Old Age and Samuel Beckett's Late Works

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Old age featured in Samuel Beckett's plays and novels throughout his literary career. This paper explores the question of how—or indeed if—Beckett's own experience of aging and old age affected the representation of age in his late works. Focusing upon his last two trilogies, the plays *Not I*, *Footfalls*, and *Rockaby* and the novellas *Company*, *Ill Seen Ill Said*, and *Worstward Ho*, I argue that Beckett's late-life literary preoccupations were little affected by the corporeality of his own aging. Even in the last year of his life, he still sought to put down through dramatic images and words the ontological issues that had always concerned him. Hopes that his own old age might lead him closer to the edge—closer to what has been termed "the event horizon of the fourth age," where subjectivity implodes—were not fulfilled, although arguably he did feel, at times, that he was getting closer to it, stylistically perhaps, if not in substance. To what extent Beckett's later works serve as examples of a "late style" and to what extent they represent the continuing elaboration of a cultural imaginary of "old age" that he first deployed in his original trilogy, *Molloy*, *Malone Dies*, and *The Unnameable*, are difficult to ascertain. What is clear is that Beckett's literary old age remained a symbolic imaginary, realized differently than in his earlier work but scarcely more connected with his own later life.

The confusion is not my invention, it is all around us and our only chance is to let it in.
Letter from Sam Beckett to Alan Schneider

INTRODUCTION

Old or aging characters appear throughout Samuel Beckett's plays and novels, and many commentators have assumed that old age must have been a constant preoccupation for him.[1] Beckett, however, had a long

[1] On the prevalence of old age and agedness in Beckett's work, see Adelman; Palileo; White; and Woodward.

life as a writer, spanning some six decades. His writing has been divided into three or four distinct chronological periods, reflecting the progress of his career and the content and style of his writing.[2] The aim of this paper is to consider whether Beckett's representations of old age were constant throughout each of those periods, whether they were affected by his own experience of aging, or whether such stylistic changes in his representations of old age as were evident were themselves reflections of a more general Beckettian "late style."[3]

After resigning his position as instructor at Trinity College, aged 25 years old, Beckett relocated to France and "began to believe that to make his living as a writer was not impossible after all" (Bair 150). This represented what might be termed his early period as a writer. In May 1932 he started his first, unpublished novel, *Dream of Fair to Middling Women*. After numerous rejections, he abandoned this work, though not his belief in becoming a writer. As he would do with other abandoned works, he later reused this material, added more, and put together an alternative "episodic novel," a collection of interlinked stories that he called *More Pricks than Kicks*.

Accepted in 1934 by the London publishing firm Chatto and Windus, this was his first published "novel." Beckett was now in London trying to make a living as a writer while at the same time undertaking a course

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[2] On the stages of Beckett's writing, see Bair; Cronin; Fletcher; and Knowlson.

[3] Originally used in relation to the visual arts and described sometimes as "old age style" [*Altersstile*] by German art critics (see Held) and sometimes as "late style" [*Spätsil*], the concept of a distinct "late style" associated with the later works of artists, composers, and writers has been explored by a number of writers in the arts (see Said for a recent example). A critique of the "ageism" implied by such a term has been made by writers familiar with the literature on age and aging (Hutcheon and Hutcheon). Across the arts, however, the term resolutely persists and is regularly applied to artists, composers, and playwrights who share in common a continuing "productivity" into and beyond their middle age. It was first applied to Beckett's plays by Enoch Brater, who saw, as I do here, Beckett's late period beginning with *Not I*. As a number of writers have pointed out, there is in all such writing a vagueness of terminology such that "[i]t is not clear to what extent chronological age provides the systematic commonalities as opposed to variables other than, or relatively independent of age, such as career-stage, accumulated practice, environmental events, intensity of involvement with the creative occupation, personal temperament, and so on" (Cohen-Shalev 36). It is used here more in the sense of "career stage" than in terms of chronology, but career stage itself is hardly "independent of age."

of psychoanalysis at the Tavistock Institute, paid for by his mother. Soon after his analysis ended, he began work on another novel, *Murphy*, in late 1934. The novel was completed in the spring of 1936, but it took him over a year and more than forty submissions before it was finally accepted for publication by Routledge, in 1938. Despite the struggle and the rejections, the experience seemed to have strengthened Beckett's self-belief in his future as a writer. He began writing what would be his third published novel, *Watt*, around the time the Second World War began, but most of the writing was undertaken when he and his future wife, Suzanne Deschevaux-Dumesnil, escaped Paris and settled in the village of Roussillon. Although the bulk of the novel was written between 1943 and 1944, *Watt* was not published until 1953, by which time Beckett had already "entered the important period of creativity he called 'the siege in the room'" (Bair 367).

The second phase in his career, undoubtedly his most creative, coincided with his writing in French. He began work on *Mercier et Camier,* his first French novel, during the summer of 1946. This was followed by a trilogy of novels, written between 1946 and 1950—*Molloy* (1951), *Malone Dies* (1951), and *The Unnameable* (1954)—that would establish Beckett as an acclaimed novelist. The novels were followed by three plays, also written in French, *Waiting for Godot* (1952), *Endgame* (1957), and *Krapp's Last Tape* (1958). These would not only define him as a major writer and dramatist but, following the plays' staging in Paris and in London, would transform him into an avant-garde celebrity. According to his first biographer, Deirdre Bair, this spell of creativity arose following his return to Ireland in April, 1946, when Beckett made a discovery about himself that would have lasting impact on his life and on his writing: "I shall always be depressed," he wrote to a friend, "but what comforts me is the realization that I can now accept this dark side as the commanding side of my personality. In accepting it, I will make it work for me" (cited in Bair 373).

By 1960, Beckett had become widely recognized as a leading contemporary dramatist. His growing international recognition culminated in 1969, when he was awarded the Nobel Prize for literature.

During the 1960s he continued writing, but much less, and as his dramatic work reached a wider audience, he became heavily occupied with helping theater companies stage his plays. The writing of this period—the "post-Godot" or third phase in his career—was characterized by ever-sparser plot, character, and language. His only substantial novel of this period, *How It Is*, (written, again, in French) was published in 1961. Arguably it represented a work of transition from his second "creatively intense period" to a third period of mastery and minimalism. *How It Is* was followed by the short story *All Strange Away* (1963) and four even more pared down "shorts": *Imagination Dead Imagine* (1965), *Enough* (1965), *Ping* (1966) and *Lessness* (1969). The plays written during this period were equally brief and spare in their text and imagery, culminating in *Breath* (1969), a forty-second production that begins and ends with a brief cry, the interval filled first with slow inspiration and increasing light immediately followed by equally slow expiration and decreasing light.

BECKETT'S LATE PERIOD

The fourth, "late" phase of his career, with which this paper is concerned, can be delineated by works composed after 1971, commencing shortly after his sixty-fifth birthday (April 1971). Though old age, decay, and decrepitude had long served Beckett as themes through which his tragicomic vision of human existence was realized, these later works are, if anything, less preoccupied with the tragicomic aspects of life. Instead they seem steeped in a kind of nostalgic despair that lacks the redeeming humor and sarcasm of his earlier writing. Pursuing—and reflecting upon—the internal narratives that incessantly accompany human lives, these works seem preoccupied with memory, the endless soliloquy of the internal voice, and repeated attempts and failure to ever make adequate sense of an individual's life. The effect is a mixture of confusion, hesitation, refutation, and repetition enacted or realized in the text and in the performance.

In addressing these late works, I shall focus on Beckett's final two trilogies: the stage plays *Not I* (1972), *Footfalls* (1976), and *Rockaby* (1981)

and the novellas *Company* (1980), *Ill Seen Ill Said* (1982), and *Worstward Ho* (1983). Although Beckett continued writing more or less up to his death in 1989, many of these late works constitute explorations or variations of those Beckettian themes that Cohn has called "theaterality," but written not so much at the demand of that "inner voice" insisting he must carry on, as produced "on demand" for a TV or radio program, for some celebratory event, or at the request of an old colleague or friend (Cronin 571).[4] The last two trilogies, I believe, better reflect Beckett's continuing preoccupations as a writer and an artist.

THE PLAYS

I will start by considering the play that arguably initiated this "late" period, *Not I*. This was written in a burst of creative energy soon after Beckett's return from a holiday in Morocco in March, 1972. For the previous few years—from 1967 onwards—Beckett had been struggling to do "something more than the abandoned shorts of these past years."[5] The feeling of stasis lifted (perhaps as a result of his sight being fully restored after two cataract operations performed in 1971 and his subsequent convalescence, first in Malta and later Morocco) with *Not I*, which Beckett said he wrote almost as if he could hear the main character, an Irish woman, speaking it out loud in his head (Bair 662). Despite Beckett's obvious pleasure in having again experienced the rush of creativity, his writing did not immediately pick up again and for the next couple of years he felt once more stuck on "the usual plod" (Knowlson 600). Things changed once more with *That Time*, a piece he described as a "brother" to *Not I* (Knowlson 600). Written in 1974, *That Time* was soon followed by

[4] *That Time*, a play written between June 1974 and August 1975, is a notable exception proving this particular rule; it is of the *Not I* family, which "seemed to release an autobiographical swell that he had kept under control for many years" (Bair 677), but unlike the other plays of this period, it was centered upon a male character and voice. The eight pieces making up *Fizzles*, written in French between 1973 and 1976, represent yet more "shorts" that Beckett wrote throughout much of his career, without at the same time being finished pieces in the way that, say, *Ping, Enough,* or *Imagination Dead Imagine* are.

[5] Letter by Samuel Beckett to Jocelyn Herbert, 9 August 1970, cited in Knowlson (578).

another play, *Footfalls*, written early in 1975 with the actress Billie Whitelaw now very much in mind. The third play in this trilogy, *Rockaby*, written some five years later, was intended as a contribution to a celebration being prepared for his seventy-fifth birthday. It too, Beckett said later, had been written with Whitelaw in mind, although the immediate impetus had been the planned birthday festival (Knowlson 663).

The three plays display a kind of unity on several counts. On a personal level, they have been called "the Whitelaw trilogy" because they "were written specifically with Billie Whitelaw in mind" (Simone 57). That they were all written with Billie Whitelaw in mind is not, perhaps, strictly accurate, but her portrayal of all three main characters was very much a source of delight—or at least of some pleasure—to their author. They were written in English between 1972 and 1980, on either side of Beckett's seventieth birthday. At a thematic level, the main protagonist in each is a single female figure performing a kind of broken soliloquy recounted in an incoherent, repetitive manner, "turning would-be soliloquisers into strange new narrators" (Kennedy 32). Furthermore, they represented a theatrical development for Beckett, as he adopted what Ruby Cohn has described as a new mode of "theatereality," where the fictional place of the text and the factual space of the stage seem to converge (Hale 72).

Not I retains the minimalism of Beckett's third period, with the only speaking voice that of a woman whose mouth is illuminated from below, leaving the rest of her face and body in shadow. The play opens as if by illuminating her speech, which is meant to have been going on before the curtain rises and which, the audience must assume, will continue after it closes. The voice speaks of a character, presumably the person who is speaking but who fails to acknowledge herself as such—"not I." She [the voice] considers herself [the object of her narrative] as old: at first said to be coming up to sixty, this is quickly corrected to seventy—"what? . . seventy? . . good God! . . coming up to seventy . . ." (376, ellipses in original). It is not her age, however, that preoccupies the speaker so much as the act of speaking, of giving voice to a person and her uncertain identity that the voice insists on referring to as not an I, but as a third person—the subjective object of her (the voice's) story.

Footfalls expands this theme. It contains both a "disembodied" voice and a woman (May). May is the daughter, the voice her mother's. Her mother is old (eighty-nine, ninety); May herself is in her forties, but old before her time, with grey, disheveled hair. Her body is lit by a dim light, strongest at her feet as she paces, and dimmest at her head. May seems at first concerned with looking after her mother—changing her position, straightening her pillows, passing her the bedpan, dressing her sores, praying with her, praying for her—while her mother recounts (to the audience) how May has since girlhood always paced, always seemed to need to pace, and not only needs to pace, but also needs to hear herself pacing, all the while never having "done . . . revolving it all" (400, ellipsis in original). The play ends as May takes up the same theme, as she too recounts another story, of another mother and another daughter, this one called Amy, whose mother asks if she too will "never have done . . . revolving it all" (403). Despite the agedness of the one and the aging of the other, Beckett's concerns seem less to do with the identity of their ages than with the identity—and veracity—of the "inner" voice, and on this occasion its repetitive revolving and questioning of memory and meaning that cannot be done with.

Rockaby depicts another woman who, like May, is "prematurely old." She is not given a name. As in *Footfalls*, she is "accompanied" by a voice that is separate from, yet identifiable as, herself—this time in the form of her own recorded voice. The lighting focuses upon the woman in her rocking chair, catching her face fully when still or in mid-rock, fading as she moves into and out of the spotlight with each rock. The woman on stage says nothing other than a periodic "more." This "command" instigates another episode of rocking after she has come to rest at the end of a particular stretch of speech/rocking. Pervading the play is repetition—of rocking, of life, and of coming to an end. The voice, which like the rocking chair is mechanically controlled, describes wanting the rocker to stop. At such times the woman echoes the same words as her recorded voice: "time she

stopped." Since the voice from the past and the woman in the present express similar desires, this seems to imply not so much an ending as the continual desire for an ending, expressed in the past and still in the present, but now more faintly. Despite having looked "high and low for another, another living soul . . . another like herself" (436, ellipsis added) and having failed to find such another, she has turned in on herself, becoming, it sounds like, her own mother, who seems to have experienced a similar fate. She feels that it is time she too stopped, like her mother; and at the end of the play, the repetitive rocking ends. But rather than having reached an ending, it seems as likely that the whole sequel will soon be reactivated, after the curtain has closed at the end of one particular sequence of rocking that we, the audience, have observed but which other audiences will observe all over again, watching and listening as another mother, another daughter, occupy the same space, on the same stage, repeating the "endless continua" that characterize Beckett's new "theatereality" (Hale 72).

The three plays each feature old age, yet it is an old age that exists more as background than as foreground. It is not an important characteristic of the women on stage. The actor who played the women on stage, Billie Whitelaw, was in early middle age. While the theme of "endings" is present, even that is depicted in a way that suggests an endlessness of endings. Minimalism, more than agedness, dominates. It is, however, a minimalism that has developed beyond the minimalism of his third period that came to an exhausted end with the forty-five second performance of *Breath*. Rather than brevity there is repetition—a voice that alternately ruminates and reflects about the past; that is present on stage; and that will return, saying again what it has said, with each repetition of the play. Beckett had found a motif and a method to move beyond the pared down minimalism of his previous work and in doing so, had reconnected with a voice from his own past—one that began with the memory of a voice, a woman's voice, an Irish woman's voice, heard in his head as he was recuperating in Morocco after a series of operations restoring the clarity of his sight. The plays, too, represent some kind of restoration, a creative recovering of sorts.

THE PROSE

Beckett wrote three novellas at the same time as or just after this last play. *Company* appeared in 1980, *Ill Seen Ill Said* in 1981, and *Worstward Ho* in 1983. Similar preoccupations are evident in *Company* as were expressed in the late plays: the identity of the inner voice, the nature of narrative, and how it serves as some kind of company for its "deviser." The main character now, however, is an unnamed man, seemingly ageless. He is presented both as a "devised deviser devising it all for company" (30) and a hearer "hearing on and off a voice of which uncertain whether addressed to him or to another sharing his situation" (29). The devising character is addressed always as "you," as "the first personal singular and a fortiori plural pronoun had never any place in your vocabulary" (41). As "you" designates the deviser, so "he" designates the hearer—the one listening to the stories the deviser devises. Yet this "he" seems also to be a character that "you" has devised and who "you" at one time considers naming, but decides against, leaving "him" as he was: "The hearer. Unnameable. You." (20). The novella ends with the character's body, the hearer, "you," now unable to rise again, both devising voice and hearing body, realizing "how words are coming to an end. With every inane word a little nearer to the last. And how the fable too. The fable of one with you in the dark. The fable of one fabling of one with you in the dark. . . . And you as you always were. Alone" (42, ellipsis added). While it is possible to consider the novella as an autobiographical piece—sections of the novella go back to his birth, his father's absenting himself, being at home playing in the garden while his mother entertained her guest, etc.—it can also be read as an extensive meditation (again, a kind of soliloquy), both on the narrative that goes on incessantly in our heads, linking memories of our past self with our present, and on the relationship of the present self as an "embodied" being fixed in space and time to ourselves as a "disembodied" narrator of past and present. Despite the complex relationship between past and present, between a "him," a "you," and an "I," when all is said and done, at the end, the self is a self alone.

In *Ill Seen Ill Said*, the main character is an old woman, seeking to rid herself of all that is "ill seen" and "ill said," wanting to say a last farewell to farewell but finding that in doing so, she still wants "One moment more. One last. Grace to breathe that void. Know happiness" (78). This is not, however, another case of Scheherazade wanting yet one more night to put off death. Like *Company*, the piece represents another extended meditation—but this time concerned not so much with the coherence of past and present and the uncertainties of memory and identity, but with life, its desolation—"On the one hand embers. On the other ashes" (65)—and the possibility or impossibility of experiencing (and enjoying) its ending.

The novella opens with the woman sitting "rigid upright on her old chair" (45). Her hair is white, her face and hands "faintly bluish white," and all the rest is black. The image from *Rockaby* comes to mind, another unfinal soliloquy on ending. But the old woman is inexorably another: not the narrator but one of whom the narrator narrates "this old so dying woman" (53). Rather than privileging the voice, as *Rockaby* does, *Ill Seen Ill Said* privileges the eye—both the eyes of the woman as well as, implicitly, the eyes that observe her. Despite the way "the mind betrays the treacherous eyes and the treacherous word their treacheries," Beckett nevertheless still seems to be seeking—however ill seen or ill said—what "foretaste of the joy at journey's end" can be seen, peering at the eyes, wondering if at the last moment of life "like the last wisps of day" it can be seen, this "[o]ne moment more. One last. Grace to breathe that void. Know happiness" (78). The piece echoes not only Beckett's ontological concerns but also what Beckett had written, years earlier, about his mother in her final illness: "I gaze into the eyes of my mother, never so blue, so stupefied, so heart rending—the eyes of an issueless childhood, that of old age."[6]

In *Worstward Ho*, similar autobiographical themes and memories can be found, including one that Beckett had often used in his previous

[6] Letter by Samuel Beckett to George Duthuit, 1948, cited in Knowlson (367).

writing: that of a child and an old man, holding hands together, bound together in a longing "faintly vainly longing for the least, of longing . . . of longing still" (97, ellipsis added). To this story, a persistent echo of Beckett recalling himself as a boy with his father, trekking across the countryside of Cooldrinagh and over the Wicklow Hills, Beckett adds a third person, an old woman, some two thirds of the way in. But these characters, figures rather, remain "in dimmost dim, vasts apart" (103), as if the old man, the child, and the old woman are mere archetypes, lacking in all but the shadow of their being, "gnawing to be nought . . . Three pins. One pinhole" (103, ellipsis added). Hisgen and van der Weel have suggested that *Worstward Ho* represents Beckett's last, best attempt to remove all representation from the text, leaving the reader's imagination with nothing beyond the words, "an imaginary universe existing in an absolute void" (Hisgen and van der Weel 244). Yet the images of an old man, a child, and an old woman that had long weaved their way in his earlier writings reappear, "stooped as loving memory some old gravestones stoop" (102). If his intention was to remove all representations of a reality outside the text, why this persistent imagery? It is difficult to avoid thinking that these figures are residues of a memory that Beckett could not erase, however long he lived, images of "longing still. Faintly vainly longing still" for childhood, for his parents, for home, crucial images of his own cultural imaginary of old age.

If the late trilogy of plays noted above was triggered by a voice, the intrusion of images from Beckett's past seem to dominate this late trilogy of prose fiction. Many of these images seem culled from his own childhood, much more than from his present circumstances. They seem to be parental images, unforgettable figures from his past. Where they represent agedness, it suggests the agedness of one's parents rather than one's self. Of course other themes persist—the sense of ending, of closure, and the stripping away of the unessential clutter of life to get back to the bare bones of existence and non-existence. If Beckett's "mature" works had frequently incorporated couples—Lucky and Pozzo, Gogo and Didi, Nag and Nell, Hamm and Clov, Malloy and Moran, Mercier

and Camier, Watt and Mr Knott—these late works focused upon the lone narrator for whom company was represented by voices or images from the past, echoes within a monologue rather than the dialogical form that characterized the plays, particularly of the earlier period. In that process of surrendering increasingly to the interior of a life in his work, Beckett himself was by no means a lonely figure of age. He continued to be sought after by friends and acquaintances, actors, directors, and producers, right up to his last months and weeks in a nursing home. His journey back to voices and images from the past may have served a creative impetus, taking him away from the "death" of imagination that seemed to have preoccupied him through much of the 1960s, and that was reflected in shorts such as *Enough*, *Ping*, and *Imagination Dead Imagine*. Perhaps the prospect of his own ending fired his desire once more to explore the next to next to nothing, and this going back enabled him to go forward again to the edge. But equally, the surge of creativity evident in both late trilogies may have been triggered by his restoration to health, and perhaps, too, by his vital engagement with the "marvelous" Whitelaw (Knowlson 599). Perhaps this juxtaposition of two contrasting positions—his rediscovering vitality in old age—may also have played its part.

THE CULTURAL IMAGINARY OF OLD AGE AS EMBODIED IN BECKETT'S TEXTS AND IN HIS LIFE

In contrast to the idea of a social imaginary as outlined by Castoriadis—that is, the invariably polysemic representation of society's institutions—the idea of a cultural imaginary is both more particular and more symbolic (Strauss). To discuss literary representations of such social institutions as "old age," "family," or "community," it seems preferable to employ the latter term (while recognizing that for other forms of representation, such as those employed by the media, "social imaginaries" might be a better term). The point is that the representation of old age throughout all Beckett's work can be seen as the deployment of a cultural imaginary that locates it, on the one hand, on a continuum with

impotence and decay, and on the other, with endings, or with coming in reach of an ending. The former stresses corporeality—the bodily aspects of agedness—while the latter emphasizes a more existential coming to an end, an end of mental striving to communicate or to go on.

As Ulrike Maude has pointed out, many "Beckettian characters' experience of the world is a markedly physical bodily experience" (10). There are several features in Beckett's later texts, however, that indicate a change in how he chooses to realize that corporeality. One feature in the staging of his late plays, for example, is the extent to which the bodies of the actors are subjected to tortuous requirements to minimalize and regularize their bodily movements and/or shed their natural wholeness as fully embodied persons. They appear instead as disembodied elements, unending voices, and repetitive sequences of footsteps, of rocking, as if their agedness had become strangely less corporeal. In his earlier plays Beckett had placed some of his characters in dustbins, buried in sand, or even in urns, but the audience were expected to understand that the body on view was that of a whole person, an embodied person, even if reduced in power, size, and influence. Even Winnie, who, in *Happy Days*, is buried in the sand, can at least in the first act move her arms and head—movements she has "lost" by the time of the second act, when she has become primarily a voice in the first person. But in the late plays, Beckett begins with the "whole body like gone" (*Not I* 381), leaving a mouth or a face, a figure which leaves behind "no trace" of having ever been whole (403). This erasure of the body is even more evident in the novellas. In *Company*, the main character sits huddled, clasping and unclasping his knees with his arms, lifting his head, straightening his legs after "having covered in your day some twenty-five thousand leagues or roughly thrice the girdle" (40) and for whom, at the end, "supineness become habitual and finally the rule. You now on your back in the dark shall not rise again . . . till finally you hear how words are coming to an end" (41, ellipsis added). In *Worstward Ho*, the three figures—the [old] man, the [old] woman, and the child—are but "dim

shades on unseen knees," "stooped as loving memory some old gravestones stoop," leaving in the end "what left of skull. . . . Three pins. One pinhole" (103, ellipsis added).

The process of erasing the embodied "self-containing" aspects of the body evident in these later works can, of course, be seen as yet another aspect of Beckett's endless fascination with impairment and decay—themes already evident in *Molloy*, in *Malone Dies*, in *Waiting for Godot*, and in *Endgame*. But as Beckett grew older, he seems to have become less, not more, preoccupied with the body's corporeal nature—or at least with those aspects reflecting somatic dysfunction, disease, and decay. He turned instead to a growing fascination with the body as a vehicle of performance, a symbolic backcloth almost, as in *Not I* and *Footfalls*, with the physical separation of self as voice from self as body, as in *That Time* and *Rockaby*. Were there changes in Beckett's relationship with his own body during this time that might account for or contribute to this change in direction? Was he developing a changed imaginary of old age? Arguably there were and he was, these changes reflecting, perhaps, a "release" from the physical discomforts that had long afflicted him, moving his imaginary toward a more disembodied, more discursively realized representation of old age.

Psychosomatic concerns had bedeviled Beckett's early career, but these were overtaken in his early sixties by concerns over his failing senses (his vision especially), his weakening mental powers, and his persisting respiratory problems. His brother Frank had died of lung cancer just a few years after his mother's death, in 1954, and for much of the 1960s, Beckett grew concerned that a similar fate awaited him (Cronin 541). When he was awarded the Nobel Prize he was sixty-three, had had a persistent chest infection for some time, and was waiting to recover sufficiently to undergo bilateral cataract surgery. He recovered and had cataracts removed from both eyes, in two separate operations performed during the autumn and winter of 1970-71. Soon after this, he again fell ill with a recurrence of the abscesses on his chest and a skin infection that affected his neck and

face. As he approached pensionable age (he was sixty-five in April 1971), he faced the dual embarrassment of his public success coupled with the private discomfort of an increasingly ailing body.

For nearly a decade Beckett had been preoccupied with theatrical, television, and radio productions and had written very little that was "new." By 1971, he was feeling even more pessimistic than usual, doubting that he would ever write anything of any substance again and resigning himself to the prospect of "spending his time negotiating for productions of his plays or assisting in their presentation and now and again issuing a brief 'formerly aborted' text to please his publishers" (Bair 660). Then, almost a year after the last operation, he began writing *Not I*. The play "produced an almost miraculous change" in him (Bair 662) as he "opened the floodgates and let them [the words] flow" (Knowlson 589). His eyesight was much improved and his lungs had healed. At last he sorted out the recurring problems with his teeth when he had his remaining teeth extracted and new dentures fitted. The New Year found him refreshed, revitalized, and rehearsing in London with one of his favorite actors, Billie Whitelaw. The effect of working on this new play re-invigorated him. Despite the deaths of old friends, his creative juices seemed unstoppable; he finished the long overdue task of translating his first French novel, *Mercier et Camier,* into English and in 1974 began work on another play—*That Time*—which he finished in the summer of 1975.

The change was noticeable to colleagues. Sir Peter Hall, then artistic director at London's Royal Court theatre, wrote how "Sam looks no different to twenty years ago; still the aesthetic visionary face, the nervous energy" (cited in Knowlson 604). About this time, he met up with Rick Cluchey, an ex-convict from San Quentin who had formed an acting group—the San Quentin Drama Workshop—as a result of discovering Beckett via two San Quentin performances of *Waiting for Godot*. Cluchey became his protégé, a kind of adopted son bringing new enthusiasm and new stories into Beckett's old world. *That Time* was followed by yet another short play, *Footfalls*, also written in English and

with Billie Whitelaw in mind (Knowlson 616), making up the "other trilogy" that Simone referred to as "The Whitelaw Trilogy."

Officially old, Beckett was in fact renewed. Although the mouth that provides the monologue in *Not I* is supposed to be that of a woman "coming up to seventy" (376), Whitelaw was just forty years old, an attractive woman as devoted to Beckett as he was to her. The theatrical—and later the televised—versions emphasized, with Beckett's approval, the sensuality of the mouth, as the largely inactive, ungendered "auditor" who was first written into the play was marginalized and then omitted altogether, leaving a mouth whose symbolic proximity to a vagina did not pass unnoticed. She (the character, the actor) was both old and yet not old: old only in her dialogue.

Beckett continued to pursue his interest in how a body could be made to perform on stage. In *Footfalls*, for example, he became preoccupied with the sound and image of pacing feet, the balance between pacing and pausing, and the precise sound made by this pacing. In *Rockaby*, he sought to coordinate the rocking of the chair with the illumination of the protagonist's face so the woman's largely silent face rocks in and out of the spotlight. Further preoccupation with "staging the body" is evident in the televised version of *What Where*, written for the theatre (his last piece of "theatereality") in 1983 and performed on German television in 1985. For the TV version, which Beckett edited and directed, the four figures were reduced to four masks, made to look as alike as possible and illuminated so that "only oval of face to be seen" (Beckett's notes, cited in Maude 130).

Other factors were at work in his developing interest in all aspects of theatrical production. As he grew more experienced working with dance and mime, film and radio, and, of course, television, Beckett had become fascinated by the possibilities of technology. Since his first venture into TV in 1966 with *Eh Joe*, he had been interested in the scope of the medium to portray what was beyond, or what could not be fully enacted on, the stage. This included the potential for film and TV to disembody, or rather, to transform the body from being a vehicle of

the self, embodying a character, to being an image caught between self and non-self, whether through lighting; through mechanical repetition; by contrasting the voice and the body, or life and lifelessness; or by contrasting the body with—or making it akin to—non-living objects, such as chairs, beds, lamps, lights, urns, and so forth.

Unlike the bodies of the characters in his earlier plays—the pained and struggling Estragon, Pozzo's blindness, Vladimir's urinary urgency, and the hapless Lucky in *Waiting for Godot*; Hamm's blindness and immobility and Clov's stiff legs in *Endgame*; Krapp's hardness of hearing and his quavering singing voice in *Krapp's Last Tape*; or the slowly sinking Winnie and her crawling companion, Willie, in *Happy Days*—all of whose actions reflect or form part of their character, the bodies in his late work are not inept or frail. Rather they are less whole, less fully present on the stage, less visibly and unequivocally "on view" than in his earlier plays.[7]

While aging and old age are as present as ever in his later work, agedness seems to be represented differently, more symbolically than functionally. This can be seen, for example, in the monochromatic contrast of white, grey, and black dress or hair, rather than in the display of somatic impairments or complaints. The protagonist's hair is either grey (May in *Footfalls*, the woman in *Rockaby*) or white (Listener in *That Time*, Listener and Reader in *Ohio Impromptu*, Speaker in *Piece of Monologue*) and his/her dress is either black (woman in *Rockaby*, Listener and Reader in *Ohio Impromptu*) grey (May in *Footfalls*) or white (Speaker in *Piece of Monologue*). Characters as complete bodies, as persons caught up with their bodies, are replaced by persons as abstracted, stylized bodies and/or disembodied voices. In the novellas scant attention is given to the characters' complaints, their physical ills or infirmities, in marked contrast to those of the earlier Watt, Molloy, and Malone. Only their position, the visualized stance of their body, is detailed alongside the stylized movements of their eyes and eyelids, their hands, mouths, or

[7] David Pattie has described the "characters" in these late plays as "disturbingly evanescent—not all there—[rendering them] studies of the partially absent self" (402).

limbs—slowly or less slow, more in darkness or less. The subjective suffering of individual bodies that once pervaded his texts no longer dominates the narrative of these late works. Suffering is articulated differently, through the infidelities of memory and the unending incompleteness of the "impenetrable self" and its companion, the equally impenetrable "un-self" (Beckett, "Neither" 258). In contrast the body—perhaps his own body—seems suffused with a new energy, possibly from seeking medical attention or from receiving the attentions of a younger, attractive woman. For one reason or another, the aging Beckett seems to have been experiencing his body differently and—dare one say it?—more positively.

OLD AGE IMAGINED AND EXPERIENCED IN BECKETT'S LIFE AND WORK

Beckett was certainly conscious of his own aging. This self-consciousness, however, must be set in the context of his longstanding preoccupation with physical discomfort and bodily dysfunction. While these preoccupations are evident in much of his writing, they were as, if not more, evident in his earlier life. He was subject to frequent (and frequently psychosomatic) afflictions and illnesses as a young man, in midlife, and when older. At various times he suffered from anxiety and depression, arthritis, boils and cysts, cataracts, chest infections, emphysema, and poor teeth. His experience of illness and discomfort was not confined to his own body: his conflictual experience of his mother's Parkinsonism, and her terminal decline and eventual death in the Merrion Nursing Home, were profoundly disturbing for him.

With age, however, Beckett seems to have experienced a kind of relief (Cronin 575). The earlier anxiety attacks had receded, as had his skin disorders, and after having the cataracts removed in 1970-71 and new dentures fitted in 1972, he was relieved of past discomforts. Further, Beckett had positive expectations of his own aging. As his friend and biographer James Knowlson wrote: "He had always believed that, in old age, things would be simplified and one would be free to concentrate on essentials

associating old age in his mind with the idea of light, of illumination and he often spoke of how writers like Goethe or W.B. Yeats had produced their best work when they were old men" (Knowlson 643).

Well before he reached his fifties, Beckett had used old men—or decrepit men—as central characters in his novels and his plays. *Molloy* was on crutches as he pursued his journey in search of his mother, experiencing an "astonishing old age, still green in places" but spending much time lying "as much as possible with the feet higher than the head to dislodge the clots" (76-77). In *Malone Dies*, Malone throughout the novel is an old man apparently on his death bed, looked after by an old woman, telling himself stories while waiting to die (174). His stories are, in turn, mostly about an old man, Macmann, and his partner, an old woman called Moll. In *The Unnameable* the main character is "a nasty old pig" (322) who has progressively lost his limbs, his speech and control of much of his body. Krapp is described as "a wearish old man" (215) aged about sixty-nine at the time depicted in the play, while in *Waiting for Godot*, Estragon and Vladimir appear—to Pozzo at least—to be at least sixty or seventy years old (28). In *Endgame*, Hamm is blind and seemingly immobilized, yet young enough to still have both of his aged parents alive—"bottled" in two trashcans (203).

The corporeal representation of old age and its association with decay and decrepitude that characterized his major midlife writing seem to have become less important to Beckett as he aged. His concern with the physical exigencies of old age that plagued many of his earlier "protagonists" declined. Although he did worry about losing his mental powers with age, he also maintained an active assumption of "carrying on" and of being able to do so, throughout his own old age, carrying on while the cells gently expired. Such "carrying on" was, as ever, contingent upon his continuing creative engagement with life, its pains and pitfalls, and increasingly with the peculiar nature of lived experience. Never a philosopher, *tout court*, Beckett became more contemplative with age. Through pared down monologues and soliloquies he pursued his ontological

concerns with identity, being and non-being, narrative coherence, and the continuity of self. Such issues burdened him, depressed him at times, but they also provided him with enough intellectual discomfort to drive him always to further writing, to seeking again to speak of what was so hard, so impossible to ever put well into words.

In some sense, Beckett's preoccupation with old age seems to have become progressively less tied less to his experience of his own corporeal failings and instead became aligned to the persistently present images coming from his past—of his father and mother, their last illnesses, and their "otherness" just before they died. Of his mother's death he once wrote: "I keep watching my mother's eyes, never so blue, so stupefied, so heartrending, eyes of an endless childhood, that of old age. Let us get there rather earlier, while there are still refusals we can make. I think these are the first eyes that I have seen. I have no wish to see any others, I have all I need for loving and weeping, I know now what is going to close, and open inside me . . ." (letter to George Duthuit, cited in Jenkins 5).

Beckett's peculiar imaginary of old age, his fascination with the experience of endings, leads him to have high hopes that his own old age might be a time when, on the brink of oblivion, a kind of truth at last might come, as if "from the mind in ruins" (SB to George Tabori, 1983, cited in Knowlson 684). With his old head "nothing but sighs (of relief?) of expiring cells," he wondered if there might be "A last chance at last . . . of ineffable departure. Nothing left but try—eff it" (SB to Avigdor and Anne Arikha, 1984, cited in Knowlson 697). In the end, the various physical indignities and infirmities he experienced were never as salient to him as the sense of his own alienation from life, his dismay at its brevity, its insubstantiality, which he once described as like a journey "To and fro in shadow from inner to outershadow/ from impenetrable self to impenetrable unself by way of neither/ as between two lit refuges whose doors once neared gently close, once turned away from gently part again" (Neither 258). Perhaps as he grew closer to the edge, he felt more keenly than ever the need to steer himself toward that "event horizon," to report back somehow at the brink of the black hole, that

social imaginary of the fourth age. In the end he could do no more than end, still "failing better."

LATE LIFE, LATE STYLE: CONSIDERING THE AUTHOR AND THE TEXT

In place of a conclusion, I would like to consider a question that has been insinuating itself throughout this paper, namely, the relationship between the analysis of texts and the biography of the author. This is, of course, a tendentious issue, but it is a matter of some importance when it comes to judging the significance of Beckett's works and his life to the field of aging studies. It is possible, for example, to compare his treatment of old age in his second, "mature" period—*Godot, Endgame, Molloy, Malone Dies*, etc.—with that of his fourth, "late" period, without reference to changes in his life, and to consider whether the difference in his treatment of agedness might instead constitute a key feature of a "late style" as defined by, for example, Edward Said, rather than that arising from experience. Equally, it is possible to consider Beckett's representation of old age in his works, without either periodizing his works or considering his life, seeing it simply as another way of his elaborating on—of riffing on—the fourth age's "cultural imaginary."[8] Bringing Beckett's life, his own "adult development," into the picture risks confounding such strategies; does it do any more than that?

My aim has been to show that it does. While issues of late style can be endlessly debated,[9] it is clear that any artist, composer, or writer, if they live a long enough life, will develop and change their style, concerns, and/or habits of composition; as Erik Erikson pointed out, human development—the development of character—does not come to a dead end once adulthood is reached. Noting changing areas and themes that distinguish developments in the author's or artist's work can be encompassed by ideas of a late style, along the lines developed by Adorno and Said, so long as one does not construct late style as a universal,

[8] On the fourth age, see Gilleard and Higgs.

[9] See, for example, Hutcheon and Hutcheon on recent debates about late style.

homogenous phenomenon akin to "the aging process" (a point made by Hutcheon and Hutcheon when they describe such a task as "both risky and reductive," 11).

For a writer like Beckett, for whom old age was both a persistent imaginary and a personal concern, it seems to me that there is value in going beyond marking out in his later works potential elements of a "late style"—one could argue he made several creative advances in his later works, including the development of "theatereality"—to consider the conflicts and contradictions of old age that are demonstrated in his later works and in his later life. Why? Because old age is a contradictory process for most of us, posing conflicts between the diversity of our experience and the homogeneity of the imaginaries that we carry with us. Beckett's later life could be seen, for example, as an illustration of Peter Laslett's third age ideal—a period of personal development, when he was responsible mostly to himself, creative, self-directed, and free to take off on his own—and when he was content simply to do nothing (Juliet 37). The way he lived his later life certainly seems a personal and social contrast to the old age imaginaries that appear in his works, whether the distinct uncomfortable corporeality of age that Malone or Ham or Krapp represent or (though perhaps less distinctly so) the less concrete, interiorized representations of age and ending evident in his last trilogies. Being fascinated by old age—as a limit experience, as decay and disillusionment, and, in extremis, as the possibility of experiencing an irrecoverable, unrepeatable ending—seems, for Beckett, to have been as exhilarating as it was tragic. I believe that, in a strange way, it invigorated him right to the end—as, I think, is evident in his very last written work, the poem "*Common Dire*?," which he translated into English as "What is the Word?" in the final weeks of his life, still working, watching, and meditating in a nursing home called, ironically, "*Le Tier Temps,*" or, "The Third Age" (Knowlson 700-03).

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