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The Work of Poverty

Lance Duerfahrd

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Duerfahrd, Lance.

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Introduction



Begging Context

This book is about Samuel Beckett's destitute art. Though his body of work seems to offer audiences very little by way of lesson or entertainment, it nevertheless has an unusual performance history within settings of real-world crisis. In landscapes of ruin, *Waiting for Godot* emerges unexpectedly and Beckett's impoverished aesthetic begins to resonate. A focus on poverty is in keeping with the primary trajectory in Beckett's career, eliminating all excess from his work and seeking what Beckett calls "ultimate penury" in art.¹ Beckett offers us not a rich but a poor—and ever poorer—prose, and subject matter likewise stricken by poverty. Entwined with creation, poverty is for Beckett a dynamic condition, a "worsening" rather than an achieved state.² In conversation with Lawrence Harvey, Beckett observes, "What complicates it all is the need to make. Like a child in mud but no mud. And no child. Only need."³ Beckett's work undertakes an endless subtractive movement, removing first mud, then child, leaving only need and then perhaps something less than need. His texts explore an aesthetic of worsening suitable to the inherent dispossession of his itinerant subjects, figures in a perpetual state of emergency. This enterprise to deplete representation places Beckett firmly in the camp of the avant-garde. Performances of *Waiting for Godot* in prisons, in Sarajevo during a civil war, and in post-Katrina New Orleans, however, reveal an alternative potential for his

work. Abstruse to many critics, Beckett's postdramatic minimalism makes under these circumstances an immediate and unexpectedly emotive appeal, as the survivors of flood, siege, and carceral institutions become literate in Beckett through their predicament. This study explores the illuminating encounter between Beckett's theater and these environments.

The Work of Poverty is a discussion of "poor Beckett," but it also aspires to add to existing discourses about poverty and worklessness. I isolate four key Beckettian tropes: need, exposure/abandonment, enough, and begging the question.⁴ Beckett uses the terms "exposure" and "abandonment" to describe the unsheltered condition of his evicted vagabond figure, for whom privation has supplanted privacy, similar to Walter Benjamin's "new poverty."⁵ Beckett's term "enough," his measure for the barely adequate, resonates with Giorgio Agamben's concept of "bare" or "naked life," the biopolitical status to which the individual is reduced in the modern state. The way Beckett's work begs questioning provides us with the antithesis of Franz Kafka's literature of petition. *The Trial* and stories such as "The Building of the Chinese Wall" honor *petitio principii* to the letter: they situate their narratives around the investigation of a missing premise, for example, the basis of Joseph K's guilt and cause of his arrest.⁶ Whereas Kafka actively raises questions within the text, thereby encouraging a hermeneutical response from the reader, Beckett begs questions and invites an interrogative relation to his work. Beckett's defense of the remainder and his pursuit of the barely adequate are key to the recurrent but critically underappreciated place of poverty in modern thought. Beckettian poverty differs sharply from depictions of the struggling poor in novels of Charles Dickens and Victor Hugo, which trade on "mere misery where destitute virtuous mothers may steal bread for their starving brats."⁷ *The Work of Poverty* explains why Hugo's *Les Misérables* lands on Broadway while Beckett's hobos turn up in Sarajevo. It shows how Beckett's thematic discussion of poverty and his legendary theatrical, textual, and formal sparseness act together to propel the emergence of his theater on "stages of history," landscapes mired in the aftermath of catastrophe.

Although it has not yet achieved this status, Beckett's destitute theater ultimately deserves a place next to fellow modernist playwright Bertolt Brecht's aesthetic of didacticism, his Epic theater. Brecht approaches theater as a pedagogical instrument rigged to expose the contradictions of capital, showing the audience that theater is illusion. Brecht's theater aspires to deny the viewer empathy by interrupting the theatrical illusion and drawing the spectator toward a state of critical awareness. The actors' estrangement from their roles, the unexpected appearance of a stranger

in the doorway, the immobilization of a scene into a sudden tableau are devices that tear away the theatrical veil and remind the audience of the mechanism of its production. To this, Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* provides a pointed antithesis. Not only does the play go uninterrupted, but its crux depends on a stranger who never shows up at all. The endless waiting for something to happen in Beckett's plays inverts Brecht's message that conditions must be understood in order to be changed.⁸ On Beckett's stage, nothing changes and little is understood.

If Brecht's Epic theater seeks to educate and to make critics of his audience, what purpose are we to ascribe to Beckett's theater of destitution? This purpose is glimpsed in what I call the crisis performances of *Waiting for Godot*: productions in the impoverished contexts of Lüttringhausen Prison (1953), San Quentin State Prison (1957), and Raiford Prison (1974); McComb, Mississippi during the Civil Rights Movement (1964); Sarajevo in the midst of civil war and genocide (1993); post-Katrina New Orleans (2007); and in Zuccotti Park during Occupy Wall Street (2011). Beckett never stages crisis; rather, these crises stage Beckett. The reduction of the human subject in the prison, in the city under siege, and in the area devastated by flood meshes with the scant remains of persona and action witnessed on Beckett's stage. Though Beckett rarely commented on Brecht's work, Brecht was outspoken on what he took to be Beckett's apolitical stance. In 1953 Brecht made a stab at fashioning a *Gegenentwurf* (counterpoint drama) to *Waiting for Godot*, deleting some lines and adding others in order to make the play into a commentary on class. Estragon becomes *ein Prolet* (derogatory slang for a proletarian), Vladimir an "intellectual," Lucky a "donkey or policeman." Pozzo becomes *ein Gutsbesitzer* (landowner) and a noble, "Von Pozzo."⁹ Yet Brecht cannot refunction the dysfunctional figures on Beckett's stage to his purpose and ultimately abandons the attempt to rewrite the play. Though it is the dramaturgical antithesis of Epic theater, *Godot* resists participation in dialogue with Brecht. The problem for Brecht is that Beckett's play advances very little. The play exposes a situation rather than posits a viewpoint. Because the play is the situation, Brecht has difficulty instrumentalizing it.¹⁰ What can Brecht offer Beckett's outcasts? What counterstance can Brecht strike against their abandonment, against their post-social condition? Outside systems of exchange of labor and capital, Beckett's vagabonds obstruct inscription into social context.

In fact, Brecht does resolve this impasse, and *The Work of Poverty* takes a cue from his resolution. Brecht opts to leave the text and performance of *Godot* intact. Instead, he contextualizes the play by projecting cinematic footage of social revolutions in Asia, China, the Soviet Union, and

Africa behind the actors. In the words of Clas Zilliacus, the tramps are not “dragged into society. Instead, they are shown as voluntary outsiders having chosen to part with a progressing world.”¹¹ Brecht realizes, in other words, that he must put his eraser and pencil down and approach *Godot* through the situation of performance. Brecht’s solution undoes the audience’s fascination with Godot’s absence as well as the religious and metaphysical speculations it has sustained. The audience is asked to critically divide its attention between the stage and the cinematic space adjacent to it. Instead of invading the play, Brecht chooses a display of force, massing the troops of historical revolutions at the border of Beckett’s stage. The force exerted over Beckett’s play by Sarajevo, San Quentin, and New Orleans exceeds that of a cinematic backdrop. These crisis settings permeate every aspect of the play: not just performance but rehearsal, production, and audience. Whereas Brecht’s revolutionary filmstrips invite the spectator to dismiss Beckett’s stage through dialectical contrast, these environments align themselves with the subadequate conditions of Beckett’s stage. Crisis encircles Beckett’s stage not to set it off (negate it) but to set off (like a bomb) the need and frailty of its images.

Brecht understands something crucial in his effort to elicit meaning from Beckett: though too poor to instantiate a reality, *Godot* demands juxtaposition to one. The condition of need on Beckett’s stage exerts a radiant effect over contiguous spaces. Waiting consumes all the spaces adjoining the stage, including the seating, the lobby, and even the space of movement toward the theater. Drama theorist Elin Diamond remarks that *Godot* “paradoxically begs for meaningful context.”¹² Brecht does not fabricate a context per se for *Godot*. His cinematic and archival images allow Beckett’s play its autonomy while indicting it as a willful abandonment of history and political action. Beckett does not seek alienation for effect, and there is no redemption, no charity, no call to action that would alleviate it. For Beckett, alienation is tied neither to man’s fate nor to labor. As we will see, need is not confined to the stage in San Quentin, Sarajevo, or New Orleans. Susan Sontag remarks that the separation of actor and role—the discipline demanded by both Brecht and Epic theater—is impossible in her Sarajevo production. The play calls for the character Pozzo to eat a piece of chicken and casually toss the bones aside in front of the hungry vagabonds. With no chicken available, Sontag resorts to a papier-mâché likeness. What need is there to expose the illusion, what opportunity is there for a lesson on class when the actor is himself hungry and where conspicuous consumption describes the actors’ bodies rather than Pozzo’s display of luxury on stage? In Sarajevo, chickens are for the pot, not the theater. Need is too urgent to

allow the bird to become a prop. The actor does not have the freedom to alienate himself from his hunger. Beckett's work takes root in contexts that repudiate Brecht's strategy of alienation. The destitution of Beckett's characters is registered, even exacerbated, in the very process of producing the play.

Histories of Beckett performances tend to focus more on the directorial interpretation of his work than on an aesthetic of poverty. Critical emphasis on fidelity is partly a by-product of Beckett's meticulous attention to detail as a director, and of the playwright's absolute rejection of productions that "creatively" alter his text or stage directions.¹³ The language of paternity and proper inheritance pervades the backlash by critics dismayed by Sontag's decision to cut *Godot* in half and turn Vladimir/Estragon into three distinct couples played by a total of six different actors. Everett Frost lines up with the Beckett estate when he makes a distinction between "Beckett's" *Godot* and the "bastard twin" that he names "*Godot-as-metaphor*," staged at the Youth Theater in Sarajevo.¹⁴ Frost's emphasis on the purity of the textual *Godot*, which he calls the "full measure of the experience of the play written by Samuel Beckett," is made clear by this comparison of Sontag's production to a sibling abandoned at birth.¹⁵ Yet this abject status befits Sontag's version of Beckett's vagabond drama staged amidst a siege. The challenge is in recognizing this poor bastard performance without trying to restore it to the lineage of sanctioned productions. The goal here is not to issue a critical imprimatur but to learn how the adversities of war, prison, and flood impose their marks and fractures on these performances. These alterations to the face of Beckett's play are not makeup added by the director (willful infidelity) but the look of suffering it assumes in response to its surroundings.

Literary critics who make no specific mention of these performances nevertheless evoke their possibility. In his 1967 essay "Beckett's Purgatory of the Individual," Darko Suvin writes that Beckett's work finds relevance in crisis: "The lack of a central and all-embracing relevance should not . . . make us forget what relevance can be found in Beckett's work: for where and when it is relevant, it is supremely so. I suggested earlier that it was relevant in random and closed situations of human experience: in war, camps, prisons, sickness, old age, grim helplessness of all kinds."¹⁶ Some of the settings Suvin hypothesizes as settings for Beckett have in fact materialized in the performances I discuss: war (Sarajevo), camps (the Lower Ninth Ward, with the FEMA trailer camps nearby), and prisons (Lüttringhausen, San Quentin).¹⁷ The other sites Suvin mentions provide us with food for thought, the possibility of *Godot* staged in retirement communities,

hospices, and hospital waiting rooms. Suvin remarks upon the “random and closed” quality of experience under these circumstances. Such impoverished sites sustain experience without horizon and within an economy of the ever-same. The closed systems of these environments find their echo in the hermetic structure of Beckett’s stage. In *Godot*, as in prison, “Nothing happens, nobody comes, nobody goes, it’s awful!”¹⁸ Though Suvin describes the experiences of the prison, the camp, and war as “random,” we can observe that they are, in fact, just as structured and managed as the theater itself. *Godot* is summoned not before natural disasters but before unnatural ones: the wasteland by design of the carceral system, the combined engineering failure of the levee and inadequacy of governmental response following Katrina, the ethnic cleansing of Sarajevo.

Relevance is more personal than meaning for a play. Suvin underscores the “where” and “when” of the relevance of Beckett’s work because it addresses people in particular situations—not just as theatergoers. *Godot* becomes relevant to audiences faced with “grim helplessness” through a mechanism other than representation (mimesis). In New York or Paris, *Waiting for Godot* is a highly mediated and avant-garde play. In the context of crisis, the play is self-evident, intuitive, even necessary. Vivian Mercier’s observation that *Godot* is a play in which “nothing happens, twice” becomes jarringly real for the displaced residents of the Lower Ninth Ward.¹⁹ Captive to forces deaf to their argument, prisoners understand the disjunction between the characters’ declaration (“let’s go”)²⁰ and their subsequent immobility, but they see this predicament as familiar rather than absurd.

Marked by mass uprootings, illegitimately detained subjects, and man-made and natural disasters, our era finds its symptom in Beckett’s literature of dereliction. Crisis productions of *Waiting for Godot* are neither an aestheticization of the world nor a mirror held to it. Sontag’s production in Sarajevo and Paul Chan’s production in New Orleans both appear on the front page of the *New York Times* and in other major news media. While the headlines treat the confluence of crisis and theater as a sensational novelty, I take it to be inherent in Beckett’s design. The response of the flood evacuee, the inmate, and the siege victim help us engage the play’s drastic address. As I will show, these audiences’ reception illuminates waiting, structures of the waiting process, names for waiting, and the awaited. They help us read the play’s first line, “nothing to be done,” and the final stage direction, “they do not move.”²¹ Beckett’s theater exists, in a sense, after the world is over: an impoverished theater of aftermath.

These audiences do not forget their situation in their encounter with the play. Martin Esslin remarks upon this as he introduces his classic study of

avant-garde theater, *The Theatre of the Absurd*, with the image of 1,400 spell-bound convicts watching Vladimir and Estragon on the stage. Esslin asks, "Why did a play of the supposedly esoteric avant-garde make so immediate and deep an impact on an audience of convicts?"²² Prisoners, many of whom had never been to the theater before, were able to embrace a play that perplexed and angered theatergoers who were free to walk at intermission. In the early 1950s, Beckett's only unqualified success was with criminals. Yet as we will see, the inmates' responses are not entirely immediate, as if they were uneducated, nor do they construe Beckett's work as nothing more than a circus act. Their reactions are mediated by their experience of the institution. They have been schooled there in a way that the critic will do his utmost to avoid: in living with the situation depicted on Beckett's stage. After the performance in San Quentin, the convicts appropriate the names of Beckett's characters to designate functions within the prison hierarchy: "Lucky" is a man on death row, "Pozzo" is a guard.²³ *Godot* in these contexts takes these audiences where they happen to be. Catastrophe turns the prisoners into readers of Beckett.

Esslin overlooks the degree to which the setting is an active agent in this reception of Beckett's play. A 1954 production of *Waiting for Godot* in Belgrade, Yugoslavia, stands as perhaps the purest rendering of Beckett's absurd theater, as the play was performed for no audience at all. The performance occurs in the context of the Eastern Bloc's designation of modern theater as Western decadence. Prerag Dinulović, artistic director of the Belgrade Drama Theatre, agrees to begin rehearsals of *Godot* as a gesture of openness to Western culture. Concerned about the political repercussions of a Beckett performance, however, he eliminates the production in the announcement of the theater's official repertoire, continuing all the while to rehearse the play.²⁴ As the day of the premiere approaches, management grows increasingly wary of the plan to stage the play. Theater is important to Belgrade, and producing this play carries risks.²⁵ What will be the consequences of staging this most Western, most decadent piece? A compromise is found: the theater company will go ahead with the production but allow no audience into the theater. Guards posted at the entrances allow only actors and stagehands to enter. The show goes on before an empty house, the spell interrupted only by a few intrepid theatergoers who manage to climb in unobserved through an open window and peek at the stage while crouched between the rows.

This performance is unwittingly Beckettian, and I read Soviet bureaucracy as a crisis environment. By letting the performance happen but only under the condition of sealing it off from all witnesses, the administration

avoids the potential debate that shutting it down before opening night might have caused. Like a photo from which a suspect individual had to be erased, the *Godot* performance takes place, but without any aberrant subjectivity marring the historical record. The performance literalizes Beckett's idea of art as a "stain on the silence."²⁶ It also honors the suggestion Beckett made at the time of the play's first London production: "If they did it my way they would empty the theatre."²⁷ The evacuation of the audience does not represent an ironic "success" of the play but the fulfillment of its principle. When performed before an audience in a traditional theater setting, the proscenium arch issues an official limit, a property deed, to the no-man's-land on Beckett's stage. Performed before an "empty house," this emptiness does not end awkwardly with the front row. Likewise, the Belgrade production turns the prison performances of *Godot* inside out. At San Quentin, guards are stationed at the exits. In Belgrade, the guards are turned in the opposite direction. They are there to ensure that only theater workers enter. The guards do not interrupt the production, only the effects that the play might have produced. In Eastern Bloc absurdity, those effects are encountered by no one but the characters on stage, whose loneliness is actualized, whose abandonment is enforced by guards, and who really do just go through the motions as if opening night were indistinguishable from a rehearsal. Trees fall in theaters differently than in the proverbial woods. Beckett's skimpy tree falls and is permitted to make a sound, but only in official documentation and not in anyone's ear, not in anyone's memory.

Modern history provides more and more settings for Beckett's stage, conditions under which Beckett is to be rediscovered. Suvin concludes his discussion about Beckett's relevance by remarking, "As children of this century . . . we have seen that it is often very difficult to tell the centre from the periphery. The threat of grim helplessness hangs continually over all of us collectively."²⁸ Textual analysis of *Godot* might observe that Beckett's work precipitates the reversal of center and periphery by turning outcasts into dramatic personae. But Suvin here is looking off Beckett's stage rather than on it. He approaches Beckett's relevance by observing that the extreme conditions under which Beckett's theater finds its address are losing their exceptional status.

Situations beyond the stage, wherever there is shattering of the historical continuum, bring audiences into alignment with Beckett's world. This alignment does not happen with the solar regularity of the moon's rotation of the earth. It is episodic but frequent, the modern era's tendency toward recurring and ongoing catastrophe. Beckett's stage emerges in landscapes of dispossession, among people under threat. Beckett called this the "time-

honored conception of humanity in ruins."²⁹ The crisis is not one of postmodernity (the structural loss of center) but of poverty, foretold by Beckett's impoverishing aesthetics, of an endlessly peripheral human subject. Beckett's aesthetics of poverty break the geometrical idea of periphery as a limit. His theater does not give us conceptual tools to think through our world. Instead, part of our world becomes visible in its déjà vu encounter with Beckett's stage.

Belgrade, New Orleans, San Quentin, and Sarajevo are not performances *in extremis*, spectacular and peripheral instances in which theater is called upon to resist the conditions that envelop it. In fact, the strange catharsis that prisoners and flood and siege survivors find in Beckett's post-dramatic theater is part of a growing awareness about how history is unfortunately obliging Beckett's microcosm. Finding Beckett's relevance gives us an inkling of where we are headed as well as where we already are.

Chapter 1 explores the performances of *Waiting for Godot* within carceral institutions. What qualities of Beckett's play appeal to audiences "doing time"? How does the play read their situation? In the second half of the chapter, I reverse this question: how do the inmates illuminate *Godot*? What do they discover unacknowledged within Beckett criticism? Through the case studies of ex-convicts K. F. Lembke and Rick Cluchey, and inmates at Raiford Prison in the Florida State Penitentiary system, a different play emerges. The prisoners seize upon something only implicit within Beckett's impoverished theater. Former inmate Rick Cluchey, who later becomes friends with Beckett and Beckett's preferred actor and interpreter of the roles of Hamm and Krapp, told me in 2011 that prior to Herbert Blau's 1957 production of *Godot* at San Quentin, he "had never been in a theater, not even to rob one." Cluchey's transfigurative encounter with the play illuminates a possible response or outcome to Beckett's hermetic stage. Following the *Godot* performance, Cluchey forms an actor's workshop in San Quentin. He goes on to write plays (*The Cage* and *The Wall Is Mama*) that are critical rewritings of *Waiting for Godot*. Instead of breaching the "closed system" of Beckett's play, Cluchey works more deeply within it, first as an understudy reenacting Beckett's figures, and then as an author of theatrical prisons. Cluchey's career repeats and expands the range of the closed system of Beckett's work.

Waiting for Godot has also been summoned before a city under siege and a postdiluvian no-man's-land. Chapter 2 explores two performances that situate the play within disaster: Susan Sontag's 1993 production of *Godot* in Sarajevo and the Paul Chan/Classical Theater of Harlem production of *Godot* in New Orleans in 2007. How do these performances enlist *Wait-*

ing for Godot to the cause of humanitarian intervention or political protest? Sontag's and Chan's productions force reconsideration of the traditional understanding of performance context. Directors have always refashioned the stage to localize or update the setting of a play, as in productions that resituate Richard III between the two world wars. The productions I discuss submit Beckett's play to conditions of need rather than just novel contexts. The play must meet these conditions like terms for a surrender: they affect the characters on stage as well as the actors and the production process.

Chapter 3 examines the intrusion of reality into Beckett's work at an interior and subjective level: the thought processes of his vagabond narrators. Though critics have referred to Beckett's characters as "learned" and even "philosophic," the vagabonds seem to disperse, rather than dispense, knowledge. Drawing from Beckett's prose works, I show how Enlightenment protocols of reason that shore up the autonomy of the individual cannot sustain defenseless and impoverished subjects. We encounter the impoverished condition of Beckett's narrators not mimetically but in the emergency state of thinking perforated by what the subject cannot possess. Beckett's trilogy gives us monologic vagabond thought: thought in rags and without shelter (condition) but also thought in a constant state of displacement (movement). I isolate several distinct modalities of vagabond thought.

In chapter 4, the role of the reader comes into view. What is an impoverished reading of Beckett? How can we maintain an unresentful disposition toward the indigence of Beckett's work and respond to its needfulness without substituting something of value in its place? I show how Beckett's work ultimately abandons the figure of the derelict and begins interrogating the worklike nature of the literary work per se. Decimated of both premise and possibility, late prose pieces such as *Worstward Ho* take begging to a new intrinsically literary level: they beg questioning. Our response to his literary work is structured primarily around the process of asking questions the work itself is unable to pose, as if his work were unable to afford question marks. Yet Beckett is not nihilistic. In *Worstward Ho*, a tract against nihilism, the work appears as its own writing manual in which the "less" and the "worse" are paradoxically "more" and "better." "Pox on void" is Beckett's pithy slogan against the zero.³⁰ It is counterbalanced by his striving for the "meremost minimum."³¹ Beckett calls this process "perjorism," a worsening, in counterdistinction to "meliorism."³² Beckett's destitute works culminate in the asymptotic nature of an escalating condition of need in which the figure for need, the hobo, is missing. I contrast Beckett's defense of the remainder, his injunction toward the less

and the worse, with the more apocalyptic tone of his contemporaries, particularly Georges Bataille's imperative, following the devastation of Hiroshima, "to lift, in the instant, a form of life to the level of the worst."³³ I situate the final phase of Beckett's art of indigence as an infinite travail of reduction within his literary precedents, notably, the wisdom of Voltaire's Pangloss, who declares this to be the best of all possible worlds, and Edgar in *King Lear*, who observes, "The worst is not, / So long as we can say 'This is the worst.'"³⁴

In the afterword I discuss my production of *Waiting for Godot* in Zuccotti Park during the Occupy Wall Street protests in New York City in October 2011. The Occupy movement sought to call attention to the iniquities of the global financial system that placed most of the wealth and political power in the hands of a privileged few (the 1 percent) while disenfranchising the many (the 99 percent). As with the other performances examined in the book, Zuccotti Park acquired the physiognomy of a Beckett stage before our group, the 99% Theater Company, performed the play. The Occupy movement, rather than march on the street in the manner of a more traditional protest, undertook vagabond existence, squatting on private land in a seemingly public space among the monoliths of capital that required constant policing. To throw light on conspicuous consumption, the protesters chose the route of conspicuous habitation. The production set the stage for a collision between Beckett's theater, a restless and downtrodden crowd of protesters, and hundreds of armed police that surrounded the encampment. Performances of *Godot* in Zuccotti Park resonate with San Quentin, Sarajevo, and the Lower Ninth Ward. A thread of Beckett's poverty links the dissimilar but similarly exposed and threatened communities of prison inmates, flood survivors, citizens living under siege, and occupiers next to America's most celebrated and yet possibly least hospitable street.