave, the light gleams an instant, then it’s night once more.’ Pozzo’s words are evoked only moments later in Vladimir’s monologue: ‘Astride of a grave and a difficult birth. Down in the hole, lingeringly, the grave-digger puts on the forceps’ (WFG, 83, 84).
the protagonists of an earlier draft of *Endgame* which appeared under the title 'Avant Fin de Partie':

X: [...]. What with the two of us we're not likely to go far wrong. [Pause.] I mean in exercises of pure reasoning. If one goes too far, the other holds him back. And if one doesn't go far enough –

F: The other one pushes him.

X: I was just about to say it.\(^{59}\)

Thus, perhaps the most fitting description of human company in Beckett's drama to date is provided by Stanley Cavell in his study of *Endgame*. Although our approaches towards Beckett's work differ quite extensively, his analysis of the relationship between Nagg and Nell, the minor couple in *Endgame*, is particularly revealing. Nagg and Nell – and I would here add Vladimir and Estragon, Pozzo and Lucky, Hamm and Clov – 'comfort one another as best as they can,' Cavell writes,' not necessarily out of love, nor even habit [...] but out of the knowledge that they were both there, they have been through it together, like comrades in arms, or passengers on the same wrecked ship'.\(^{60}\)

Emerging from the ruins of the Second World War, Beckett's trilogy rethinks and re-contextualises the nature, purpose and value of human relationships. In its depiction of the physical presence of the other as a vital, compulsively sought human need, it brings human company to the forefront, exposing it as itself a symptom of historical trauma. The next section of this chapter aims to expand on the analysis I have provided so far and argue that while surfacing as a product of trauma, human company also constitutes a fundamental means of resistance to the repercussions of history. Company, I will initially argue, serves to prevent, if only temporarily, the violent resurfacing of the past in memory and language. Where the physical presence of the human other as audience to the performance of Beckett's drama transforms the very performance into an onstage struggle to recapture the history which it embodies and, therefore, into a compelling testimonial attempt, the physical presence of the human other in each play serves, paradoxically, to repress history and postpone the struggle to tell. That is to say that the presence of the

\(^{59}\) Quoted in Germoni and Sardin, 'Tensions of the In-Between', p.342.

\(^{60}\) Stanley Cavell, 'Ending the Waiting Game: A Reading of Beckett's *Endgame*', in Stanley Cavell, *Must We Mean What We Say?* (1969; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).p.117.
human other acts for each protagonist as a distraction from one’s disturbingly traumatic past, a past which remains too immediate and too present that, as the later one-man works so vividly present, can almost annihilate a protagonist that exists in solitude. Consequently, I will proceed to discuss the ways in which *Waiting for Godot* and *Endgame* but most notably *Happy Days* expose a vital interrelation between the state of company and the availability of witnessing. Where both company and the process of witnessing presuppose the presence of a human other, the plays enable through their depiction of couples a reassessment of the role that each character plays or may play towards his or her counterpart. By examining the particulars of the aforementioned interrelation, then, I propose to show that the physical presence of the human other in the post-war trilogy, a physical presence that is at once a source of solace, safety and support, provides one with not a witness to testimony (since the plays depict solely involuntary testimonial attempts through the monologues) but with a witness to his or her existence. In light of Chapter Two, which approached Beckett’s plays as examples of testimonial drama, I will therefore suggest that through the depiction of human company the plays reflect their own predominant need for a witness, thereby exposing – both structurally and thematically – the value of witnessing as they also open up the possibility for testimony to take place in the post-war period.

### 4.2. Resisting the Trauma: Company and Witnessing

In the previous section I have discussed the depiction of human company as a product of a deeply traumatic history. Where the physical presence of the human other is portrayed as an irrepressible and compelling need, one which causes the reduction of individual identity to a continuously enacted role, human company confronts us in the form of endless role-play. Through this specific treatment of company, Beckett’s post-war drama, I have argued, responds to the historical background of its composition, providing us with a reassessment and a re-contextualisation of human relationships.

As we shall now see, human company emerges also as response to past trauma. By exploring the contrast that is created between the state of company
and that of solitude, a contrast which arises in the moments that a protagonist is left onstage alone and heightened when we take into account the condition of the protagonists in Beckett’s later one-man plays, I will show that the physical presence of the human other provides a distraction from one’s personal history primarily by opening up the possibility for the use of language in the form of dialogue. By so doing, the physical presence of the human other prevents, albeit temporarily, the violent resurfacing of the past. Concentrating then on the interrelation between human company and the availability of witnessing, I will show that in providing one with the presence of a human other the post-war trilogy at once provides him or her with one that may act as a witness, thereby opening up the possibility for witnessing and, potentially, testimony to take place. Much more than a symptom of trauma, then, human company emerges, also, as a vital means of resistance to the repercussions of a deeply traumatic and, indeed, traumatising history. Drawing upon Dori Laub’s theorisation of the concepts of witnessing and testimony, I will propose that the need for the physical presence of the human other in Beckett’s plays is fundamentally a need for a witness, a need for one who may play the role of the spectator to one’s existence.

The following analysis will be carried out in light of the discussion I have provided in Chapter Two, which approached the post-war trilogy as testimonial drama. The trilogy, I have argued, performs the struggle to recapture and articulate the history which it embodies while inviting the active participation of the audience as a witness, thereby transforming itself into a compelling historical testimony. While Beckett’s protagonists invest in the physical presence of their counterparts not in order to tell of the past but in order to repress it, their need for the human other is also in itself a need for a witness. It is precisely through this relentless emphasis which the trilogy both structurally and thematically adds onto the need for the human other that Beckett’s post-war drama responds to its historical background. Emerging as perhaps the only source of solace and support in the traumatic aftermath, the human other initially serves to restore a sense of belonging to the world. With his or her physical presence, he or she restores a much-needed sense of communality, thereby reintroducing the possibility to speak of the existence of “we.” Yet, in
depicting the possibility that the human other may act as a witness, the trilogy also emerges as an ethical act of resistance to the horrors of the Second World War, opening up the possibility for testimony by reclaiming witnessing after the latter's radical collapse.61

The state of human company, I contend, surfaces as a response to the past traumatic event, providing if only a temporary distraction from one's disturbing personal history. With this argument I do not mean to counteract the analysis I have provided in Chapter Three, which discussed the manifestation of trauma in the condition, behaviour and reactions of Beckett's protagonists. Rather, my contention is that in opening up the possibility for dialogue, the physical presence of the human other serves to direct one's attention to the present moment, thereby preventing the overwhelming resurfacing of the traumatic past to which the protagonists of later one-man plays like Not I and That Time (1975) fall victim. Arguably, the contrast between the state of human company and the state of solitude should also emerge as a contrast between language and silence. Yet in Beckett's trilogy it appears as a contrast between dialogue and overwhelming, convulsive monologues. Where the silence that should define the state of solitude is always replaced by the violent resurfacing of the traumatic memory in the form of a fragmented, compulsive logorrhoea, the physical presence of the human other plays a vital role in maintaining the struggle to repress memory, the struggle against the past and against silence.

In Chapter Three I proposed that language is employed by Beckett's protagonists as a means by which the traumatic past may be kept at bay. The interconnections between memory and language, as well as the impulse to distance oneself from his or her personal history, are explicitly addressed in the following dialogue between the two protagonists of Godot:

VLADIMIR: What do [the dead voices] say?
ESTRAGON: They talk about their lives.
VLADIMIR: To have lived is not enough for them.
ESTRAGON: They have to talk about it. (WFG, 58)

61 See Laub, ‘An Event Without a Witness’.
In this context, the value of the human other is to be traced in the way he or she can actively prevent the resurfacing of the traumatic memory. The following episode in *Godot* exemplifies this:

ESTRAGON: Do you remember the day I threw myself into the Rhône?
VLADIMIR: We were grape-harvesting.
ESTRAGON: You fished me out.
VLADIMIR: That's all dead and buried.
ESTRAGON: My clothes dried in the sun.
VLADIMIR: There’s no good harking back on that. Come on. (*WFG*, 51-2, my emphasis)

Vladimir here effectively puts an end to Estragon's recollections, diverting his attention to the present moment. Yet, as the later emergence of Vladimir’s monologue reveals, this active repression of memory can only take place in a state of company. The monologue is delivered during the time Estragon is asleep, thereby enabling the play to portray the repercussions of solitude. A haunting narration of violence, suffering and atrocity, the monologue is discussed in Chapter Three as a compulsive re-enactment of traumatic memory, the defining characteristics of which being that it ‘has no social component’ and ‘is not addressed to anybody’. It is primarily the absence of Estragon as a listener, as one who may put an end to the monologue, which ultimately triggers the resurfacing of personal history and prolongs its stay in the present.

The fundamental relation between human company and the availability of dialogue is explicitly addressed in *Endgame*, in the following exchange between the protagonists:

CLOV: What is there to keep me here?
HAMM: The dialogue. (*E*, 120-1)

When Clov withdraws to his kitchen, simultaneously withdrawing also the availability of dialogue, Hamm succumbs to the overwhelming force of his past. ‘You weep, and weep, for nothing, so as not to laugh, and little by little...you begin to grieve’, he says during one of Clov’s protracted stays in the kitchen. Echoing Vladimir, he continues: ‘All those I might have helped. [Pause.] Helped! [Pause.] Saved. [Saved.] Saved! [Saved.] The place was crawling with them’ (*E*,

---

125). In his attempt to shed light on the treatment of language and silence in Beckett’s drama, Jon Erickson provides a notable insight into the function of dialogue, one which in turn illuminates my own reading. Erickson argues:

Typically, in plays called absurdist, there is a contrast between speaking and silence, between incessant chatter and the *horror vacui* it attempts to cover. This is evident in absurdist drama from the awkward silences in Chekhov to the famous Pinter pauses. But also, typically, *this chatter is a way of avoiding the irrevocable something that stands as a threat to the fragile present that everyone clings to.*

Erickson’s account is particularly revealing, not only because it traces how the dialogue – or, ‘chatter’, as he calls it – acts as a distraction from ‘the irrevocable something’, but also because it highlights the threat which that ‘irrevocable something’ poses to the present moment. Expanding on his argument by approaching that underlying ‘something’ as a haunting, traumatic past, one which imposes itself onto the solitary protagonist and contaminates the present, I contend that *Endgame* builds on the value of human company that *Godot* introduced by stressing through Hamm’s monologues the catastrophic effects of solitude.

The previous section of this chapter maintained that the need for the human other as a listener is most explicitly addressed in *Happy Days*. While portraying Winnie’s frequent attempts to ensure that Willie is within hearing distance, the play also depicts more extensively than *Godot* and *Endgame* the repercussions of what eventually emerges as an imagined solitude. Through Winnie’s words we learn that Willie’s presence within hearing distance acts as that which enables her to consider her monologues as a dialogue. As she confesses, she cannot ‘bear to be alone, to ‘prattle away with not a soul to hear’ (*HD*, 145). That Willie is physically present – albeit, silent – is precisely that which also allows her to maintain some sense of control over the subject-matter of her monologues. Refraining from providing her with a response in Act Two, Willie causes the female protagonist to surrender completely to a deeply traumatic personal history. In his possible absence, Winnie compulsively returns to the Shower/Cooker story and the story of Milly, thus emerging as a second Mouth.

---

Here, I would like to draw attention to a vital correlation which *Happy Days* exposes between the protagonist’s use of language, mental state and physical decline. In the near-absence of human company in Act Two, Winnie’s monologue turns into a fragmented, often incoherent logorrhoea, one which occurs at once with her loss of composure and her further sinking into the earth. That is to say that in the near-absence of the human other, Winnie is gradually reduced to the female protagonist of *Not I*, of whom only a body part remains. A key passage which will help me expand on my argument is delivered in Act One, during which Willie is still within hearing distance. Winnie’s lines, which initially demonstrate how her need for the human other is fundamentally a need for a listener, move on to imagine her behaviour if she ever found herself alone. Winnie says:

WINNIE: [...] Not that I flatter myself you hear much, no Willie, God forbid. [Pause.] Days perhaps when you hear nothing. [Pause.] But days too when you answer. [Pause.] So that I may say at all times, even when you do not answer and perhaps hear nothing, something of this is being heard, I am not merely talking to myself, that is in the wilderness, a thing I could never bear to do – for any length of time. [Pause.] That is what enables me to go on, go on talking that is. [Pause.] Whereas if you were to die [...] or go away and leave me, then what would I do, what could I do, all day long, I mean between the bell for waking and the bell for sleep? Simply gaze before me with compressed lips. {Long pause while she does so. [...]} Not another word as long as I drew breath, nothing to break the silence of this place. [Pause.] (HD, 145, original emphasis)

Though she envisions herself mute in Willie’s absence, Act Two depicts the perpetuation of her monologue and its reduction into a disjointed, irrepressible narrative. For a period of time there is little difference between Winnie and Mouth, and it is only the eventual reappearance of Willie which puts an end to the incessant logorrhoea.

The repetition of the word ‘wilderness’ (*HD*, 145, 148, 160) which Winnie speaks, emerges as another vital indication of the correlation between Willie’s absence and Winnie’s decline. Appearing for the first time in the passage I have cited above, the word ‘wilderness’ is employed as a reference to the surrounding world. Shortly after, the word resurfaces in Winnie’s following line: ‘no doubt [...] come another time when I must learn to talk to myself a thing I could never bear
to do such wilderness' (HD, 148). Wilderness, then, is here synonymous with the act of talking to oneself. Remarkably, Winnie has by the second act become herself ‘the wilderness’: ‘Say it is a long time now, Willie, since I saw you. [Pause.] Since I heard you. [Pause.] [...] I say I used to think that I would learn to talk alone. [Pause.] By that I mean to myself, the wilderness. [...] But no. [...] No no’ (HD, 160, my emphasis). Overwhelmed by the sheer force of her personal history, a history which manifests in the continuous resurfacing of traumatic memories while in the absence of Willie, Winnie becomes the wilderness. Her motionless head has become but a constituent of the surrounding world, eternally talking to itself of its violent past; a wilderness speaking in the wilderness of wilderness.\(^64\)

Where one’s existence is dictated by the past traumatic experience, an experience so compelling that it persistently absorbs the subjected protagonist into its horrors, the physical presence of the human other and the vital role he or she plays in enabling the use of dialogue provides a distraction, a lifebelt, continuously restoring one’s attention to the present moment. By this I am not suggesting that Beckett’s trilogy introduces human company as an effective means through which the surviving victim may recover from trauma. As I have maintained throughout my thesis, the traumatic event which lurks beneath the fragile surface of the trilogy is so overpoweringly immediate that it precludes the very possibility for recovery. What the plays suggest, rather, is how human company is a way to cope, a way to preserve the traces of what it looks like, what it feels like, and ultimately what it is like to be human. Asked once of how he had survived Auschwitz, Primo Levi said: ‘I was [...] helped by the determination, which I stubbornly preserved, to recognize always, even in the darkest days, in my companions and in myself, men, not things, and thus to avoid that total humiliation and demoralization which led so many to spiritual shipwreck.’\(^65\) This, I propose, is exactly the image that *Waiting for Godot*

---

\(^64\) Alan Schneider’s question about Winnie’s lines and the playwright’s response which appear in the correspondence between the director and Beckett are perhaps noteworthy. Schneider asks: ‘Is there, by any chance, a word left out [...]?? ?? “...when I must learn to talk to myself a thing I could never bear to do (in) such wilderness.”’ Beckett’s answer was the following: ‘Above all no “in.” “Never bear to do such wilderness” straight through, imperturbable [...]’ Alan Schneider to Samuel Beckett, 13 Aug. 1961. In *No Author Better Served*, ed. Harmon, p.93.

confronts us with through the remarkable words of Vladimir, delivered as a response to the blind Pozzo, who asks him and Estragon to reveal who they are; ‘[w]e are men’ (*WFG*, 76), Vladimir says while at his lowest, having stumbled and struggling to get up, exposing that the trauma which has deprived him and Estragon of a life narrative and of an identity has not deprived them of their status as human beings.

Adorno writes: ‘Beckett’s figures behave primitively and behavioristically, corresponding to conditions after the catastrophe, which has mutilated them to such an extent that they cannot react differently – flies that twitch after the swatter has half smashed them.’ Situating the plays within a framework of trauma while maintaining the view that Beckett’s post-war trilogy emerges as a response to the horrors of the Second World War, I have attempted to expand on Adorno’s argument by examining what triggers the protagonists’ behaviour, the manner and the extent to which it is symptomatic of trauma – or, of the catastrophe –, and explore why they can be said to be unable of reacting differently. Though my analysis of Beckett’s drama agrees with several issues that Adorno raises in his reading and has therefore drawn upon his views quite extensively, I would here propose that in the depiction of the resolute determination to maintain human company, as well as in the fundamental interrelation which I will now show exists between company and the availability of witnessing, the plays communicate, also, a persistent will to resist, a desire to persevere despite the catastrophic impact of history.

In his account of how trauma affects the victim’s position in the society, Kai Erikson argues:

> [T]he experience of trauma […] can mean not only a loss of confidence in the self, but a loss of confidence in the surrounding tissue of family and community, in the structures of human government, in the larger logics by which humankind lives, in the ways of nature itself, and often (if this is really the final step in such a succession) in God.67

---

67 Erikson, ‘Notes on Trauma and Community’, p.198.
The traumatic event, then, leads to an all-encompassing loss of trust and of faith. Crucially, it also causes a loss of confidence in the existence of one who may act as God, one who may play the role of the spectator to the victim’s suffering and with his or her very presence make one’s suffering ‘mean something’. The Second World War, and in particular the event of the Holocaust, brought about one such annihilation of spectators, or a ‘collapse of witnessing.’ Where ‘[a] witness is a witness to the truth of what happens during an event’, the Holocaust, with its ‘inherently incomprehensible and deceptive psychological structure [...] precluded its own witnessing, even by its very victims.’ Through its depiction of human company, Beckett’s post-war trilogy, I will now argue, portrays the attempts to restore the witness, the attempts to open up the possibility for witnessing in the hope of providing a glimpse into the truth of what happened in the history of its protagonists.

The previous section examined how the prolongation of the relationship between Vladimir and Estragon derives from perpetual role-play, with each protagonist eternally performing his role against his counterpart. I would here like to suggest that the protagonists of Godot role play not only against each other, but also against the absent title character. Through the words of the protagonists we learn little about Godot other than the fact that Vladimir and Estragon have an appointment with him concerning the possibility that he might offer them a job. It is of course notable that Estragon frequently forgets about their purpose to wait for Godot, and admits in Act One that he ‘wouldn’t even know him if [he] saw him’ (WFG, 24). What may constitute an important clue as to how Godot is perceived by the characters is arguably the contention that his arrival will bring salvation. This is divulged in the following lines, delivered shortly before the play ends:

ESTRAGON: And if [Godot] comes?
VLADIMIR: We’ll be saved. (WFG, 88)

---

68 See the following dialogue between the protagonists of Endgame:
Hamm: We’re not beginning to...to...mean something?
Clov: Mean something! You and I, mean something! [Brief laugh.] Ah that’s a good one! (E, 108)

69 See Laub, ‘An Event Without a Witness’.
70 Ibid., p.80.
My contention, however, is that the protagonists' profound ignorance concerning the figure of Godot implies that his value lies not in the reason for which he is expected but in the extent to which his absence shapes the present situation of Vladimir and Estragon. That is to say that Godot will not play his role if and when he brings salvation; Godot plays his role by simply remaining absent, by being expected. Godot, in other words, is a necessary absence. Turning once more to Dori Laub’s study on the concept of witnessing, we may expand further on the purpose Godot fulfils in the lives of the protagonists by drawing a parallel between him and the concept of the internal witness.

According to Laub, the internal witness is one ‘who substitutes for the lack of witnessing in real life’.\(^71\) In order to explain the creation, establishment and maintaining of an internal witness, Laub draws upon the story of a boy who escaped the Krakow ghetto. Accordingly, a young boy who lived with his parents in the ghetto was smuggled out after the parents received news of the impending extermination of all children. Before the boy’s escape, the mother gave him a passport photograph of herself to turn to when he felt the need to do so. Eventually, the boy would find himself praying to the photograph.\(^72\) For Laub, then, this bond which emerged between the boy and the photograph of his mother exemplifies the creation of ‘his first witness,’ and it is this internal witness that ‘enabled him to survive the years he spent on the streets of Krakow.’\(^73\) I would propose, then, that Godot constitutes one such witness to Vladimir and Estragon, one who with his absence provides a permanent point of reference to which the protagonists turn to in the time of need.

Within this context, Godot’s arrival cannot and will not take place. As the verb in the title of the play suggests, waiting is an ongoing state, similar to, if not synonymous with, the struggle to survive. As the young boy turned to his mother’s photograph, his spectator, his internal witness to his own daily struggles, Beckett’s protagonists turn to Godot, role play against Godot so that they may, in the traumatic aftermath, ‘prevent [their] reason from floundering’ (\textit{WFG}, 75). Ultimately, Godot – whose name may perhaps be seen as a derivative

\(^{71}\) Ibid., p.87.
\(^{72}\) The story is recounted in detail in ibid, pp.86-8.
\(^{73}\) Ibid., p.87.
of the names by which Vladimir and Estragon call each other, namely, Didi and Gogo – paradoxically becomes with his very absence the ever-present witness, that human other in the position of the unbiased spectator which the collective historical trauma has eradicated. It is with Godot as a witness that Vladimir and Estragon persist, and it is with Godot as a \textit{shared} witness that human company is maintained. Equally significant, then, is how the opposite applies as well, since it is only in the presence of the human other that Godot is reminded of and, by expansion, maintained as a witness.

Where 'Hamm and Clov are Didi and Gogo at a later date,'\textsuperscript{74} Hamm and Clov dwell in a time period by which Godot has failed to arrive too many times, a period marked by the disintegration of the internal witness. This absence of a spectator is communicated in two distinct episodes in \textit{Endgame}, namely, the prayer scene and the paradox of the millet grains of Zeno of Elea. The prayer scene, which depicts the four protagonists' futile attempts to pray to God, echoes Vladimir and Estragon’s own, rather comic efforts to discover whether God sees them. Standing on one leg in an attempt to ‘do the tree’ (\textit{WFG}, 71), a posture which simultaneously constitutes the respective yoga exercise for praying,\textsuperscript{75} the protagonists of \textit{Godot} address God as follows:

\begin{quote}
ESTRAGON: Do you think God sees me?
VLADIMIR: You must close your eyes.
[ESTRAGON closes his eyes, stagers worse.]
ESTRAGON: [Stopping, brandishing his fists, at the top of his voice.] God have pity on me!
VLADIMIR: [Vexed.] And me?
ESTRAGON: On me! On me! Pity! On me! (\textit{WFG}, 71)
\end{quote}

Vladimir and Estragon’s effort to pray is interrupted by Pozzo and Lucky’s entrance on stage. Building on this image, \textit{Endgame} depicts a lengthier prayer scene which commences with Hamm asking Clov and Nagg to join him in prayer:

\begin{quote}
HAMM: Let us pray to God.
CLOV: Again!
NAGG: Me sugar-plum!
HAMM: God first! [Pause.] Are you right?
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{74} Quoted in McMillan and Fehsenfeld, \textit{Beckett in the Theatre}, p.163.
CLOV: [Resigned.] Off we go.
HAMM: [To NAGG.] And you?
NAGG: [Clasping his hands, closing his eyes, in a gabble.] Our Father which art –
HAMM: Silence! In silence! Where are your manners? [Pause.] Off we go.
Atitudes of prayer. Silence. Abandoning his attitude, discouraged.] Well?
CLOV: [Abandoning his attitude.] What a hope! And you?
HAMM: Sweet damn all! [To NAGG.] And you?
NAGG: Wait! [Abandoning his attitude.] Nothing doing!
HAMM: The bastard! He doesn't exist! (E, 119)

A scene which triggered many objections to the play and greatly affected Beckett's attempts to secure its English-language production, the prayer scene initially emerges as a compelling critique of Christianity. Confronting us as a parody of the act of praying, it devalues religious practices by reducing communication with God into a sequence of mechanically performed gestures. Yet, the episode also portrays what Erikson describes in his work on trauma as a 'loss of confidence [...] in God', highlighting, thus, the failure of religion to sustain the human victim in the traumatic aftermath. In failing to provide the protagonists with a spectator, with a witness to their existence, religion is then dismissed as of no value in the present moment.

The absence of a witness to Hamm and Clov is reinforced through the references to Zeno of Elea. Zeno's paradox, which contrasts the sound that a bushel of millet grains makes when it falls to the ground with the fact that it constituents make no sound when they fall to the ground individually, is first alluded to by the servant: 'Grain upon grain, one by one,' Clov says, 'and one day, suddenly, there's a heap, a little heap, the impossible heap' (E, 93). Yet, it is with

---

76 See James Knowlson, Damned to Fame: The Life of Samuel Beckett (London: Bloomsbury, 1996), pp.448-51. Knowlson describes in detail the difficulties that Beckett encountered in his effort to secure an English language production of Fin de Partie after he self-translated the work into Endgame, since the play needed first to receive an approval by the Lord Chamberlain's office. According to the biographer, these difficulties arose primarily from the English censor's objection to the prayer scene, a scene which he found to be blasphemous. Thus, he refused to license the play unless Beckett omitted a total of twenty-one lines. Though the playwright did eventually agree to omit or modify a number of lines elsewhere, he strongly refused to amend the prayer scene and, in particular, Hamm's line, '[t]he bastard! He doesn't exist!' (E, 119). The Lord Chamberlain eventually licensed the play after Beckett agreed to replace the word 'bastard' with the word 'SWINE.' Upon the play's production, the playwright then commented that 'he hoped God was pleased at being called a “swine” instead of a bastard', adding [...] “There's a nicety of blasphemy for you. I think I'd be rather less insulted by 'bastard' myself” (Quoted in Knowlson, Damned to Fame, p.451).

77 Erikson, ‘Notes on Trauma and Community’, p.198.
Hamm’s subsequent allusion that the centrality of the paradox in *Endgame* is fully exposed: ‘Moment upon moment,’ the protagonist says, revealingly, ‘pattering down, like the millet grains of... [he hesitates]... that old Greek, and all life long you wait for that to mount up to a life’ (*E*, 126). In a 2002 essay on the play, Eric P. Levy considers Zeno’s paradox next to the depiction of life in *Endgame* and argues:

Whereas Zeno problematized plurality and multiplicity, *Endgame* begins by problematizing indivisible wholeness. [...] Under these conditions, where the whole is negated by the meaningless accumulation of its temporal parts, life can no longer be construed as a continuous process of becoming by which the living individual progressively unfolds his or her significance.  

According to Levy, in *Endgame* the process of living entails ‘not the continuous unfolding of the intrinsic meaning or value of the animate subject in question, but only the accumulation of temporal units which remain extraneous to the subject enduring through them.’ Having discussed the condition of personal history within the context of trauma studies, I contend that Levy’s analysis, and in particular his argument that life in *Endgame* is the accumulation of fragments extraneous to the protagonists, is particularly revealing. As I have shown in Chapter Three, Hamm and Clov’s past emerges as the site of violent, massive trauma, one which by definition resists integration into the life narrative, remaining always “outside” the subject[s]’. In employing Zeno’s paradox to convey an image of his life, Hamm is indeed communicating his personal history as one that is fragmented and fundamentally non-sequential, one which fails to mean something or enable Hamm to ‘unfold his [...] significance.

Here, I would argue that the centrality of Zeno’s paradox in *Endgame* can also be traced in the parallel which Hamm draws between the ‘pattering down’ (*E*, 126) of the moments which comprise his life and the *silent* fall of the millet grains to the ground. That is to say that through the employment of this

---


79 Ibid., pp.263-4, my emphasis.


particular paradox, Hamm suggests his life not only as fragmented but also as it itself silent, an accumulation of meaningless moments which make no sound as they occur. It is a life, we may say, that unfolds unobserved, a life to which neither religion nor philosophy can provide a spectator. It is precisely this very absence of a witness that the perpetual physical presence of the human other seeks to restore. In a period long after Godot, a period by which the trust in the internal witness has dissolved, master and servant invest in the physical presence of the other in the hope that one may play the role of the spectator to their existence. ‘Gone from me you’d be dead’ (E, 126), Hamm tells Clov, meaning that if the servant removes himself from the presence of his only witness, his whole existence will simultaneously be erased. ‘And vice-versa’ (E, 126, original emphasis), Clov threatens, implying the same for Hamm. In this context, Hamm’s demand for an audience to the narration of his chronicle – his continuously modified personal history – is triggered by the very same need for a witness to his life so that ‘perhaps’, as he says, ‘it won’t all have been for nothing!’ (E, 108).

While the protagonists of Godot seek to counteract the absence of a physical witness through the creation and maintaining of a shared, internal witness, Endgame does so by seeking a witness in the human other. Happy Days, I suggest, takes the need for a witness a step further by confronting us with the creation of a witness through the imagining of the physical presence of the human other. As I have previously discussed, Winnie’s monologues, and in particular that which comprises almost the entirety of the second act, are addressed to Willie despite the possibility that he is not listening, that he has left or even that he has died. It is in Act Two, then, that Winnie delivers what in my view constitutes one of the most significant passages of the trilogy, the first few lines of which I have examined above. Addressing the possibility that her counterpart may be absent, Winnie says:

WINNIE: [...] Say it is a long time now, Willie, since I saw you. [Pause.] Since I heard you. [Pause.] [...] I say I used to think that I would learn to talk alone. [Pause.] By that I mean to myself, the wilderness. [Smile.] But no. [Smile broader.] No no. [Smile off.] Ergo you are there. [Pause.] Oh no doubt you are dead, like the others, no doubt you have died, or gone
away and left me, like the others, *it doesn’t matter, you are there.* (HD, 160, my emphasis)

As we have seen, the use of language in the form of dialogue emerges in all three plays as a vital means by which the protagonists repress the surfacing of traumatic memory, a means by which they keep the past at bay, since dialogue brings into focus the present moment. In the absence of a human other the self surrenders to the overpowering nature of the past, he or she falls victim to the symptoms of a deeply traumatic history that persistently escapes integration into the life narrative. Where one’s past may be the site of trauma, *Happy Days* communicates that the absence of human company in the present constitutes itself a second trauma, a second blow to the victimised protagonist.

‘Ergo you are there’ (HD, 160), Winnie says, restoring the presence of a witness to her existence by imagining Willie’s presence, thereby restoring, also, the value of human company as a response to the horrors of history. While the compelling, irrepressible need for the human other emerges as a product, a symptom of trauma, and while the very nature of human company as role-play is dictated by the trauma of the past, human company emerges also as the sole necessity of the human victim, the sole means by which he or she may cope with the repercussions of history in the present moment. Paradoxically, then, human company is both a product of trauma and a vital form of resistance to it, the sole means by which the human victim may ‘mean something’ (*E*, 108). In providing the trauma victim with a witness, human company becomes the means by which his or her existence in this world does not evaporate, his or her suffering ‘won’t all have been for nothing’ (*E*, 108). It constitutes the means by which the human victim is not reduced to ‘the wilderness’ (HD, 160), the means by which he or she does not become one with the ruins of a dehumanising history but retains, albeit only traces, of the qualities of being human.

In his theorisation of the collapse of witnessing during the Second World War, Laub writes:

[The world of the Holocaust [...] was] a world in which the very imagination of the *Other* was no longer possible. There was no longer an other to which one could say “Thou” in the hope of being heard, or
being recognized as a subject, of being answered. The historical reality of the Holocaust became, thus, a reality which extinguished philosophically the very possibility of address, the possibility of appealing, or of turning to, another.\textsuperscript{82}

Emerging from the ruins of the Holocaust, Beckett’s trilogy manages through the depiction of human company to restore the possibility of imagining the human other, to open up, once more, the possibility of addressing, appealing and turning to another human being. Set in the aftermath of a violent and far-reaching traumatic event, one that has permanently impaired the sense of communality and eradicated the possibility to speak of “we” as ‘a connected pair or as linked cells in a larger communal body’,\textsuperscript{83} the plays destabilise our conception of community, of social networks and of human relationships by portraying human company as radically shaped by the past, as itself a product of history. Yet, through the depiction of the very availability of the human other, through the depiction, that is, of the possibility for witnessing, they simultaneously rethink and re-contextualise the value of human company in the post-war era.

‘It’s too much for one man’, Vladimir says early in Act One of \textit{Waiting for Godot} (\textit{WFG}, 11). In a world that has become irrational, a world subjected to too much violence, too much atrocity and too much death, the need for the physical presence of the human other is all that remains. Human company emerges as the sole aspect of humanity that the trauma, or the war, has not managed to erase. Providing its protagonists with a human other, then, the trilogy as testimonial drama opens up, thematically as well as structurally, the possibility for witnessing and, indeed, the possibility for testimony in the post-war period. Surfacing as both a literary and an ethical response to its history, it provides a glimpse into the reality of this history, while at once communicating the inherent human impulse to persist, to persevere, to go on.

\textsuperscript{82} Laub, ‘An Event Without a Witness’, pp.81-2.
\textsuperscript{83} Erikson, \textit{Everything in its Path}, p.154.
5. Conclusion: Trauma, Company and Witnessing in Samuel Beckett’s Post-war Drama

In my thesis I set out to explore the interrelation between the dynamics of human company and the psychoanalytic concept of witnessing in Samuel Beckett’s major post-war drama. Finding human company to constitute a relatively unexplored territory in the field of Beckett studies, I have pursued a close and detailed analysis of this issue with the purpose to determine and prove its central position in Beckett’s oeuvre.

At the start of my thesis I identified the need to examine the reasons why the protagonists of Beckett’s post-war drama display an unwavering obsession with the physical presence of the human other. To what extent, my Introduction then asked, is this obsession with the human other related to the historical and socio-political background of the works? Does the representation of human company in the post-war trilogy constitute a product of a specific historical period, a period of unprecedented historical and collective trauma? The need for human company, I suggested, is heightened once we take into account the status of the plays as works of drama. Indeed, drama presupposes the physical presence of the human other since the theatrical performance necessitates the presence of the audience. What are, then, the overall implications of this thematic and structural preoccupation with the need for the human other, and in what ways might an assessment of the dynamics of human company illuminate our understanding of post-war Beckett?

These questions remained at the core of my analysis, which first sought to examine the potential of the theatrical genre to address and bear witness to traumatic memory and experience. In the absence of a substantial body of criticism on the interconnections between trauma and the theatre, I have drawn upon the theorisation of trauma fiction, as well as upon Patrick Duggan’s 2012 study on the concept of trauma-tragedy to suggest the viability of approaching theatrical performance as a performance of testimony. My reading of Beckett’s trilogy within the context of trauma studies consequently enabled me to propose the significance of approaching Waiting for Godot, Endgame and Happy
Days as testimonial drama, as plays which internalise the symptoms of traumatic experience in both form and content and testify to their historical contexts through the very act of being performed in front of a live audience. In light of Laub’s and Langer’s views on the process of testimony as ‘a process that includes the listener’ and ‘cannot take place in solitude’, I have argued that the inherent need of Beckett’s testimonial drama for the human other as audience is fundamentally a need for a human witness, a witness who may with his or her physical presence enable the transmission of unprocessed cultural memory, of embodied traumatic history.

Turning my attention to the depiction of couples in the post-war trilogy, I have attempted to explore the relation between human company and traumatic memory and experience. Company, my analysis argued, emerges as both a product of, and a means of resistance to, a deeply traumatic, unnamed and unnameable history, the repercussions of which are still endured in the present. Company emerges as a product of trauma in that it does not derive from mutual feelings of affection or from the conscious desire to remain in the physical presence of one particular human other. Rather, human company is compulsively sought out in the chronic struggle against solitude as that which may restore a sense of communality and belonging in the denuded universe in which the plays are set. That human company is decisively shaped by the past traumatic experience is also conveyed through the nature of the dichotomous relationships we encounter in the three plays, relationships which I have shown to be profoundly based on the perpetual re-enactment of individual identity as a role.

Paradoxically, human company serves also as a means of resistance to past trauma. As the physical presence of the human other gradually emerges as a vital source of solace and support, safety and protection, the state of company mutates into a fundamental source of communality in the traumatic aftermath. Company persists, while everything else deteriorates in Beckett’s major drama, thus confronting us with a profound image of human perseverance and intimacy.

amid the ruins of history. Most crucially, in providing one with the physical presence of a human other, the state of company opens up the possibility for witnessing and in turn the possibility for testimony to take place, in a period in which the past is still unprocessed and inaccessible. It provides one with an other to which he or she can say “Thou” in the hope of being heard, of being recognised as a subject, of being answered, thereby restoring the possibility of address, the possibility of appealing and of turning to another.2 In exploring this interrelation between human company and witnessing in Beckett’s post-war trilogy, my analysis has ultimately argued that the plays effectively manage to destabilise our conception of relationships by rethinking their purpose and value in a historical period marked by a profoundly violent, unprecedented trauma.

With this analysis, then, I have attempted to offer a comprehensive reading of what emerges as a key trope in Beckett’s oeuvre, in the hope of illuminating the ways in which his post-war plays embody, address and resist to the historical background of their composition. The discussion which now follows will revisit several key issues that I have raised throughout my thesis so as to highlight their prominence in Beckett’s post-war drama, to provide further analysis of the implications they carry, and to demonstrate how by giving appropriate and sufficient attention to these issues we may indeed contribute to the existing criticism on the playwright. In the first section I will concentrate on the presence of trauma in Beckett and further elaborate on why the process of situating his post-war works within the context of trauma studies is viable, appropriate and instructive. The second section will then focus on the centrality of the human other in his post-war works, and on the implications of the audience assuming the position of the human other towards the performance of his drama. What does it mean to act as witnesses to Beckett, to the performance of his drama as testimony? What does it entail and in what ways may it contribute to what we already know about his drama? It is with a further

---

2 See Dori Laub, ‘An Event Without a Witness: Truth, Testimony and Survival’, in Felman and Laub, Testimony, pp.81-2. Laub writes that ‘the world of the Holocaust […] [was] a world in which the very imagination of the Other was no longer possible. There was no longer an other to which one could say “Thou” in the hope of being heard, or being recognized as a subject, of being answered. The historical reality of the Holocaust became, thus, a reality which extinguished philosophically the very possibility of address, the possibility of appealing, or of turning to, another.’
assessment of the answers to these questions that I wish to conclude my thesis, answers which I believe can shed new light on how the post-war drama embodies and preserves the historical period which gave birth to it.

5.1. Beckett and Trauma

In the Introduction I expressed my belief that a theorisation of Beckett’s works in the context of trauma studies is long overdue. Pursuing such an approach towards Beckett, I suggested, could well prove beneficial and provide a deeper understanding of particularly the works he composed in the aftermath of the Second World War. Without dismissing existing critical studies on the playwright, I turned to psychoanalytic theories of trauma and the relatively recent theorisation of trauma fiction to explore how they can inform a new reading of his plays. By referring back to the analysis I have already provided, I will now discuss the value and comment on the implications of tracing the presence of trauma in Beckett’s oeuvre.

My attempt to examine the presence of trauma in the post-war trilogy found most useful Theodor Adorno’s and Martin Esslin’s respective discussions on the correlation between form and content in Beckett’s plays. Albeit situating the plays in different contexts, Adorno and Esslin seem to agree with each other when they detect in Beckett a ‘relation, not identity’ between form and content, and a ‘striving for an integration between the subject-matter and the form in which it is expressed,’ respectively. Taking into account the theorisation of trauma in psychoanalytic criticism, I suggested that it is possible to expand on Adorno’s and Esslin’s arguments by reading the relation between form and content in Beckett’s drama as the result of a simultaneous internalisation of the symptoms, the rhythms and the processes of traumatic memory and experience. What Adorno speaks of as a ‘negativity of the metaphysical content’ that is related to ‘the eclipsing of the aesthetic content’, I then read in terms of an overwhelming absence. This absence, which derives from the manifestation of the symptoms of ellipsis and repetition, stasis and fragmentation, brings about a

---

profound disruption, a structural and linguistic collapse that is inextricably intertwined with trauma. Trauma, I argued, manifests itself most prominently in memory, the condition of language and the body, with both the dramatic text and the dramatis personae falling victim to its violent and decisive re-emergence.

The theorisation of trauma fiction enabled me to position the post-war trilogy within a more specific context. Focusing on Laurie Vickroy’s and Irene Kacandes’ studies, I suggested that there is a vital similarity to be acknowledged between Beckett’s works and trauma narratives, narratives that ‘go beyond presenting trauma as a subject matter or character study’,⁶ and manage to “perform” trauma, in the sense that they can “fail” to tell the story, by eliding, repeating, and fragmenting components of the story.⁷ In their treatment of form and content, Beckett’s plays display a similar process and endure a similar predicament. They, too, “perform” trauma, yet being works of drama we may say that they perform trauma more vividly and in a more literal sense than prose fiction. What is depicted as an absence of conventional theatrical structure, a seeming absence of plot and a distinctive resort to repetition and silence may then be read in terms of a profound and radical deprivation, one which suggests that both form and content are decisively shaped by the simultaneous desire and inability to assimilate and therefore communicate traumatic experience and memory. Unable to articulate the history which they embody, both form and content are condemned to an eternal re-enactment of its symptoms.

Though Vickroy and Kacandes offer many valuable insights into how trauma is addressed and represented in prose literature, my analysis necessitated also an assessment of how trauma may be given embodied form in works of drama. In light of Patrick Duggan’s theorisation of the concept of trauma-tragedy, I set out to explore the viability of the theatrical performance to engage with traumatic experience. One of only few works to examine the

---

⁶ Laurie Vickroy, *Trauma and Survival in Contemporary Fiction* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2002), p.3.
presence of trauma in theatre and performance to date, Duggan’s study proposes that ‘theatre/performance, more than any other art form, is perfectly placed to attempt a dialogue with, and even a representation of, trauma.’ In sharing his view, I have attempted a reading of Beckett’s post-war trilogy as testimonial drama, as drama which internalises the symptoms of traumatic memory and experience in both its form and content, thereby bearing witness to its historical context by actively engaging the audience as a witness to the performance. The performance of drama as testimony, I have maintained, is neither a didactic representation of history nor an explicit account of the events which shaped it. Indeed, Beckett’s trilogy dares not name or localise the historical period in which it unfolds or explicitly narrate the events of the past. The performance of drama as testimony, rather, derives from the depiction of the onstage struggle to speak of a history that remains unprocessed and persistently resists articulation. In achieving a more direct and intimate bond with its audience than prose works, Beckett’s drama manages to address its historical context by embodying its symptoms, thus testifying to its agonising unrepresentability.

I believe that situating Beckett’s trilogy in a framework of trauma questions our assumptions about the artistic, historical and ethical dimensions of his drama. As I have shown, such an approach sheds light on his post-war shift from prose to drama and recognises his quest for ‘a form that accommodates the mess’ as simultaneously a compelling critique of the condition of art and literature in the post-war era. In manipulating dramatic form and content so as to internalise symptoms of trauma – so as to internalise, that is, the repercussions of traumatic history –, Beckett suggests that it is no longer possible to produce an artwork, a literary or a dramatic work that is entirely disconnected from, or unaffected by, the unprecedented trauma of the Second World War. It is no longer possible to produce an artwork that retains structure, coherence and the ability to communicate a story. Yet, if form and content have succumbed to the *traumatising* re-emergence of history, if they are neither

---


capable of addressing this history nor able to distance themselves from it, what is the purpose of art and literature in the post-war era?

The theatrical genre, I contend, enabled Beckett not only to express this question but also to provide the answer to it. Indeed, theatre seems to have provided him with the means through which he could convey the profoundly unstable and foreboding atmosphere of post-war Europe, since it provided him with a stage on which to present the repercussions of history in concrete images. What is more, the theatrical genre enabled him to present – perhaps more vividly than prose works did – the compulsive yet futile struggle to bear witness to this history. It enabled him to compose works which display the same juxtaposition between knowledge and denial, between the ‘imperative to tell’ and ‘the impossibility of telling’, the same stylistic qualities with oral Holocaust testimonies. Thus, theatre enabled him to create a compelling dialogue between past and present, a dialogue which effectively manages to transform the Beckett stage into a key site of interaction between theatre and history.

Most crucially, the suitability of the theatrical space to address and give embodied form to trauma in front of a live audience enabled Beckett to provide us through his post-war trilogy with an invaluable medium of bearing witness to a history which ‘precluded its own witnessing’. In the aftermath of a historical period which art can neither engage with nor escape from, a period which ‘does not enter, and cannot be framed by, any existing frame of reference’, theatre allowed Beckett to achieve a more direct relationship between his work and the audience, thus triggering the transformation of the theatrical performance into a performance of testimony in the physical presence of a human other, a human witness. In the post-war era, his works suggest, art can no longer retain its previous condition or purpose; art has succumbed to the need to provide a witness to the crisis of history. In embodying the symptoms of history while endlessly struggling in vain to address it, Beckett’s post-war trilogy is at once a

11 Ibid., p.80.
12 Shoshana Felman, ‘Camus’ The Plague, or a Monument to Witnessing’, in Felman and Laub, Testimony, p.103.
victim and a witness to its historical context, testifying to a period of profound violence and atrocity, as well as to the condition of art but most crucially the condition of humanity in the post-Holocaust era. It is in confronting us as a remnant of the war years, in responding to the call for a witness to history, in recognising in the audience an other to which it can say “Thou” and be heard, recognised and answered, thus opening up the possibility for testimony to take place, that the ethical dimension and value of Beckett’s post-war trilogy are ultimately to be found.

5.2. The Human Other

As I have maintained throughout my thesis, the human other remains a constant preoccupation in Beckett’s oeuvre, one that appears for the first time in the 1946 novel, *Mercier and Camier*, finds concrete representation in *Waiting for Godot*, *Endgame* and *Happy Days*, is extensively evoked in later one-man plays such as *Embers* (written 1957; broadcast 1959) and *Rough for Theatre I* (1961), and reaches a climax with the 1980 novella, tellingly entitled *Company*. For the purposes of my analysis, I have decided to focus primarily on the three stage plays which depict human company in concrete images, yet I believe that the insights I have offered on the nature, purpose and value of human company could perhaps contribute to a deeper understanding of the central position it occupies in Beckett’s later works as well. Returning to the analysis I have provided in the previous chapters, I will now attempt to provide a more informed discussion of the role that the human other plays in the post-war trilogy, as well as an assessment of the role that we play by assuming the position of that human other towards the theatrical performance of drama as testimony.

Itself a product of trauma, a product which carries the symptoms of a disastrous history, human company is portrayed as a form of role-play. It derives not from mutual feelings of affection, nor from a conscious desire to exist in the physical presence of one particular human other, but from the reduction of individual identity to a role chronically acted out in what emerges as a game between opposite forces. Beckett’s comments on the situation in
*Godot* are particularly revealing: ‘It is a game, everything is a game. When all
four of them are lying on the ground, that cannot be handled naturalistically.
That has got to be done artificially, balletically. Otherwise everything becomes
an imitation of reality... It should become clear and transparent, not dry.’ This
game, this perpetuation of human company in the aftermath of a profound and
far-reaching traumatic experience replaces, therefore, all traces of individual
identity and any inclination towards individuality. Of course, the traumatic
experience has already contributed extensively to the destabilisation and,
indeed, fragmentation of identity, individuality and personal history, so much so
that the very availability of a concrete identity or a coherent personal history is
questioned. The human victim is now left crumbling in the ruins of history,
along with all aspects of the self.

In approaching human company as the result of endless role-play I do not
wish to question its value. Nor do I believe that the playwright had such an
intention with his portrayal of relationships. In the world of the trilogy, human
company may have been reduced to game, but this is fundamentally ‘a game in
order to survive.’ It is a game in order to cope in the aftermath of a period that
has radically impaired the condition of social networks, of community and
communality. In the Beckett universe, in the post-war European setting, the
physical presence of the human other no longer serves – if it ever did – the
purpose of achieving philosophical or Existentialist self-differentiation. The
physical presence of the human other serves, rather, as a source of solace and
support, a source of intimacy, but most crucially a source of communality.
Human company is that which provides the possibility of ‘an other’ to which one
can say “Thou”, a possibility which the event of the Holocaust eliminated. Most
crucially, human company is that which provides the human victim with one
that may act as a witness to his existence, one that may listen to the pattering
down of the millet grains that comprise his life so that ‘perhaps it won’t all have
been for nothing!’ It is by restoring the physical presence of the human other.

---

14 Ibid.
as a potential witness, by enabling the protagonists to firmly assert, ‘[w]e are men’,\textsuperscript{17} that human company eventually emerges as compelling means of resistance to the horrors of history.

Beckett’s post-war trilogy reflects the need for the human other through its very status as drama. Being drama, \textit{Waiting for Godot}, \textit{Endgame} and \textit{Happy Days} presuppose the physical presence of the human other as audience, they communicate that the human other is an indispensible part of the theatrical performance without which the performance cannot take place. Confronting us in the form of testimonial drama, I have argued, the plays invite our active participation as witnesses to the onstage struggle to testify. Yet in acknowledging our presence through metatheatrical references, as well as through the profound sense of ambiguity that defines each dramatic scenario and demands that it is \textit{we} that should connect means to ends, it is \textit{we} that should make the effort to imagine,\textsuperscript{18} the trilogy also manages to \textit{create} a witness to its performance. In a striking act of resistance, then, Beckett’s trilogy manages to test the limitations of the theatrical space and opens up the possibility for bearing witness to a period that persistently resists coherent articulation or integration into history. It provides, that is, that much-needed frame of reference capable of transmitting a history that exists beyond any known frame of reference.

Yet, what are our responsibilities to the performance? What does acting as witnesses mean and what does it entail? Duggan argues that ‘[t]he central difference between being a spectator and being a witness is [...] to do with implication.’\textsuperscript{19} What are, then, the implications of adopting such a stance towards the performance of Beckett’s trilogy? To actively and self-reflexively reposition ourselves as audience and act as witnesses to the performance of drama as testimony requires, first, a readiness to experience, consciously and absolutely, a sense of unsettlement that is fundamentally a sense of empathy. This sense of unsettlement is that which arises from being at once both inside

\textsuperscript{17} Samuel Beckett, \textit{Waiting for Godot}, in \textit{The Complete Dramatic Works}, p.76. All further references to the play will be cited parenthetically in the text, and will be to this edition.


\textsuperscript{19} Duggan, \textit{Trauma-Tragedy}, p.90.
and outside the theatrical performance. It is a sense which derives from the contrast between the familiar and the unfamiliar, the recognisable and the hard-to-relate-to. By experiencing empathy, I contend, we take the first step towards communality, towards the expansion of ‘the circle of “we.”’

Acting as witnesses, then, also entails the recognition of what unfolds onstage as a chronic yet futile struggle to testify to a history that remains unimaginable and therefore unspeakable. What occurs onstage, in other words, is neither a metaphor nor an allegory but an embodiment of the ‘imperative to tell’ of a story, an imperative that is eternally haunted by ‘the impossibility of telling’. Thus, to act as a witness is simultaneously to accept the onstage struggle as the result of a profound lack of freedom, a profound lack of choice. The plays testify to their history because they cannot do otherwise, their history is one that can only find expression as a period in which there was ‘[n]othing to be done’ (WFG, 11). With its very first line, then, Godot bears witness to a historical period which, like the period of the Second World War, ‘rudely dispel[s] as misconception the idea that choice is purely an internal matter, immune to circumstance and chance.’ By becoming ourselves the human other to the theatrical performance, the human witness to, and recipient of, testimony, we may gain a glimpse into the historical context of the trilogy, enabling, ultimately, the transmission of the actual historical period which produced it.

Peter Woodthorpe once asked the playwright what Waiting for Godot was really about. ‘It’s all symbiosis, Peter’, Beckett said, ‘it’s symbiosis’. Usually employed to describe the relation between parasites that are foreign to the world they inhabit and invisible to the naked eye, microorganisms that come into existence and perish without making a sound, the term “symbiosis” seems like a fitting description of the condition and relationship between each couple in Beckett. Perhaps it is also a fitting description of the condition of humanity in the ruins of the Holocaust, in the ruins of an era of profound dehumanisation, an

---

23 Quoted in Knowlson, Damned to Fame, p.417.
era which treated human beings as wholly interchangeable. It is a fitting
description, that is, of an era marked by a radical collapse of witnessing, a
historical period in which life is reduced to waiting aimlessly for Godot or for
something to take its course, and human existence is reduced to fragments, to
unobserved moments pattering down silently. Itself a remnant of this era, the
post-war trilogy embodies its repercussions and testifies to its horrors, while at
once fighting against it precisely by bearing witness to it, precisely by
preserving, that is, an image of humanity after the crisis of history. With the
trilogy responding to the need for a witness to history, I believe that it is our
turn, now, to respond to the trilogy by becoming that human other, that belated
witness that will finally enable history to be transmitted, re-inscribed and,
perhaps, fully captured.
Bibliography

Primary Sources


Secondary Sources


Adorno, Theodor W., and Jones, Michael T., ‘Trying to Understand *Endgame*’, *New German Critique*, No. 26 (Spring – Summer, 1982), pp.119-150


Cary, Henry Francis, trans., *The Vision of Dante Alighieri: or, Hell, Purgatory, and Paradise* (London: Bell and Daldy, 1869)


Czarnezki, Kristin, “‘Signs I Don’t Understand’: Language and Abjection in *Molloy*, *Journal of Beckett Studies*, Vol. 17, No. 1-2 (September, 2008), pp.52-77


Erikson, Kai, ‘Notes on Trauma and Community’, in *Trauma*, ed. Caruth, pp.183-199


Horowitz, Evan Cory, ‘*Endgame*: Beginning to End’, *Journal of Modern Literature*, Vol. 27, No. 4 (Summer, 2004), pp.121-128


Kacandes, Irene, ‘Narrative Witnessing as Memory Work: Reading Gertrud Kolmar’s *A Jewish Mother*, in *Acts of Memory*, eds. Bal, Crewe and Spitzer, pp.55-71


Knowlson, James, *Damned to Fame: The Life of Samuel Beckett* (London: Bloomsbury, 1996)


Laub, Dori, ‘Bearing Witness or the Vicissitudes of Listening’, in Felman and Laub, Testimony, pp.57-74


Luckhurst, Roger, The Trauma Question (London: Routledge, 2008)


McMillan, Dougald, and Fehsenfeld, Martha, Beckett in the Theatre: The Author as Practical Playwright and Director (London: John Calder; New York: Riverrun Press, 1988)


Vickroy, Laurie, *Trauma and Survival in Contemporary Fiction* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2002)

Waterson, Roxana, ‘Testimony, Trauma and Performance: Some Examples from Southeast Asian Theatre’, *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, Vol. 41, No. 3 (October, 2010), pp.509-528