

## ***That ‘vaulty night’: Trials, testimonies, and critiques of justice in Beckett’s panopticon prison-stage***

### ***Abstract:***

Beckettian justice avoids the usual scripts of judicial processes: his trials and punishments merge, as his captive characters lock themselves into eerily repetitive, self-questioning loops of semi-existence. His prison-cell courtrooms critique the wider socio-cultural symbolism associated with indefinite incarceration and unduly harsh sentences, questioning whether retributive sanctions have the power to redeem, or to spark atonement. By turning vague but terrifying recollections into accusatory witness statements, Beckett crafts purgatories grounded in endless perception. Audiences must therefore act as jurors and gaolers: by witnessing the various ‘crimes’ of omission (neglect, abandonment, unintentional cruelty) we are perhaps better placed to judge our own failings and frailties and capacity for resilience.

**Key words:** Beckett – justice – legal – courtroom - panopticon - trial- atonement - testimony – purgatory – guilt

### **1. Introduction**

*To be judge and party, witness and advocate, and he, attentive, indifferent, who sits and notes. It’s an image, in my helpless head, where all sleeps, all is dead, not yet born...<sup>1</sup>*

Samuel Beckett’s model of justice (focussing upon trial and punishment, but not necessarily in that, or any other, order) is firmly grounded in the various ‘guilts, memories of loss and the sheer daily troubles of the world.’<sup>2</sup> His adamant refusal to adhere to the usual scripts of judicial procedure often sees the playwright locking his characters into eerily repetitive, self-

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<sup>1</sup> Samuel Beckett *Texts for Nothing V* in Mark Nixon (ed.) ‘Texts for Nothing and Other Shorter Prose, 1950-1976’ London: Faber and Faber (1967) p 21

<sup>2</sup> Robert Cushman (Review in *Observer*, 1976) in Lawrence Graver and Raymond Federman ‘*Samuel Beckett: The Critical Heritage*’ London: Routledge & Kegan Paul (1979) p. 385, noting that ‘...repetition is purgatorial for them, but helpful for us.’

questioning loops of semi-existence, effecting an inescapable, final ‘slow declension’<sup>3</sup> of the body, spirit and self. This article argues that this unique penal policy system manages to ignore, merge or invert the usual norms associated with trial and sentencing: the Beckettian ‘formula’ for justice serves as a harsh critique of the wider ‘social symbolism’<sup>4</sup> associated with indefinite imprisonment and unduly harsh punishments. It calls into question the very purpose of incarceration as a means of achieving offender atonement, redemption, or some degree of social reintegration.

Where defendants and detainees must endlessly craft, relive, and share their intensely personal ‘imprisoning memor[ies],’<sup>5</sup> their recollections and revelations become self-accusatory witness statements. Beckett thus achieves a terrifying model of open-ended incarceration which has the potential to exist in perpetuity, as an endless merger of cross examination and sentence: so long as his protagonists are perceived by some (unseen, but not usually altogether unsensed) ‘other’ they will be able, if not actively obliged, to endure their fates. Beckett’s stages thus mirror both the limbo of the courtroom and the hell of the panopticon prison. He enlists us as his audience-jurors to serve not only as his court scribes (bearing witness and giving hearing to his characters, remembering them long after we have left the theatre) but to act also as powerless prison wardens, observing and thereby compounding the manifold sufferings of his endlessly paraded detainees. Because their pains cannot end whilst we are present, we too must serve time as complicit, captive onlookers, ‘entertained’ by ritualised suffering and sporadic ‘confessions.’ Any verdicts that we might offer seem as irrelevant to the proceedings here as the motives of the absent *Godot* were to the fates of the abandoned Vladimir and Estragon. Any sense that we are somehow in control

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<sup>3</sup> Hugh Kenner, ‘*A Reader’s Guide to Samuel Beckett*’ New York: Syracuse University Press (1973) p163

<sup>4</sup> David Garland, ‘*Culture and Control: Crime and Social Order in Contemporary Society*’ Oxford: Oxford University Press (2002)

<sup>5</sup> Irving Wardle (*The Times*, 1976) in Graver and Federman (1979) p 382

of, or set quite apart from, the proceedings (as empowered judge, juror, or gaoler) soon vanishes. As helpless court clerks we must take careful note of all that unfolds before us, but are unable to question aloud, deliver judgement, pass sentence, or grant any form of reprieve to those detained or abandoned.

Normative judicial processes are inverted, with detailed cross-examinations often following incarceration, and perhaps continuing endlessly and relentlessly in the wake of it. Symbols of justice are evident however: blindfolding or blindness, the ‘staccato,’ sword-like delivery of testimony and questioning, and the vulnerability of the ‘bared breast’ thoughts of the protagonists that sometimes break through. Anonymity (of the accused) ceases here however to serve as a protective force, bringing with it instead a disempowering namelessness which renders them defenceless if not disembodied. The use of shadow, light, silences, and quite terrifying physical or mental stasis, underscores further the profound ‘theme of entrapment,’<sup>6</sup> recalling a profusion of traditional symbols and norms associated with law, justice and the adversarial courtroom arena. Black and white dress, measured silences and sounds, the presence of bewigged or unseen accusers, close-rationed rights of speech or audience, involuntary enclosure or restraint, and the ability to stand or sit without being granted permission to do so, take on a much deeper significance here. They are markers of lost freedoms and submitted-to authority, and serve to ensure that the very bodies and minds of these imprisoned souls and accused defendants will themselves become instruments of their indefinite incarceration. The true horror perhaps lies in the growing sense that any further mental or physical decay will most likely not bring repentance, nor will it necessarily lead to the escape or release of death.

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<sup>6</sup> John Robert Keller *‘Samuel Beckett and the Primacy of Love’* Manchester: Manchester University Press (2000) p 150

## 2. Trial as punishment: Beckett's courtroom-cells

By highlighting the imprisoning power of endless time, shattered self-identity and spot-lit, boundless regret, Beckett appears to question the very nature and purpose of the concepts of justice and atonement. Rather than serving as a reason-based 'procedure dedicated to truth,'<sup>7</sup> his systems of evidence-gathering (tied as they are to retribution) fall somewhere 'beyond the compass of explicit definition.'<sup>8</sup> In *Play*, for example, we see his adulterous trio of trapped characters become increasingly frenzied, until 'having exhausted their supply of confessions,'<sup>9</sup> their potted testimonies simply begin afresh. This leaves us to wonder whether we have been witnessing an endless, circular trial or watching the play out of some karmic, mortifying punishment, grounded in public confession and self-mortification. We share in their suffering, and are relieved when we, at least (and at last) are free to depart the arena. As with many of Beckett's 'witness box' works (involving a captive, sorely questioned, prisoner-defendant) our task is to simply note and observe without delivering any verdict, or recommending any manner of remission or further sanction. As a result, we often remain haunted by the sense of unending anguish and guilt that the debased characters have put on display for our benefit, long after we have left the theatre. Such an open-ended adjournment is at odds with the idea that we are in any way a key component (i.e. as witness, judge, advocate, gaoler) within Beckett's process of slow-grinding justice.

He still draws however upon classic symbols of legal methodology to ground his prisoner-defendants within the confines of his courtroom-stage. Darkness and light (which have often represented justice and justiciability) can be said to suggest the admissibility or exclusion of relevant facts or testimony, the binding nature of many 'black letter' laws, or the need to limit

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<sup>7</sup> Russell Smith (ed) *Beckett and Ethics* London: Continuum Literary Studies (2008) p 8

<sup>8</sup> Harold Hobson ('Sunday Times' 1957) in Graver and Federman (1979) p 162

<sup>9</sup> Cushman (1979) p 343

juridical focus for the sake of truth-finding. For Beckett, such ‘trigger light[s]’<sup>10</sup> may serve to prompt an outpouring of manic confession (*Play, Not I*) or effect suspension of an apparently pending death sentence (*Happy Days*). As Winnie observes delightedly in *Happy Days* (buried up to her neck in sand and slowly sinking away whilst roasting under a blazing sun), ‘Hail, holy light... Someone is looking at me still.’<sup>11</sup> She welcomes her suffering so that she might yet be both heard and beheld, rather than simply being left alone, talking only to herself. To be perceived is to avoid the horrors of a solitary existence or of creeping invisibility: the light that is slowly killing her is also sustaining her, and allowing us, the audience, to both witness (and wonder at) her predicament, and ponder her past behaviours. Clearly, as Wardle argued, such Beckettian ‘light is cruel,’<sup>12</sup> with neither observation nor revelation bringing much in terms of comfort or closure, either to the audience-juror or to the doomed protagonist.

In *Eh Joe*, the self-imprisoned ‘defendant’ is similarly spot-lit and cornered into some measure of acceptance of his fate by the camera’s inexorable approach and Voice’s unremitting assault upon him and what might remain of his conscience. He is forced to recall shameful and poignant scenes and events in such heart-breaking detail that he can offer neither response nor rebuttal: ‘bundling her into her Avoca sack...Her fingers fumbling with the big horn buttons.’<sup>13</sup> His ‘testimony’ is grounded in accusatory memory, provided by ‘another’ (the Voice in his head) but his eyes are those of some cornered creature, unable and indeed unwilling to flee from self-imposed, gradually shrinking hermitage. Black and white are used here to alarming effect:<sup>14</sup> in other works of Beckett they recall the norms of

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<sup>10</sup> Ruby Cohn ‘*Just Play: Beckett’s Theater*’ New Jersey: Princeton University Press (1980) p 27

<sup>11</sup> Winnie, Act II, *Happy Days* in ‘*Samuel Beckett: The Complete Dramatic Works*’ London: Faber & Faber (2006) p 160

<sup>12</sup> Wardle (1979) p 342

<sup>13</sup> Voice, *Eh Joe* (following camera move 7) in ‘*Samuel Beckett: The Complete Dramatic Works*’ London: Faber & Faber (2006) p 365

<sup>14</sup> Kathryn White ‘*Beckett and Decay*’ New York: Continuum Literary Studies (2009) p 68

courtroom garb, and the very act of judgement itself, via verbal, black-balled condemnations (*All That Fall*, *Krapp's Last Tape*). Shrouded or faceless figures (for example in *Endgame*, *Footfalls*, *Quad*, *Come and Go*) remind us of death-sentencing judges who must cover their heads with black cloth to absolve themselves of guilt and avoid divine retribution. Characters may be clothed as jurists, with long black robes setting off stark, white court 'wigs' (*That Time*, *Ohio Impromptu*). And yet, their generally tattered, dirty garments, and unkempt, matted hair suggest a profound wariness of lawyers and legal processes: we should accept little at face value, whether written, spoken or mimed, it seems. As Beckett cautions carefully in *Texts for Nothing V*: 'Don't forget the question-mark.'<sup>15</sup>

His black and white tableaux can, aptly, dissolve into murky greyness (*Ghost Trio*) or 'ash' (*Catastrophe*), signifying the intensely equivocal nature of many of the accounts and testimonies that he has presented to us, and suggesting that even the most carefully transcribed, well-witnessed recollections can fade over time, just as ink marks and human powers of recall and vision will often weaken and blur with age. As Cohn noted, at times 'wisdom seems to dissolve in interrogation,'<sup>16</sup> so that even highly 'expressive language is not to be trusted.'<sup>17</sup> Furthermore, with 'every i dotted to death' (*Catastrophe*) it can be argued that such 'visual images and auditory images become one' by the play's end.<sup>18</sup> Krapp's taped challenges to time's passing (*Krapp's Last Tape*) are set to fail too, despite the evidence of his (and our) ears: he cannot fully divorce himself from his earlier 'selves,' so that he will succumb eventually to his half-remembered truths and pathetic, continued denials. His captured testimonies wear thin, as his weak, presumably final words on the value of his

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<sup>15</sup> Samuel Beckett 'Texts for Nothing V' in Mark Nixon (ed.) 'Texts for Nothing and Other Shorter Prose, 1950-1976' London: Faber and Faber (1967) p 24

<sup>16</sup> Cohn (1980) p 3

<sup>17</sup> Ronan McDonald 'The Cambridge Introduction to Samuel Beckett' Cambridge: Cambridge University Press (2006) p 36. See also Cohn (1980) on Beckett's 'hesitations, interrogations, fluctuations, contradictions, and ambiguities' and how he often 'mistrusts the evidence of his own eyes.' (p.6)

<sup>18</sup> Mariko Hori "'Hidden Voices" in Samuel Beckett's Late Work: Language of the Displaced and Displacement' 13 *The Harp* (1998) pp. 67-73, p 69

earlier years deceive no-one, his own, frail self perhaps least of all. His eyes contradict his words in the closing seconds of the play: 'I wouldn't want them back...Not with the fire in me now. No, I wouldn't want them back.'<sup>19</sup>

As Beckett further stressed in *Closed Place*, often, 'what goes on in the arena is not said.'<sup>20</sup> It is his characters' silences that tend to confirm that his stages are largely untrustworthy courtrooms, with many of their strategic 'pauses ...a crucial part of the dramatic language.'<sup>21</sup> These quiet, stilled moments seem to imply or confirm culpability, so that 'much of what Beckett has to say in his drama lies in what is omitted,'<sup>22</sup> or barely hinted at, whether by the playwright's stage directions, set, or protagonists. As Boxall has noted,

Beckett's writing is hard pressed to account for its violence, for its strangely bloody-minded determination, and for its sheer stamina in the face of repeated failure. This contradiction in Beckett's writing between determined commitment and resigned indifference is, of course, very familiar, and emerges in many guises throughout his oeuvre, most famously perhaps in the figure of Beckettian silence.<sup>23</sup>

When thus 'empt[ied] of any comforting message,'<sup>24</sup> it may be argued that these silences clearly recall the overly harsh, deterrent models of penal policy, skewed judicial processes and unjust court proceedings. Beckett perhaps saw much of his own self in the silently defiant *Catastrophe* defendant: 'Insidious question, to remind me I'm in the dock.'<sup>25</sup> As author and playwright, he serves perhaps as a sort of court scribe to wider society, noting its various ills

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<sup>19</sup> *Krapp's Last Tape* in Samuel Beckett: The Complete Dramatic Works' London: Faber & Faber (2006) p 223

<sup>20</sup> Samuel Beckett 'Closed Place' in Mark Nixon (ed.) 'Texts for Nothing and Other Shorter Prose, 1950-1976' London: Faber and Faber (1967) p 147

<sup>21</sup> McDonald (2006) p 52

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid* p 36

<sup>23</sup> Peter Boxall 'Samuel Beckett: Towards a Political Reading' (10) 2 *Irish Studies Review* (2002) pp 159-170, p 160

<sup>24</sup> Rudie Goldsmith 'The Artful Dodger' (443) *Fortnight* (Apr., 2006) pp 19-20, p 20

<sup>25</sup> Beckett, *Texts for Nothing V*, in Nixon (1967) p 21. On Beckett's own experiences of the court room, see further Knowlson J 'Damned to Fame: The Life of Samuel Beckett' London: Bloomsbury (1996) (Kindle, Loc 6229)

and injustices, particularly when gathering up and recording the testimonies of his tortured creations:

That's where the court sits this evening, in the depths of that vaulty night, that's where I'm clerk and scribe, not understanding what I hear, now knowing what I write.<sup>26</sup>

Some of his characters are, unsurprisingly, often unable to engage even in basic levels of 'penitential self-examination.'<sup>27</sup> Their immobility may be very telling: trialled characters may, much like the imprisoned, be allowed only the most sparing of movements, and remain quite mute or unintelligible. Words, like visitors to a prison, or evidence in legal proceedings, are only cautiously admitted here, underscoring a very deep 'mistrust of language'<sup>28</sup> that speaks volumes about human nature. Beckett himself may be seen to be 'doubting the possibility that words can sustain a concept of reality for any length of time.'<sup>29</sup> In *Catastrophe*, Protagonist is denied a voice altogether, even an inner one, and is perhaps unable to speak, having been conditioned to blindly obey harsh, unjust authority. He must neither 'clench his fists' nor have 'hands in pockets,' but must remain clasping them before him, upheld in 'prayer.' Assistant is ordered three times to ensure that he, very much like a shamed, docked criminal defendant, will continue to fully 'Down his head.'<sup>30</sup> Basic acts of standing and sitting, and the inability to do either of these, are doubly significant here: as in the courtroom, these mark out the accuser from the accused, indicating who holds or lacks

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<sup>26</sup> Beckett, *Texts for Nothing V*, in Nixon (1967) p 23

<sup>27</sup> Cohn (1980) p 5

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid* p 6

<sup>29</sup> Goldsmith, p 20. On 25<sup>th</sup> January 1931 Beckett wrote to Tom MacGreevy ('McGreevy,' in the letter) 'You know I can't write at all. The simplest sentence is a torture.' (*The Letters of SB 1929 – 1940*, 61.)

<sup>30</sup> Director, *Catastrophe*, in Samuel Beckett: The Complete Dramatic Works' London: Faber & Faber (2006) p 459



power, and, most significantly, who possesses those rights of audience which will allow one's voice to be acknowledged by the court. Even these

... writhings and contortions endured by Beckett's narrators and characters are orchestrated around a relentless confrontation between a poetic demand for a right to silence, and a political demand for speech.<sup>31</sup>

Black and white transcription clearly matters: Assistant constantly pauses to 'make a note' to remember to straighten or whiten the visible parts of Protagonist, or to 'help him have all black.'<sup>32</sup> Arguably, the 'message' is perhaps to 'judge not, lest you be judged,' serving here not just as admonition but as a call to the unseeing masses – and witnessing audience – to both question and challenge unjust authority.<sup>33</sup> We should mistrust those laws, words and norms which have traditionally served to keep powerful elites in positions of control: the final, wordless gesture of the defendant (a raised head) is an eerily profound challenge to the guiltily 'applauding' audience. It marks a small but notable victory for one charged with keeping himself forever downcast and obedient. We, the audience, are rendered complicit however, having quietly watched his misery, and 'applauded' by proxy.

His stoicism is typical of those ravaged Beckettian creations who are managing to 'go on' long after they seem incapable of enduring much more. Whether or not we can truthfully view ourselves as fellow victims is uncertain: as Gontarski observed, Beckett, post-*Godot*, was clearly working towards some sort of 'monologue with a consciousness of audience.'<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Peter Boxall 'Samuel Beckett: Towards a Political Reading' 10 (2) *Irish Studies Review* (2002) pp 159-170 p 160

<sup>32</sup> See further Emilie Morin 'Samuel Beckett, The Wordless Song and The Pitfalls of Memorialisation' 19 (2) *Irish Studies Review* (May 2011) pp 185–205, p 199) on '...the complexity of the structures of memorialisation, forgetting and oblivion' and the '...sophistication of Beckett's interrogation of the connections between European ideologies of nation and race.'

<sup>33</sup> See further Vickie Roach, 'Judge Not - Lest Ye Be Judged' 33 *Alternative Law Journal* (2008) pp 2 -4, p 3 on how there is 'no justice in a system that metes out vengeance in the place of fairness, and delivers even that only to those who haven't the means or the wiles to escape it.'

<sup>34</sup> Stanley E Gontarski 'Beckett and Performance' (17) *Journal of Irish Studies*, (2002) pp. 89-97 p 89

Dialogic discourse is difficult within the Beckettian courtroom-prison however, but it is impossible to remain emotionally aloof and unaffected at key moments, for example, when Pozzo cruelly chastises the hapless Lucky, ‘Will you look at me, pig!’<sup>35</sup> Blindness repeatedly affects many a Beckettian defendant-prisoner, whether natural or brought about via blindfolds or denials, and offers a particularly apt symbolism. Justice (as most depictions of the figure of ‘lady justice’ can attest to) often rests, perversely, upon the unseeing neutrality of those who should not just be casually witnessing but very actively observing all that unfolds before them.<sup>36</sup> Thus, a sudden sensing or revelation takes on profound significance: interrogations which force recall and realisation are particularly poignant. In *Rough for Radio II*, for example, the ‘defendant-prisoner’ Fox is initially blind-folded, hooded, gagged, and deafened by ear plugs: his evidence is obtained through cyclical tortures recorded daily, but this is neither trusted nor (as in many creative processes) deemed adequate. His gaolers similarly have very little hope of an escape towards freedom, agency, or clearer vision: ‘Don’t cry, miss, dry your pretty eyes and smile at me. Tomorrow, who knows, we may be free.’<sup>37</sup>

Blind or blinded characters such as Rooney (*All That Fall*), Hamm (*Endgame*), and Pozzo (*Waiting for Godot*), similarly cannot ‘see’ or sense the effects of their behaviour upon themselves or others. Their various ‘fibrous degeneration[s]’ (*Catastrophe*) do serve however to provide the audience with highly visible reminders of exactly how such cruelties may eventually rebound negatively upon perpetrators, often by triggering or accelerating their own imprisonment, decay or decomposition. And yet we, the ‘all-seeing’ audience, remain particularly sightless at times. The ‘coming out of the dark’ radio play *All That Fall*

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<sup>35</sup> Pozzo, *Waiting for Godot*, Act I, in Samuel Beckett: *The Complete Dramatic Works* London: Faber & Faber (2006) p 30

<sup>36</sup> See further Lorne Neudorf, ‘Judicial Independence: The Judge as a Third Party to the Dispute’ 28 *Revista Forumul Judecatorilor* (2012) pp 28-79 on traditions of (and the over-arching need for) judicial impartiality generally (in respect of Canadian law)

<sup>37</sup> Animator, *Rough for Radio II* in ‘*Samuel Beckett: The Complete Dramatic Works*’ London: Faber & Faber (2006) p 284

(arguably the most trial-like of Beckett's radio work, with its cross-examination, and slow accumulation of evidence) appropriately requires that its audience be blindfolded. Here, a quasi-confession and dramatic half-expositions at the play's close speak not only of Rooney's disingenuousness and likely culpability, but highlight our own negligence in failing to pick up on the various clues that have been scattered before us over the course of the play. Visual evidence is heard from the outset, with Maddy Rooney's words at one point ostensibly providing us with a description both of her perceived self and of the horrific scene of carnage which could mirror the aftermath of a small child's fall, flight, or inadvertent push from a fast-moving train:

...flat on the road like a big fat jelly out of a bowl .. never move again! A great big slop thick with grit and dust and flies, they would have to scoop me up with a shovel.<sup>38</sup>

Despite Beckett pointing so 'vividly to the visual' <sup>39</sup> throughout this dark play, there are still some more subtle forms of evidence that might still go unnoticed. Dan Rooney's role in the incident, for example, is, with hindsight, very strongly hinted at when he is quite literally 'black-balled' by the child-witness Jerry, who offers key testimony as to why exactly the train was delayed. <sup>40</sup> Again however, even the presence of this highly symbolic (and Beckett-recurrent) object cannot be relied upon to accurately indicate, negate, or even apportion blame or guilt: as Maddy states, 'It looks like a kind of ball. And yet it is not a ball.' <sup>41</sup> Her

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<sup>38</sup> Mrs Rooney, *All That Fall* in *Samuel Beckett: The Complete Dramatic Works* London: Faber & Faber (2006) p 174

<sup>39</sup> Cohn (1980) p 6

<sup>40</sup> Kenner (1973) argued that the question of the child's fate (and Rooney's implied guilt or negligence) was unimportant in relation to 'our experience of Dan' through 'his voice and words.' (p 162) The significance of his having somehow caused or been present for the 'miscarrying' of the child cannot be overlooked however.

<sup>41</sup> Goldsmith (2006) p 20, further suggests that the entire journey might well be a dream of Maddy's with her subconsciously 'blaming Dan for their childlessness or indeed her infertility.' This would tie in well with Beckett's repeated emphasis that the whole thing must be perceived as having somehow come 'out of the dark.'

own sad 'existence is attested to'<sup>42</sup> only by the presence of fairly unequivocal background music ('Death and the Maiden,') as she plods along, and her 'laborious footsteps beat out her ebbing life.'<sup>43</sup>

Such 'mediated link[s] between the voice of the character and the ear of the listener'<sup>44</sup> tie us firmly to presently unfolding events, but still stress the Rooneys' past sorrows: their childlessness, and their treatment of other children in the present, become significant factors. Their self-imposed exile, the inability to escape the storm and return to their home, and the punishing attack by a relentless child-mob, all offer evidence of Rooney having had some involvement in the train tragedy, if not also the 'miscarrying' of their own married life. There is perhaps an element of retributive justice in having a shaken Rooney face a child's testimony: by the end he remains both literally and figuratively indebted to young Jerry, yet also essentially condemned by him as having likely occasioned (or at the very least somehow contributed to, ignored, or denied) the child's demise.<sup>45</sup>

It may be argued further that even where the exact 'nature of the obsessive experience remains undisclosed'<sup>46</sup> post-trial, we will have still been witness to significant litanies of harshly imprisoning, cruel memories. Against such a backdrop, ambiguous Beckettian 'confessions' may have little to do with either regret or the need for atonement: accusers (whether they are unwelcome witnesses or self-conjured doppelgangers) may simply leave the respondents 'free' to go on ignoring their role in another's downfall. Tortured protagonists may, for a while at least, embrace denials, silently or overtly, regardless of

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<sup>42</sup> Kenner (1973) p 160

<sup>43</sup> Cohn (1980) p 27

<sup>44</sup> McDonald (2006) p 35

<sup>45</sup> See also Brynhildur Boyce 'Pismires and Protestants: The 'Lingering Dissolution' of Samuel Beckett's *All That Fall*' 17 (4) *Irish Studies Review* (2009) pp 499–511, p 503, on how in *All That Fall* 'the idea that the Irish language should be an authentic source of the country's power, rejuvenation and cultural identity is flushed away as so much rubbish.'

<sup>46</sup> Wardle (1979) p 341

damning self-recollections (*Krapp's Last Tape*), sustained, inner-voice accusations (*Eh Joe*), or confession-provoking spotlights (*Play*, *Happy Days*). Stopping just short of having them perjure themselves, Beckett still manages to stage the 'story as subterfuge,'<sup>47</sup> almost always revealing (to his characters and to his audience) that 'what is found to have happened in the end is something irreparable.'<sup>48</sup> As such, his unique model of justice frames the subconscious, innate realisation of self-culpability as profoundly horrific, so much so that it becomes both punishment and life-sustaining process. The concept of being 'trialled' therefore has as much to do with being morally tested, as it does with being mentally tortured.

This disordered fusion of trial and punishment perhaps represents most clearly what Kenner termed Beckett's 'ultimate version of the Protestant Hell.'<sup>49</sup> In *Play*, the unending punishment of the clay-pot adulterers encompasses perpetual torture rather than a straightforward exclusion from a happy afterlife. Clearly there is no chance of redemption or rehabilitation here: they will remain forever 'trapped in a condemnation to repeat, repeat, versions of what happened elsewhere, long ago, not to their credit.'<sup>50</sup> Their debilities preserve and imprison them in stagnant, semi-decaying states, recalling earlier instances of neglect or cruelty. Krapp's deafness encloses him and shrinks his existence to a few rooms and a handful of mnemonic devices. His dwindled vocabulary, together with his reluctant memories, (of, for example, the 'small, old, black, hard, solid rubber ball') speak collectively of his abject refusal to either perceive or admit the importance of his various losses, and, most significantly, his own role in bringing them about. Hamm's frailties (*Endgame*) tie directly to his own earlier sadism, but also echo his own parental abandonment in infancy which left him

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<sup>47</sup> Cohn (1980) p 6

<sup>48</sup> Graver and Federman (1979) p151

<sup>49</sup> Kenner (1973) p 153

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid*

‘immune to change’ and blind to his own ‘obliviousness.’<sup>51</sup> The play’s ambiguous ending (‘You...remain.’<sup>52</sup>) suggests that this is merely feigned ignorance on his part, however. Similarly, in *Eh Joe*, the accused repeatedly denies his wrong-doing, with no overt expressions of remorse. His demeanour towards the end does however trigger the ever-encroaching camera into increasingly ‘anatomiz[ing] guilt.’<sup>53</sup> Claustrophobic settings enclose audience and cast alike, so that a ‘stiletto voice’<sup>54</sup> can, much like the double-edged sword of justice, critique our limited ability to disclose truths or prevent harms simply by recording testimonies or sanctioning penances.

Beckett’s injustice will often see quite blameless victims ‘doing time’ alongside, and perhaps in abject, hapless attendance upon, morally corrupt others who might have previously harmed them. Clov in *Endgame*, Maddy in *All That Fall*, Lucky in *Waiting for Godot*, are but some examples. Captivity may occur too for no immediately apparent reason and may be grounded in a sort of senseless stoicism (Winnie in *Happy Days*, May in *Footfalls*) or an increasingly insistent, vocalised misery (the binned Nagg and Nell in *Endgame*, Mouth in *Not I*). In *Not I* however, key outpourings of ‘evidence’ arise from the victim’s need to somehow ‘hit on it in the end,’ through having ‘lived on and on....guilty or not.’ Here, old grievances are voiced via ‘crimson lips, spotlighted, trapped in a frenzied confession.’<sup>55</sup> As Worth argues, an unseen but clearly sensed, imprisoning dock or witness box marks a ‘deeply disturbing’ loss of order and ‘gravity’<sup>56</sup> which, bizarrely, has eventually ‘freed’ Mouth to testify. Her shrieks conflate accusation, ragged memory and witness statement (‘something she had to tell...how

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<sup>51</sup> Eric P Levy ‘Trapped in Thought: A Study of the Beckettian Mentality’ (2007) New York: Syracuse University Press (2007) p169. See also Eric P Levy ‘The Beckettian Mimesis of Time’ *University Of Toronto Quarterly* (Winter 2011) 80 (1) pp. 89-105.

<sup>52</sup> Hamm, *Endgame*, in ‘Samuel Beckett: The Complete Dramatic Works’ London: Faber & Faber (2006) p 134

<sup>53</sup> Cohn (1980) p 6

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid* p 21

<sup>55</sup> Mel Gussow ‘Conversations with and about Beckett’ (1996) New York: Grove Press p 145

<sup>56</sup> Katharine Worth (ed.) ‘Beckett The Shape Changer: A Symposium’ (1975) London: Routledge & Kegan Paul p. 206

it was...how she - ...what? had been?') offering, arguably, a belated quasi-confession of her own:

....that time in court....what had she to say for herself...guilty or not guilty...stand up woman...speak up woman...stood there staring into space...mouth half open as usual...waiting to be led away...glad of the hand on her arm...now this...something she had to tell...could that be it?...something that would tell...how it was... (*Not I*, 21)

It merits mention that (when not 'absented' from the production) <sup>57</sup> *Not I*'s Auditor is a raised, barely lit figure, who might well represent 'priest, psychiatrist [or] friendly mentor,'<sup>58</sup> or some merger of all three. Equally, he or she (with 'sex undeterminable') may be sympathetic gaoler or highly critical, self-conjured doppelganger, summoned up or sent to judge silently, perhaps somehow representing the audience itself. <sup>59</sup> Courtroom symbolism is overt here: a genderless, neutral judge or juror, with black djellaba gowning over any signs of 'sex, age, all marks of personal distinction.' <sup>60</sup> If the Auditor's role is simply to hear Mouth's testimony, to sift through it, or order it logically, then this task has clearly been failed. Likewise, if the figure is present as an advocate, then the shrugged responses, whether helplessly compassionate, or simply indifferent, seem completely inappropriate.

And yet for Beckett, it seems that very often such '...silence is not necessarily the other of speech.' <sup>61</sup> The play's script must be read to gain its full impact, given how Mouth's frenzy of verbalised testimony is often completely incoherent, and made even more cryptic by 'her weakening memory,' then left unclarified via her 'repeating words and phrases.'<sup>62</sup> Mouth's monologue seems unlikely to be a basic closing 'device which is not the start, but the end, of

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<sup>57</sup> Peter Gidal 'Understanding Beckett: A Study of Monologue and Gesture in the Works of Samuel Beckett' (1986) London: Macmillan Press p 92

<sup>58</sup> Worth (1975) p 206

<sup>59</sup> Hori (1998) p 69

<sup>60</sup> Worth (1975) p 206

<sup>61</sup> Maria Beville 'The Sounds of Silence: Samuel Beckett's Haunted Modernism' 11 *Nordic Irish Studies* - No. 2, (The Rest Is Silence: Paradigms of the Unspoken in Irish Studies) (2012), pp. 115-130 p 118

<sup>62</sup> Hori (1998) p 69

a process':<sup>63</sup> that there will be further, endless suffering for her, can be implied from the play's final moments.<sup>64</sup> For all her hysterical energy, there is an overwhelming sense of pain and imprisonment, with a terrifying backdrop of 'atrophy and loss...combined with stasis and inertia.'<sup>65</sup> Mouth has perhaps only achieved release from her silence through death, having been 'completely isolated ...in limbo, somewhere between this world and another world.'<sup>66</sup> This 'collapse of a lifetime's silence'<sup>67</sup> has not liberated her, as her voice 'continues behind curtain, unintelligible' after the play's end. Her imprisoning 'trial' is therefore not dissimilar to those presented in *Play*, where weirdly preserved characters are swearing increasingly frantic oaths to their own honesty: 'I swore by all I held most sacred...' They too must look to the evidence of long-absent others for validation: 'Her parting words, as he could testify, if he is still living, and has not forgotten...'<sup>68</sup> Given Beckett's fondness for 'meanings withheld and explanations denied'<sup>69</sup> it may be argued that such prisoner-defendants still seem to look to their audience-jurors for some sort of validation or verdict that might make sense of, or at least put an end to, their trials.

## 2. Memory as prison: an unjust limbo?

With Beckett, we witness wrong-doers avoiding 'justice,' and escaping self-blame and public censure, as virtuous others remain encased in dark victimhood, bereaved or lost in self-imposed exiles (the bereft and solitary Listener/Reader in *Ohio Impromptu*, the deranged

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<sup>63</sup> Gidal (1986) p 100

<sup>64</sup> As Billie Whitelaw observed in respect of her role as the long-suffering Mouth, the play's script for her resembled at times 'a terrible inner scream, like falling backward into hell.' (as cited by Gussow, (1996) p 85)

<sup>65</sup> McDonald (2006) p 45

<sup>66</sup> Hori (1998) p 67

<sup>67</sup> Brian H Finney 'Assumption to Lessness: Beckett's shorter fiction' in Worth (ed.) 'Beckett The Shape Changer: A Symposium' (1975) London: Routledge & Kegan Paul p 64

<sup>68</sup> W2, *Play*, in 'Samuel Beckett: The Complete Dramatic Works' London: Faber & Faber (2006) p 309

<sup>69</sup> McDonald (2006) p 31



May in *Footfalls*). The apparently innocent may however nurture various guilts, regrets and mysterious sorrows. May's fate in *Footfalls* is particularly poignant: 'she never goes out, just remembers.'<sup>70</sup> Much like the half-buried Winnie (*Happy Days*), she is bound by and to her own sadly 'reflexive routine, a holding pattern' which forces her to 'repeat herself in a sharply limited world,'<sup>71</sup> and which seems to be largely of her own making. What exactly it is that characters such as May and Winnie remember is beyond us. It may well be that they are held where they are, not to effect retribution or evince their guilt but by some sort of binding contract, entered into knowingly or innocently (*Rough for Radio II, Catastrophe, Endgame*). Even the frail Rooneys seem to have opted to trudge deliberately through an exiled discomfort (and face the children's wrath) long before Jerry's questioning begins. It is as if they have chosen to walk a pathway of penance, subconsciously or deliberately, confirming that in Beckett's universe the notions of '...freedom and constraint are not mutually exclusive. These concepts define each other and are inseparable companions.'<sup>72</sup>

The suggestion that one can somehow be set 'free' mentally via physical suffering or endless captivity (and by being tortured or interrogated whilst incarcerated or on trial for example) is also an entirely apposite Beckettian proposition. It presumes that characters and audience-jurors are open to experiencing the 'silence of quite a different justice, in the toils of that obscure assize where to be is to be guilty' (Beckett, *Texts for Nothing V*).<sup>73</sup> Where the fact of a continued hellish or purgatorial existence does imply some form of guilt, the manner of interrogation and modality of punishment perhaps become irrelevant: this may be why some of Beckett's harshest 'sentences' often precede or run concurrently within his trials. In this he

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<sup>70</sup> Cushman (1979) p 344

<sup>71</sup> Gussow (1996) p 146

<sup>72</sup> Andrew Gibson 'Samuel Beckett – Critical Lives' (2009) London: Reaktion Books p 19

<sup>73</sup> Beckett, *op cit* n 15

is clearly challenging the concepts of justice and fairness as illusory. As audience-jurors, we are similarly

...left with accepting the ongoing injustice of misfortune, while trying to alter what is arguably unjust. And we are left to live and act and wait...<sup>74</sup>

In meting out such open-ended, unearthly punishments, Beckett also challenges the traditional moral principle that an 'offender's eternal soul is beyond the jurisdiction of modern courts.'<sup>75</sup> His terrifying panopticon prison cells represent that rare place where endless forms of 'pity and cruelty coincide.'<sup>76</sup> Unearthed memories punish those inmates who remain capable of fully remembering them, but also ensure that these wrong-doers are preserved and observed, perhaps indefinitely, in stark cells that they themselves have helped to construct and maintain. There is no 'tenderness in this decaying universe: the characters whine for food or attention, but do little to deserve either.'<sup>77</sup> As McDonald argues,

...punishment and damnation are dished out for seemingly inscrutable reasons....it is not enough simply to declare that Beckett's characters are 'innocent' sufferers. The problem is rather that their crime, the source of their guilt, is elusive.<sup>78</sup>

Again, there is scant hope of any form of rehabilitation. If Beckett's universe is truly 'godless'<sup>79</sup> then (unlike Dante's versions of Hell and Purgatory) his prisoners have little or no chance of either salvation or release. Equally, and somewhat perversely, the mission of

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<sup>74</sup> Jon Erikson 'Is Nothing to be Done?' 50 (2) *Modern Drama* (Summer 2007) pp 258 – 275 p 272

<sup>75</sup> David Gurnham 'Memory, Imagination, Justice: Intersections of Law and Literature' (2009) England: Ashgate p 67

<sup>76</sup> Levy (2007) p 175

<sup>77</sup> Fletcher (2000) p 108

<sup>78</sup> McDonald (2006) p 40

<sup>79</sup> David Pattie 'The Complete Critical Guide to Samuel Beckett' (2000) London: Routledge p 111: arguably, Beckett's prison-court universe rests upon the idea of an absent deity, rather than a non-existent one, which would perhaps tie in with the notion of hell comprising of a separation from one's Creator.

Beckett's 'tyrannical creators'<sup>80</sup> seems here to be to 'exert control over the body or text' of his hapless inmates. As Smith further observes, often their 'suffering and cruelty is the occasion, not for pity or tragic pathos, but for laughter.'<sup>81</sup> As their gaolers, we, the audience will only very rarely glimpse '...penitence, yes, at a pinch, atonement.' (*Play*). Injustice is evident with innocent characters engaging in self-imprisonment, whilst culpable others retain sufficient freedom to continue on in their denials and bad behaviours. A 'slow, entropic slide into starvation and invisibility'<sup>82</sup> sees them still clinging on to such mundane everyday rituals that might, in another universe, bring some small measure of prisoner comfort or serve to 'insulate against the destabilising intrusion of change.'<sup>83</sup>

As Beckett himself noted, 'There is no escape from the hours and the days...'<sup>84</sup> Such coping mechanisms bring little respite: only a very cold comfort attaches to living out an endless 'daily routine, the various distractions of conversation and play acting.'<sup>85</sup> This profound 'purgatorial ambience'<sup>86</sup> means that inevitably

...beyond them is the void, which they hold at bay with words; but the void is inside them too, for the memories that obsess them are usually of the utmost banality.<sup>87</sup>

A Beckettian 'void' of injustice follows his inmates into their very cells and minds for further torment, annexing their thoughts and demonstrating the pointlessness of trying to escape from one's own thoughts and memories.<sup>88</sup> As their witnessing gaolers, our own captivity is

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<sup>80</sup> Anna McMullan 'Theatre on Trial: Samuel Beckett's Later Drama' (1993) London: Routledge p 5

<sup>81</sup> Smith (2008) p 1

<sup>82</sup> Keller (2002) p 160

<sup>83</sup> Kenner (1973) p 122

<sup>84</sup> Beckett (1931) p11

<sup>85</sup> McDonald (2006) p 38

<sup>86</sup> Cohn (1980) p 9

<sup>87</sup> Wardle (1979) p 340

<sup>88</sup> White (2009) p 66

similarly assured: we can only watch and wonder helplessly as the ‘narrative envelope that holds the voice in, makes breakaway impossible.’<sup>89</sup> With the innocent trapped and tortured alongside the guilty, this model of harsh, inscrutable justice accuses us of tolerating (and perhaps enjoying) such displays of and inequity. We are adding to the misery of those who have been sentenced to their own endless ‘trauma-telling’<sup>90</sup> not least because our continuing presence ensures that their sufferings are perceived, so that they therefore can, or must, ‘go on’ in perpetuity. As Wardle observes, such open-ended incarceration sees them ‘suspended in a timeless limbo, dead stars endlessly revolving their past existence in time.’<sup>91</sup> Even where it seems that some characters might already have died, their escape is forbidden: in *Act Without Words*, for example, they find themselves literally ‘thrice flung back from theatre wings’<sup>92</sup> awaiting a freeing demise that will never happen. *Endgame*’s Nell has likely died, but this is never confirmed; death is similarly presumed but never fully evidenced in *Rockaby*. In *Footfalls*, May is a fading but still present apparition, furrowing her cruciform pathway across a solitary landscape of burdens and regrets.

The ‘womb-shaped cell[s]’<sup>93</sup> of many of these characters underscore further just how vividly the tragic ‘memories of lived in places’<sup>94</sup> point to losses and isolation. Watching them ‘contemplate their own extinction in a world shorn of distractions’<sup>95</sup> we gradually become witnesses to whatever it was that compelled them to live on in captivity as ‘anguished souls, enduring the redundancy of their days’.<sup>96</sup> Arguably, they have perhaps realised at last that, having delivered their testimony, there is now little need for them to continue living out the

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<sup>89</sup> Worth (1975) p 10

<sup>90</sup> Keller (2002) p 150

<sup>91</sup> Wardle (1979) p 340

<sup>92</sup> Cohn (1980) p 4

<sup>93</sup> Kenner (1973) p 165

<sup>94</sup> Cohn (1980) p 31

<sup>95</sup> Pattie (2000) p 125

<sup>96</sup> Gussow (1996) p 146

pains of an endless existence.<sup>97</sup> Their imprisonment is clearly as much psychological as physical, whether passively or actively embraced. Joe (*Eh Joe*), for example, in seeking to avoid the more ‘extreme and sometimes murderous forms of violence’<sup>98</sup> literally locks himself away from reality, retreating into his unquiet mind, where he finds that memory acts as the harshest of gaolers. Hamm (*Endgame*) similarly observes that ‘Outside of here it’s death,’<sup>99</sup> despite the bleakness of their indoor situation. Beyond such self-crafted cells, the world outside is framed as equally (if not more so) devoid of colour and company, with stalled time itself serving as the ultimate ‘source of decay and depletion.’<sup>100</sup> The implication that these characters have somehow chosen to embrace their incarceration rather than seek out some form of ‘freedom,’ reinforces ‘powerful images of stasis, entrapment and cyclical suffering and atonement.’<sup>101</sup>

Thus, in *That Time*, we witness a decrepit, white-haired man ‘entombed in the abyss of his life’<sup>102</sup> whilst in *Footfalls*, the fragile, weakening May has ‘not been outdoors since childhood.’ Her haunted pacing suggests derangement, or some self-enforced purgatory, arising possibly from her neglect of, or failure to leave, her mother, in life or in ‘death.’ Again, ‘some intolerable memory’<sup>103</sup> seems key: as the atrophied Nagg and Nell (*Endgame*) remain ‘in their bins, pleading for their pap’<sup>104</sup> they recall and testify to the cruel infancy of Hamm, left alone to cry, and denied voice by being placed ‘out of earshot’ so that they might sleep undisturbed. They now are increasingly abandoned, their gritty ‘bedding’ (previously sawdust) going unchanged, and with only some begrudged, hardening biscuits for food. Their

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<sup>97</sup> White (2009) p 68

<sup>98</sup> Gibson ((2009) p 18

<sup>99</sup> Hamm, *Endgame*, p 96

<sup>100</sup> McDonald (2006) p 45

<sup>101</sup> Pattie (2000) p 111

<sup>102</sup> Gussow (1996) p 146

<sup>103</sup> Wardle (1979) p 342

<sup>104</sup> Gussow (1996) p 153

lifetimes are running out ('bottle them' Hamm orders Clov) much like the egg-timer sand in which they are now housed.

Their ability to recall 'without regret their treatment of their son Hamm' <sup>105</sup> sets them apart from many of Beckett's other prisoners however: if they are indeed truly deceased by the play's end, it may well be that their indifference and inability to feel or remember has somehow enabled their 'release.' Arguably, this may mean that they are utterly beyond redemption, with little or nothing to be gained from having them continue on in their suffering. Beckett has perhaps either permitted their departure or ordered their summary execution (or possibly done both, given that his universe is a law unto itself) indicating that there is now nothing to be done for these incorrigibles, who are utterly devoid of awareness, remorse, or any measure of regret for their past actions. They contrast sharply with *Not I's* Mouth, and the potted characters of *Play*, who, facing an eternity of frenzied confession, experience the act of memory as both an imprisoning yet sustaining force. For these disembodied but still very powerful souls, it seems that 'the self is encapsulated in and created by language.'<sup>106</sup> Much like a long-term prisoner shorn of an original identity and parted from their family, Beckett's players must summon absent others to provide visitations, and give them some form of hope or 'hearing. This is particularly so where, repeatedly, an 'awaited one never comes.'<sup>107</sup>

Who are all these people, gentlemen of the long robe, according to the image, but according to it alone, there are others, there will be others, other images, other gentlemen. (*Texts for Nothing* V, 27)

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<sup>105</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>106</sup> Beville (2012) p 118

<sup>107</sup> Cohn (1980) p 32

Even where they only half-manage to materialise vaguely, these visitors act as essential ‘others’ (a wife in .....*but the clouds*....., spectral messenger-child in *Ghost Trio*, tragic doppelganger in *Ohio Impromptu*<sup>108</sup>). As long-awaited visitors, self-conjured, perhaps unwelcome, they act as observant wardens, necessary for the continued existence and torturing of the inmate. As reminders of loss, they bring little or no comfort: their presence enables and forces the imprisoned to be ‘validated by the language that defines them, the inescapable text.’<sup>109</sup> Thus, in the ‘sadistically lit’ *Happy Days*, a fading Winnie looks to her near-mute spouse Willie, to help her ‘conjure house and home’<sup>110</sup> through their shared, voiced (or rather, heard) memories. As a small nod to ‘traditional bourgeois domestic drama’ this also offers a ‘norm against which the tragic action makes sense...a terminal sense of negation and obliteration takes us to a realm beyond or beneath tragedy.’<sup>111</sup>

Beckett further blurs the boundaries of guilt and innocence here, leaving us to wonder if Winnie may well have shot, or been planning to shoot, her husband, and whether it was perhaps she who emasculated him, curtailing his voice and his freedom. Such lingering ambiguities task the audience with seeking out alternative interpretations.<sup>112</sup> We are essentially summoned to attend repeated re-hearings, and to ponder over what we have been witnessing. As gaolers, we are perceiving ongoing suffering, tasked perhaps with evaluating our own neglectful or cruel behaviours beyond the theatre. Beckett confronts us with our own capacity for wrong-doing, casting significant doubt upon ‘the possibility of solace being obtained through human relationships.’<sup>113</sup> It is this indictment of human nature that evidences

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<sup>108</sup> James Acheson J ‘Troubled Voices from Within: Four Beckett Radio Plays’ *Journal of European Studies* (2014) 44(4) pp 319–335, p 329 further arguing that ‘it is impossible to form an accurate picture of the past because although we have access to it by way of our ‘memory of the head,’ our ‘memory of the heart’ colours it with emotion.’

<sup>109</sup> Beville (2012) p 118

<sup>110</sup> Cohn (1980) p 26

<sup>111</sup> McDonald (2006) p 51

<sup>112</sup> Daniel Lewis ‘*No More Nature: Nihilism in the Works of Francis Bacon & Samuel Beckett*’ (2014) (Kindle ed.) Amazon Media EU

<sup>113</sup> Goldsmith (2006) p 20

most clearly the quiet yet ‘extraordinary violence of Beckett’s world.’<sup>114</sup> Within his prisons and docks much more harm can flow from simple sins of omission than from any actual, deliberate crime: familial and emotional abandonments and betrayals are the most harmful, recurrent ‘offences,’ with characters ‘guilty’ of acts of both negligence and deliberate neglect, and of rejecting those closest to them.

That said, such cruelties may well spring from an overarching need to create or preserve for themselves some small sense of identity or selfhood, just as they come to the end of their physical or mental tether. This may be especially true for those who must endure an ‘endless childhood...[or] premature senility’<sup>115</sup> as so many of Beckett’s prisoners seem to be doing. Their sentences play out within constrictive bins, funereal urns, and self-forged nightmarish, skull-like cells: if they are able at all to look outwards, it is likely that they will gaze upon sparse, post-apocalyptic landscapes or risk meeting an accuser. It is their psychological incarceration which is therefore most distressing to behold for those of us who are fortunate enough to be able to eventually depart the theatre. Their inability to fully gain death’s release may be further evidenced by an angry or defeated stasis, or by their endless pacing and rocking: the ‘message’ here may perhaps be that the worst trials and punishments are likely to be those which we have somehow managed to impose upon ourselves either through acceptance or denial of guilt.

In sum, injustices arise here from very human failings. Particular cruelties (such as emotional desertion, familial rejection) can rebound harshly back upon the carelessly ‘guilty,’ to engender a solitary future encased in lonely remorse and embittered denials. The suggestion of ‘hereditary lovelessness’<sup>116</sup> is further reinforced by the recurrent image of the doomed,

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<sup>114</sup> Smith (2008) p 3

<sup>115</sup> Cushman (1979) p 345

<sup>116</sup> Kenner (1973) p 175



never-born, or abandoned child that tends to haunt many of his protagonists.<sup>117</sup> The loss or denial of familial contact recalls harshly retributive penal sanctions<sup>118</sup> as does the frequent ‘unilateralism’ of the relationship between the forgotten or disowned prisoner and the visiting or long absent loved one.<sup>119</sup> Thus, where all ‘time ... is a punishment,’<sup>120</sup> an already fragile sense of self-identity may be easily lost<sup>121</sup> with entrenched patterns of behaviour producing and then embedding a perpetual ‘condemnation script.’<sup>122</sup> And yet, if ‘freedom is inescapable, an intrinsic part of ...loneliness and alienation,’<sup>123</sup> then we, as Beckett’s co-conspirators, might gain some small measure of comfort from watching his frail characters somehow manage to keep themselves existing ‘...yet again skull alone in a dark place.’<sup>124</sup>

It is, after all, Beckett’s ‘assault on the audience that sustains.’<sup>125</sup> Arguably, the ‘high incidence of question-asking’<sup>126</sup> post-trial, as punishment, is particularly significant, spotlighting, captivating and sustaining all present, not least the audience (or reader). As in court proceedings, such extended speeches are likely to eventually provoke or presage some ‘revelation which appals’<sup>127</sup> but might ultimately bring key truths to light, achieving some

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<sup>117</sup> Knowlson (1996) highlighted Beckett’s difficult relationship with his mother: ‘May won these conflicts only by threats or punishment. But punishment often had little or no effect on Samuel...’ (Loc 647) ‘Equally, it was not that Beckett disliked his mother or did not care what she thought of him. Rather he loved her almost as strongly and cared for her too much. So conflicts of will became heart-rending struggles with that loving side of himself as well as with his mother, as he saw her determinedly and diametrically opposed to him in her judgments or her expectations. And to feel the weight of her moral condemnation and disappointment, as well as to be distanced from her affection, was an additional burden for him to bear.’ (Loc 653)

<sup>118</sup> Barbara Hudson ‘*Penal Policy and Social Justice*’ (1993) London: Macmillan p 147

<sup>119</sup> Stanley Cohen and Lauren Taylor ‘*Psychological Survival: The Experience of Long Term Imprisonment*’ (1972) Harmondsworth: Penguin p 67

<sup>120</sup> Kenner (1973) p 123

<sup>121</sup> John Lofland ‘*Deviance and Identity*’ (1969) New Jersey: Prentice Hall

<sup>122</sup> Shadd Maruna ‘*Making Good: How Ex-Convicts Reform and Rebuild Their Lives*’ (2005) Washington: American Psychological Association; See further Agnes Heller ‘On Retributive Justice’ (12) 2 *Dialectical Anthropology* (1987) pp. 205-215. On solitary confinement, see also Justin Piché and Karine Major ‘Prisoner Writing in/on Solitary Confinement: Contributions from the Journal of Prisoners on Prisons, 1988-2013’ 4 (1) *Can. J. Hum. Rts.* (2015) pp 1-31

<sup>123</sup> McDonald (2006) p 24

<sup>124</sup> Beckett, *op cit* n 15

<sup>125</sup> Matthew Davies ‘“Someone is looking at me still”: The Audience-Creature Relationship in the Theater Plays of Samuel Beckett’ 51 (1) *Texas Studies in Literature and Language* (Spring 2009) pp 76-93, p 76

<sup>126</sup> John Fletcher ‘*Samuel Beckett*’ (2000) London: Faber and Faber p 106

<sup>127</sup> Harold Hobson (‘*Sunday Times*’ 1957) in Graver and Federman (1979) p 163

small measure of poetic justice for the wronged. Release from the Beckettian prison, if even possible, will likely not depend therefore upon the arrival or orders of some vaguely-sensed *Godot*-like judge or governor, but will perhaps require instead a self-heard, well-lit moment of raw realization before any degree of atonement can be implied. Observed penances do not necessarily indicate, promote, or presage genuine penitence, just as remorse might not flow from punishment or incarceration, and recidivism might not follow release. Fittingly, the audience cannot accurately predict what is going on outside of these ‘cells’ or courtrooms, nor can we guess at exactly what the future might hold for most of the characters bar their further decline or some stalled degeneration. Beckett’s key message (insofar as it might be possible to ever fully glean one from his work) may well be that much social injustice can flow from indefinite incarceration and overly punitive sanctions. Unrelenting cross-examinations, and spot-lit solitary confinements mark out a pointless ‘doom of perpetual re-enactment.’<sup>128</sup> Long-term imprisonment, loss of privilege and agency, a diminished sense of self or human dignity, and a lack of kin or social contact can similarly serve to provoke recidivism rather than promote rehabilitation.<sup>129</sup>

To paraphrase Beckett, time itself may be a ‘double-headed monster of damnation and salvation.’<sup>130</sup> His cruelly ‘relentless emphasis on memory’<sup>131</sup> takes his courtroom-prisons to a stage beyond everyday existence however: he achieves the ‘reduction of life to automatism [via] the timepiece, whether watch, clock, or time-bell,’<sup>132</sup> eventually forcing time itself to be ‘relegated to the status of illusion.’<sup>133</sup> Time’s passage ceases to have meaning, much as the forever imprisoned lose (or perhaps already lacked) the ability even to mark time: as a

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<sup>128</sup> Kenner (1973) p 122

<sup>129</sup> Kenner, *ibid*, noted also the various mentions within *Endgame* of curtailed or lost privileges and freedoms including the bicycle and the wheel chair which cannot rock (symbolisms echoed to some extent in Beckett’s novels *Murphy* (1938) and *Molloy* (1951)) and the ‘enjoyment’ of rationed food (‘*Where’s me pap?*’).

<sup>130</sup> Samuel Beckett ‘*Proust (1931)*’ New York: Grove Press (1978) p 13

<sup>131</sup> Levy (2007) p 180

<sup>132</sup> *ibid* p 171

<sup>133</sup> *ibid* p 89

moonlit Vladimir observes in Act 1 of *Waiting for Godot*, 'Time has stopped.'<sup>134</sup> It is this very stasis however which perhaps forces, enables, and permits his captives to 'go on,' creating also the peculiarly Beckettian limbo that, in spite of itself, tends to offer up useful 'palliatives for the syndrome of living,' both within and beyond our own various trials and prisons of everyday life.<sup>135</sup>

### 3. Conclusion

*'...the question of justice is also connected to the question of meaning.'*<sup>136</sup>

Beckettian trials and punishments often call to mind retributive social justice models, largely side-lining the notion that an offender's social rehabilitation must be a key aim, and at times relying heavily upon a brutal magnification of the classic 'pains of imprisonment.'<sup>137</sup> Familial separation, profound human losses, and a much-diminished (perhaps irreparably destroyed) sense of self or innate identity,<sup>138</sup> are all factors in their incarceration. Under Beckett's hand, such 'fragmentation and repetition'<sup>139</sup> (whether during futile questioning, or indefinite punishment) serve as cruel signposts for those have no choice but to endlessly 'do' their time. Whether his court-prisons engender 'an enhanced sense of justice through retributivist sentencing'<sup>140</sup> is much less clear cut, however. The establishment of blame and infliction of pain,<sup>141</sup> remain blurred, both in terms of origin (there are both self-inflicted and

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<sup>134</sup> Vladimir, Act 1, *Waiting for Godot* in 'Samuel Beckett: The Complete Dramatic Works' London: Faber & Faber (2006) p36

<sup>135</sup> Ruby Cohn '*Just Play: Beckett's Theater*' New Jersey: Princeton University Press (1980) p 4

<sup>136</sup> Erikson (2007) p 259

<sup>137</sup> Gresham M Sykes *The Society of Captives: A Study of a Maximum Security Prison* New Jersey: Princeton University Press (1958)

<sup>138</sup> See further Roger Matthews '*Doing Time: An Introduction to the Sociology of Imprisonment*' (1999) London: MacMillan (1999) p 54, on the concept of prisoner 'self-management' and on (as Beckett so accurately captures) those 'minor' aspects of one's daily existence (food, privacy, daily routine, good health, visitors, the keeping of small, mnemonic objects) that tend to become increasingly significant during long periods of incarceration.

<sup>139</sup> McMullan (1993) p 5

<sup>140</sup> Susan Easton and Christine Piper '*Sentencing And Punishment: The Quest For Justice*' (2012) London: Oxford University Press, p.164

<sup>141</sup> Howard Zehr '*Retributive Justice, Restorative Justice*' in (4) *New Perspectives on Crime and Justice* (1985) Akron, PA: Mennonite Central Committee Office of Criminal Justice.

self-perpetuated agonies on display) and underpinning purpose. These trials may lead to disclosed truths, to the demise of the guilty, to the freeing of some previously unheard victim-voice, or they may simply take us back to some disturbing yet familiar treadmilling limbo, where laws, language and the very nature of human existence will cease to have much meaning.

As McMullan has further observed, Beckett's stage (despite being 'primarily a scene of judgement'<sup>142</sup>) often questions whether words alone can truly provoke or promote the uncovering of truths. His plays frequently 'work against the assumption of any definitive position of authority from which to determine truth, meaning or knowledge, for either characters or audience.'<sup>143</sup> Beckett's own experience of courtroom proceedings (as a witness in the Sinclair-Gogarty libel action, and in the prosecution case over his own stabbing) could further attest to various and marked failings within adversarial judicial systems. As Knowlson commented, 'Beckett, who was on the winning side, came out nothing if not a loser,'<sup>144</sup> having faced humiliating cross-examinations of both his character and his work. The concepts of law and justice, reliant as they are upon linguistic interpretations and the honesty or accuracy of subjective viewpoints and memories, are, it seems, not always to be trusted.<sup>145</sup> The 'endemic uncertainty'<sup>146</sup> over the validity and purpose of carceral punishment (i.e. as a means of truth-finding, atonement or victim restitution) compounds this, and mirrors the

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<sup>142</sup> Anna McMullan 'Theatre on Trial: Samuel Beckett's Later Drama' (1993) London: Routledge p 5

<sup>143</sup> *Ibid* p 5

<sup>144</sup> As Knowlson (1997) further notes, '... although he rarely discussed the case in his correspondence or with friends, his remarks about Ireland became more and more vituperative after his return to Paris, as he lambasted its censorship, its bigotry and its narrow-minded attitudes to both sex and religion from which he felt he had suffered. The trial and the publicity that it attracted made the situation with his mother, who would have been horrified at what was being written about her son in the press, worse rather than better and he did not stay with his family while he was in Dublin... It was a horrendous episode which he wanted to put far behind him.' (Kindle, Loc 6229)

<sup>145</sup> See further Marjorie Perloff, 'Beckett the Poet' in Gontarski (2010, p 216) on Beckett's apparent 'disgust' with the English language, as evidenced by his 1937 German Letter: 'and more and more my own language appears to me like a veil that must be torn apart in order to get at the things (or the Nothingness) behind it.'

<sup>146</sup> Anthea Hucklesby and Azrini Wahidin 'Criminal Justice' (2013) London: Oxford University Press p 19

wider, more general ‘search for new frames of reference for human actions and life plans’<sup>147</sup> that Beckett’s audiences will likely find themselves engaged in. In this sense, his unique panopticons and courtrooms offer up a robust critique of the notion that meaningful justice will always flow from legal processes and the convoluted words, rituals and gestures that tends to underpin them. Throughout his work, Beckett the advocate sprinkles much reasonable doubt: even his worst ‘offenders’ may at times seem slightly more sinned against than sinning, given the harshness of their current treatment, the apparent bleakness of their future, and the unknowable nature of their past. As Pattie noted, this repeatedly leads us to find more than one ‘ultimate meaning.’<sup>148</sup>

The supposedly ‘healing properties of fiction-making’<sup>149</sup> are not altogether absent from these plays however. We see Mouth in *Not I* given a voice at last, whilst Voice in *Eh Joe* not only has a transfixed audience, but also a captive defendant whom she can corner and accuse ad infinitum. Most poignantly perhaps, the abandoned and wronged ‘girl in a shabby green coat, on a railway station platform’<sup>150</sup> has somehow managed, through her powerful silence and small flash of colour, to not only puncture Krapp’s repeated, black and white testimonies of denial, but to ensure that it is *her* powerfully remembered image that dominates the play’s final, non-verbal moments. By fixing such images in the minds of his audiences, Beckett comes close to achieving a very poetic sort of justice, grounded not in the tortures of half-dead, mentally broken prisoners but in the release of some long-held truth, which in turn

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<sup>147</sup> *Ibid.* See further Andrew von Hirsch ‘The “Desert” model for sentencing: Its influence, prospects, and alternatives’ 74 (2) *Social Research* (2007) pp 413-434, on how ‘the idea of proportionate, deserved sentences has had a curious history of long being ignored, and then becoming very influential.’ (p 414)

<sup>148</sup> Pattie (2000) p 107

<sup>149</sup> Keller (2002) p 150

<sup>150</sup> *Krapp’s Last Tape* (*op cit* n 19) p 218

bears witness to universal human failings, frailties, and ultimately perhaps, our capacity for resilience or forgiveness.<sup>151</sup>

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*Play*

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*Eh Joe*

*Not I*

*That Time*

*Footfalls*

*Ghost Trio*

*...but the clouds...*

*Rockaby*

*Ohio Impromptu*

*Quad*

*Catastrophe*