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The Work of Poverty

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Godot behind Bars

You will be surprised to be receiving a letter about your play, "Waiting for Godot," from a prison where so many thieves, forgers, toughs, homos, crazy men and killers spend this bitch of a life waiting . . . and waiting . . . and waiting. Waiting for what? Godot? Perhaps. . . . We are all waiting for Godot and do not know that he is already here. Yes, here. Godot is my neighbor in the cell next to mine. Let us do something to help him then, change the shoes that are hurting him!

—Letter to Beckett from K. F. Lembke, inmate at Lüttringhausen Prison¹

I had never been in a theater. Not even to rob one.

—Rick Cluchey²

Convicts Introduce the Absurd

Martin Esslin begins *The Theatre of the Absurd*, his landmark study of avant-garde drama, with the performance of *Waiting for Godot* at San Quentin State Prison in 1957. He asks, "Why did a play of the supposedly esoteric avant-garde make so immediate and deep an impact on an audience of convicts?"³ Esslin never quite answers this question, but in asking it he exposes a crucial problem: how can an aesthetic whose chief offering is alienation, in a play that stages the consciousness of tramps and hobos, be so popular? Popularity implies familiarity. By whom, and under what conditions, is Beckett welcomed as familiar?

Prison inmates make a brief but stunning appearance in Esslin's study. They usher in the ostensible essence of the absurd in the book's introduction, titled "The Absurdity of the Absurd," and they endure as the audience

that sticks in the reader's mind. Though Esslin does not pay them another visit until the conclusion of his book, the prison appears repeatedly in the periphery of his analysis, as if it were trying to force itself back into the picture and back into Esslin's consideration. About Genet, for example, Esslin writes, "It was prison that made him into a poet."⁴ It returns again in his discussion of Beckett's visit to Paris's La Santé Prison, across from which Beckett would later live. Beckett goes there to see the pimp who had inexplicably stabbed the author one night on the streets of Paris. When Beckett inquires why he did it, his assailant replies, "Je ne sais pas, Monsieur." Of this response, Esslin notes, "It might well be the voice of this man that we hear in *Waiting for Godot* and *Molloy*."⁵ The voice of Beckett's work, Esslin suggests, emerges through the prison's bars: this incapacity to reflect, a voice without motivation, memory, or knowledge, constitutes the poverty of self on view in Beckett's work. The prison seems finally to offer us an institutional framework for understanding the absurd. Even Esslin's operative definition of absurdity, borrowed from Camus, "the divorce between man and his life, the actor and his setting,"⁶ resonates emphatically with life in prison. The fact that "living in prison" so easily merges with the phrase "life in prison"—the difficulty of separating one's existence in prison from one's sentence there—gives us a syntactical understanding of Camus's notion of the disharmony between who one is and how one lives.

Esslin describes the riddle of *Godot's* popularity with criminals in this way: "What had bewildered the sophisticated audiences of Paris, London, and New York was immediately grasped by an audience of convicts."⁷ How does a sequestered audience come to enjoy a play that metropolitan sophisticates regard as inaccessible? Esslin answers this question by developing a highly mediated approach to the absurd: he employs philosophy, the "criterion of psychological truth," and the historical contexts of Jean Genet, Eugène Ionesco, and Beckett in order to understand our encounter with their work.⁸ His book is notably titled *The Theatre of the Absurd*, not *The Absurd Theatre*; indeed, Esslin's is a theater that is beholden to, and purveys, the concept of the absurd. It is hard to imagine such a tome on the shelf of a prison library, because it does not address what Esslin calls the "immediate grasp" of the criminal. He justifies his approach by observing that the theater of the absurd (and here he speaks of both the dramas and the critical text he is writing) "allows the audience to take home an intellectually formulated philosophical lesson."⁹ Yet the question begged by his own introduction persists: *what do we take from Beckett if we have no home to take it home to?* People who have the ability to return home can convert their encounter with Beckett into a kind of philosophical souvenir. But what

lesson is imparted by Beckett's play if this lesson cannot be consumed, like a novel or a philosophical treatise, in private?

Esslin remains spellbound by the immediacy of the convict's grasp and circles back to this audience to explain the goal of his study. "It is the purpose of this book," he writes, "to provide a framework of reference that will show the works of the Theatre of the Absurd within their own convention so that their relevance and force can emerge as clearly to the reader as *Waiting for Godot* did to the convicts of San Quentin."¹⁰ According to Esslin, Beckett requires us, in one form or another, to do time. We must either break the law or read Esslin's book. But do these two paths get us to the same place? In aiming to reunite the audience of scholars with the audience of thugs and thieves, Esslin neglects to observe what the prisoners actually do when faced with Beckett. Where Esslin wants us to go through a framework of reference in order to see the relevance of the theater, the convicts do not distinguish reference from relevance at all. Instead, as I will show, they appear to respond to what speaks to their condition as prisoners. In collapsing reference and relevance, the prisoners create the address and elicit the force of the work. The pimp in jail is so intuitively familiar with Beckett's world that he is already the so-called voice of that work. What kind of encounter does his predicament, rather than his knowledge of philosophy, sustain with Beckett's work?

Mink Coats and Striped Suits

Beckett's play has been performed in numerous prison settings. These include performances done by and for prisoners (in Lüttringhausen, Germany, in 1953, which Beckett called "the true *Godot*"), by groups that brought the play to prison (San Quentin in 1957 and the Florida State Penitentiary system in 1974), and by outsiders who came to direct and train the convicts in the play (Jan Jönson in Kumla, Sweden, in 1985).¹¹ The prison is a strikingly unexpected place for theater not only to appear but also to thrive, much like Sarajevo and New Orleans were, as I discuss in chapter 2. The prison context offers a third kind of devastation area, one at only the slightest angle to both Sarajevo and New Orleans, as a ready-made backdrop for Beckett's play. The no-man's-land of prison is, ironically, inhabited only by men.¹² Yet as is suggested by its performance history, the appearance of Beckett's play is a recurring rather than a unique event. Sontag's and Chan's productions appear next to catastrophes that, according to the directors, have gone unaddressed. By contrast, performances of *Godot* in

prison are almost as old as the play itself: opening night in Lüttringhausen Prison followed the premiere of *Godot* at the Babylon Theater by only eight months. The ongoing appeal of *Waiting for Godot* to prisoners is another indication that the institution of prison is an ongoing crisis. The performances I discuss call attention to how the play resonates with experience as it is structured by carceral institutions.

The failure of Beckett's play at its American premiere at the Coconut Grove Playhouse in Miami is well known. The headline of the June 4, 1954, edition of the *Miami Herald* announced the unintended alienation effect of the play: "Mink Clad Audience Disappointed in 'Waiting for Godot.'" What catches the eye is the way the distinctive evening wear of the spectators enters into the announcement of the play's failure, as if the critic were looking more closely at the audience than at the stage. It raises the question, does it matter what one wears to a Beckett performance? What is the correlation between one's place in the fashion system (here: the vacationing tourists in Miami) and the connection one might conjure with the shabby vagabonds on Beckett's stage? A comparable title for this chapter might be "Striped Audience with Numbers on Backs Wildly Fond of 'Godot.'" For one of the peculiar dimensions of Beckett's play is its continuing resonance with an audience forcibly deprived of all fashion statements, who are allotted a very standardized wardrobe, who are neither on vacation nor at work, and who dwell, as former inmate Rick Cluchey says, "in limbo, trapped in the greyness of your own uniform of flesh."¹³

The prison performances provide a substantial structure to the play. Unlike the Chan and Sontag productions, in which *Godot* is replaced by an expressly negligent public figure or agency (Clinton, FEMA), prison performances of *Godot* transpire in a sequestered and nonpublic space, without headlines and without clever proposals about who might terminate the waiting process. Staged in the recesses of the institution, the carceral *Godots* exist in a kind of infamy, befitting the contraband status of a play that slips behind the walls. He who never appears (*Godot*) nevertheless keeps bringing his promise to arrive to Lüttringhausen, San Quentin, Kumla, and Raiford prisons. A population under siege or the survivors of a flood may seem to suffer differently than a prisoner suffers: what can the experience of war and evacuation, of historical time breaking open under the force of traumatic events, have in common with the experience of the meticulously measured time of the institutional setting? Yet Beckett's play links these dissimilar but equally exposed communities: Sarajevo, New Orleans, and the prison form a constellation around the uncanny solace they find in *Waiting for Godot*.

Exposure, Routine, Closed Space, Movement

When it is performed in jail, *Waiting for Godot* invites prisoners to relocate the performers and performance within their predicament, as the audiences in Sarajevo and New Orleans do. Four aspects of Beckett's play welcome this process: exposure, routine, closed space, and the movement on Beckett's stage. Vladimir and Estragon's unsheltered condition resonates unexpectedly with the inmate. Prisoners are exposed to a sea of forces, the cruelty of guards and inmates, in a manner similar to the vagabond's forced exposure to the elements. They are an exemplary instance of what Giorgio Agamben calls "bare life," *la nuda vita*, life in a permanent state of exception, shorn of qualities and traditional attributes.¹⁴ The nakedness of Beckett's characters is not the one that they had at birth but one they acquired, what remains after an endless process of stripping down and exfoliation: "Under this coat I am naked. Far more than when I was born."¹⁵ A mere residue to the implacable and barren stage, the characters display a placelessness that resonates with men shuffled around by an indifferent institution. The itinerant, like the prisoner, lives without assurance.

Waiting for Godot reduces drama to a set of routines. Critics have compared these routines to that of circus performers and clowns: "A music hall sketch of Pascal's *Pensées* as played by Fratellini's clowns," observes playwright Jean Anouilh in his review of *Godot's* premiere.¹⁶ These routines have also been compared to the movements of a prisoner. Underscoring first the weariness of these repetitions and then their futility, Adorno speaks of the "battered repetitions that Beckett's whole oeuvre irresistibly drags in. . . . The repetition compulsion is learned by watching the regressive behavior of the prisoner, who tries again and again."¹⁷ Where Anouilh suggests that Beckett gives us philosophy (Pascal) articulated through the highly animated and effect-oriented pratfalls of circus performers, Adorno, by contrast, insists that the play gives us a lesson in regressive behavior, repetition, and ineffectuality. Adorno even proposes that Beckett's situation of impasse, in which every action hits against a wall, was *learned* from the prisoner.

Provisionality appears in the way Vladimir and Estragon kill time on stage. The tension here is between the improvisational quality that Anouilh and other critics attribute to Beckett's "clowns" and the provisional quality of actions performed against the backdrop of despair. *Provisional* is a key term in the Beckett lexicon and describes that which is temporary yet urgent, ephemeral yet necessary. Beckett applies the term in describing the provisional hospital of the Irish Red Cross, observing, "'Provisional' is not

the term it was, in this universe become provisional."¹⁸ Yet it accurately describes the way Beckett's hobo figures occupy the stage and the measures (i.e., the habits and routines) they take in order to cope there. If Beckett's figures evoke a music-hall sketch, as Anouilh claims, then they do so only through the most damaged kind of improvisation, one drained of the spontaneity and surprise usually associated with the term. Beckett's stage inverts Heidegger: rather than being "in time," Vladimir and Estragon live, eat, and speak "for the time being."

The aimless and habit-structured interaction on Beckett's stage speaks to prisoners who have every hour of their day organized from above. They grasp how habit, as Vladimir puts it, is the "great deadener."¹⁹ In his essay on Proust, Beckett writes that "habit is the ballast that chains the dog to his vomit."²⁰ By showing only habit on stage, Beckett thereby implies the prisoner's chain. Even the sun seems to be going through the motions, as familiar and recycled as a summer-stock theater: "The day," says Vladimir, "is very near to the end of its repertory."

Martin Puchner notes the discrepancy that exists between the irrationality of Beckett's characters and the rationality, the methodical precision, of their movements. This rupture, Puchner observes, "must be seen as one of the strategies with which Beckett attacks the integrity of the actor. The association of verbal and corporeal expression and the expectation that they together represent a character are challenged by this dissociation of dialogue from gestural expressivity."²¹ Vladimir's thorough investigation of the emptiness of his hat and Vladimir and Estragon's movements toward each other, one step at a time and only in between their moments of spoken dialogue, are actions that indicate a paradoxical deliberation apart from conscious awareness. The stage directions tell Vladimir and Estragon to step toward each other only when they do not speak. Implicitly, a different agency articulates their bodies. The directives come (literally) below the level of the script. These are the movements that the actor knows but which his body reads aloud.

Beckett's stage directions, more than those of any other dramatist, are rules for actors. Not coincidentally, he also does a great deal to confine his actors: in large urns (*Play*), mounds of dirt (*Happy Days*), and trash cans (*Endgame*).²² Beckett's stage directions seep into the proceedings, under the principle that the less things happen, the more Beckett needs to keep watch over the things that do. The directions include complex readings of the tone and even motivation of dialogue: for example, when Pozzo tells Estragon, "Wait a little longer, you'll never regret it," Estragon's response, "We're in no hurry," is preceded by the stage direction "(scenting charity)." The actor

is to deliver the line as if Estragon's nostrils could detect the prospect of a handout, and this hypothetical whiff of charity underlies his insistence that they will stay where they are. Beckett's objection to JoAnne Akalaitis's production of *Endgame*, printed on a program insert, shows how gravely Beckett regarded the breach of these parenthetical imperatives: "Any production of *Endgame* which ignores my stage directions is completely unacceptable to me."²³ From this we can see how much more invested Beckett was in the procedure of the play than in its vision or concept. What Beckett writes within parentheses—never heard by the audience but enacted by the performers—is the repository for his authority. Stage directions to Beckett are not mere suggestions for how actors might move or deliver their lines; they are directives to the stage itself, to the entirety of the dramatic space, which is crisscrossed by Beckett's invisible regulations.

Stage directions simulate a penal institution in their distribution of movement and stasis across the space of the stage. Beckett's directives include the arrest of the characters. The first and second acts conclude with Estragon declaring, "Well, shall we go?" to which Vladimir replies, "Yes, let's go." Only each time this resolution is followed with the parenthetical command "*They do not move.*" The desire to leave, the proclamation to go, collides with the stagecraft of the play and provides this vow with a coda of futility. In that sense, the play might aptly be retitled *No Exit*. The characters in Sartre's play of that name cannot leave because they are beholden both to the judgments of others and to their own inauthenticity. But in Beckett's version, *No Exit* (or, more accurately, *Non Exeunt*) would receive its title from the play's stage directions, a force not encountered directly on the stage but rather one unconscious to the stage. A moment that Camus ("the divorce between the actor and his setting") and Esslin might term *absurdist* becomes jarringly real when performed in the context of prison.

Beckett's direction of *Waiting for Godot* in 1975 at the Schiller-Theater in Berlin suggests that he conceptualizes the rhythm of the play according to incarceration. In the theater notebooks, Beckett writes, "Thus establish at outset 2 caged dynamics, E[stragon] sluggish, V[ladimir] restless + perpetual separation and reunion of V[ladimir]/E[stragon]."²⁴ Beckett stages the simultaneous complementarity and opposition between the always restless and standing Vladimir and the sedentary and sluggish Estragon. Beckett reduces the four humors of medieval personality (melancholic, sanguine, choleric, phlegmatic) to the last two that are apparent in the bodies of the actors. During Lucky's monologue they leave and run back as if they were being driven mad or as if the cage of the stage could not accommodate their mutual separation. Stefan Wigger, who played Vladimir in Beckett's pro-

duction, observes that Vladimir and Estragon come together time after time “like a rubber band.” The elasticity of the collision suggests that something (like a wall) bounces them back together following their sudden departures and conflicts. This is the dynamic, and even the moral, noted by inmate C. Bandman in his review of *Godot* for the *San Quentin News*: “We continue to wait. When the scenery gets too drab and the action too slow, we’ll call each other names and swear to part forever—but then, there’s no place to go!”²⁵ The prisoner suggests that the rubber band described by Wigger is in fact closer to a chain. Bandman picks up on the caged dynamic between Beckett’s characters, an involuntary rapport between opposites who can neither stand nor leave one another.

Beckett conceives of the stage space for *Godot* as hermetic. The closed space of the stage amplifies the feeling of imprisonment as well as the spectator’s frustration. When director Alan Schneider proposed to do the play in the round, Beckett objected, saying, “I don’t in my ignorance agree with the round and feel *Godot* needs a very closed box.” He elaborated that the proscenium sustains a formal confrontation with the audience and heightens “the sense that the characters are ‘all trapped.’”²⁶ Beckett desires the squareness of a cell over the circular stage that would allow the audience to saturate the stage with their stares. Instead of tiers of spectators behind the actors from every angle, Beckett prefers the retaining wall of the proscenium that emphatically separates the stage and guarantees the emptiness of the space around the actors. As discussed in the introduction, Beckett pushes this wish to the point of desiring an empty theater for his performances, that is, the ultimately closed box of an auditorium whose doors never allow an audience to enter. Erin Koshal explains Beckett’s stipulation in this way: “In *Waiting for Godot* . . . solitude is never taken for granted. Didi and Gogo do not know what lies beyond the stage, but they continually wonder, listening for noises or making out forms in the darkness.”²⁷

Beckett’s play stages the precarious and threatened solitude of the inmate. In prison, one is always next to others but never with others. The only real solitude in prison, solitary confinement, is involuntary. Beckett’s Berlin production underscores the rapport between the characters and the empty space that surrounds them. He inserts four “inspection places” in which Vladimir and Estragon walk the perimeter of the stage and explore the three empty spaces confronting them, including the inaccessible “void” in the auditorium.²⁸ How are we to describe this walk in which Beckett’s figures physically mark the periphery of the stage and take in the vast spaces that hem them in? Though they are “trapped,” Beckett’s characters

move like guards on a night watch during an evening in which nothing's happening yet all is not well.

Limitation of movement is a condition with which the prisoner is intimately familiar. Two weeks before the arrival of *Godot*, adjacent to articles announcing the production, a column in the *San Quentin News* coincidentally makes note of how prison inmates ambulate within the yard. A prisoner by the name of "Etaoin Shrdlu" writes a weekly column titled "Bastille by the Bay." A week before the *Godot* performance he begins with this note: "THOUGHTS WHILE MILLING (Here one mills, doesn't stroll, wander, or pace.)" These "thoughts while milling" are the prisoner's retort to Schiller's *Spaziergang*, Wordsworth's strolls, and Nietzsche's climbs. The prisoner is peripatetic, but with deep restrictions; consequently, his philosophy—the thoughts generated by his movement in the yard—is different. The thinking generated by milling begins by finding a vocabulary for this movement, differentiating it, for example, from both leisurely *strolling* and professorial *padding*. Over these Shrdlu chooses *milling*, a grinding in place, modeled on the repetitive movements of machines. Milling goes on in an enclosure: one mills *about* but never beyond. Two weeks later, Shrdlu will write one of the three reviews of the *Godot* performance. Perhaps without knowing it, Shrdlu was preparing himself to describe the movement of the actors he would see in Beckett's play. On the stage one doesn't stroll, wander, or pace. One mills. His choice pseudonym indicates how Shrdlu aligns even his writing process within a graphically confined space, something deader than a column. He takes his name from the lingo of newspaper typesetting. Linotype machine operators were unable to delete typing errors. When an error was made, the line could not be reused. The quickest way to get to the end of the line was for the operator to run his finger down the closest row of keys. The sequence of letters flagged the error for the newspaper compositor who would throw out the line. *Etaoinshrdlu* is therefore a nonsense phrase filling the dead space between the typing error and the end of the page, a codeword for *erase me*.

The characters in *Godot* encounter a stricture on their freedom through the expansiveness, rather than the limitation, of space. For Beckett, incarceration is not conveyed through a psychological condition such as claustrophobia. *Waiting for Godot* emphasizes both the formal limit of the stage and the vast emptiness beyond it. The fear he seems to cultivate in his characters is Pascalian: a fear of infinite spaces. This is apparent in Beckett's response to a 1961 television production of *Waiting for Godot*: "When the production was over, [Beckett] sat for awhile with his head in his hands. 'My play,' Beckett said, 'wasn't written for this box. My play was written

for small men locked in a big space. Here you're all too big for the place.' And he went on, 'You see, you could write a very good play for television about a woman knitting. You'd go from the face to the knitting, from the knitting to the face.'"²⁹ It is the vast space of the theater auditorium, its atmospheric pressure, that encloses the vagabonds on his stage. The apparatus of television (its seeing and enlarging across great distances) reduces the incarcerating quality of empty space in the theater. Light operates in the theater to isolate the characters on stage and separate them from the darkened audience. Where the illumination of the stage emphasizes the recession of the vagabonds, the television projects their image toward the spectator and brightens the living room with them.

Beckett contrasts the locked space of the stage not only with the proportions of the television box but also with the type of labor dramatized on television. His example, not accidentally, is a drama of constructive labor: television could enlarge the slight and understated gestures of knitting, focusing first on the face of the knitter, then the craft, then back to the face of the knitter. *Waiting for Godot*, by contrast, is a labor of undoing, as there is "nothing to be done." In his "Notes Diverse Holo," Beckett calls this work of undoing "Penelopizing," after Penelope, wife of Odysseus, who took her knitting apart every night in order to postpone her promise to marry.³⁰ Television is the proper medium for Penelope by day. Penelope by night, however, is the province of theater. In *Godot*, as in the *Odyssey*, the unraveling of work, or Penelopizing, is tied to the activity of waiting.

Theme Not New to Cons

Waiting is the aspect of the play that resonates most emphatically with the prisoner's condition. Institutionalized time is empty time and *Godot's* time. An adult education teacher at the performance in San Quentin states, "They know what is meant by waiting. And they know that if Godot finally came he would only be a disappointment."³¹ This knowledge of waiting, and the implicit knowledge of its emptiness (for what is disappointment but yet another missed appointment), is consistently attributed to the prisoners by writers grappling with the success of *Godot* behind bars. The homology established between the play and prison life is not very different in an article about the return of *Waiting for Godot* to San Quentin in 1988: "There is a lot of waiting in San Quentin. Some 3028 inmates wait for meals; 777 guards wait for their shift to end; 225 inmates on death row wait for the gas chamber; and, on this sunny Thursday, seven men wait around a table

in a cramped room. They are waiting for 'Waiting for Godot' rehearsals to begin."³² The journalist lulls us with an enumeration of the instances of waiting in a prisoner's day, thereby implying the almost natural emergence of *Godot* within its walls. He claims, with a wink, that they are even waiting for the waiting in the play to begin.

The subheadline of the *San Francisco Chronicle* review of the 1957 San Quentin performance, "Theme Not New to Cons,"³³ throws light on one of the unique historical trajectories of high modernism. This is a moment in the early 1950s when *Waiting for Godot*, rejected by civilian audiences, required the audience of pimps, thieves, and murderers to keep its viability. The reviewer welds the event of the play, the nonarrival that constitutes its curious (in)action, to the life of the prisoner. The subheadline is testament to the way that performances before an audience of criminals transform *Waiting for Godot* from a perplexing novelty to something *not new*, from something challenging (to sophisticated theatergoers) to something popular (with inmates).

Yet these early reviews of *Godot* at San Quentin are the first instance of one of the myths of performing *Godot*, namely, that a rock-bottom community is forged between audience and actors in their wait. As Sidney Homan phrases it, "In the presence of such challenges to the meaning of our existence, we can only say—and say only—that on any given night of a performance of *Godot* we acted not alone but in concert. . . . Together, actors and audience, we waited for Godot."³⁴ Homan wants waiting to be beyond interrogation, sealing what we can say (and can only say) about it. Yet we lose our link to the play once we limit the ways we express waiting. The *Chronicle* author establishes waiting as something *known* to the prisoner (as if it were a skill) or, even more drably, as a *theme* (as if the inmates were watching an undergraduate essay on the play rather than the play itself). The journalists use the prisoner to block further inquiry into the temporal predicament both on stage and off. Can one know waiting? What does *Waiting for Godot* tell us about this experience of time, for example, that differentiates it from the suspense one would feel watching any other play? How does the theatrical waiting during Beckett's play address the institutional waiting of the prisoner?

The frequently proposed connection between the prisoner and the play resonates with the means that our culture employs to ingest Beckett. Prisoners initiate a way for audiences to access *Godot*; they provide a door into the very locked box of Beckett's stage. The wider public thoroughly domesticates (or thematizes) waiting because they have experienced waiting: for

a taxi, unemployment benefits, a call, a spot, tomorrow, or opening night of *Waiting for Godot*. The last scenario, waiting for Beckett, is practically scripted by the frequent abbreviation of *Waiting for Godot* to simply *Godot*, so that *Waiting for Godot* seems already to designate what we are doing before the curtain rises.³⁵ André Gregory's production of *Endgame* in 1973 both evokes and implodes these idioms of waiting for a Beckett play to begin when, on the opening night of his production of *Endgame*, the audience was greeted with only locked doors and an empty theater.³⁶

Before even seeing Beckett's play, audiences are formed, and formulate their response to the play, by taking up the implicit invitation to rewrite its title. *Waiting for Godot* has entered our culture primarily through this reinscription process (and secondarily through the syllabus). These endless reassignments of Godot's name extend utilitarian waiting (as for a bus or cab) to the central dimension of the play. Utilitarian waiting underscores the *for* in *waiting for*; it assigns a clear endpoint to the waiting process. Implicitly, the cause for waiting is also the terminal point of waiting. In the next chapter I discuss how Sontag and Chan repeatedly, and serially, inscribe various objects, authorities, and institutions in the blank space of "Godot," thus inscribing the play's waiting with an object and a terminus. These productions underscore the absence of the figure awaited by Beckett's vagabonds and rename that figure (as Clinton or as FEMA). They thereby highlight the absence of intervention, the undue negligence displayed by authorities toward the crises of Sarajevo and New Orleans. In sum, Sontag and Chan employ the most famous no-show in theater history to dramatize the need for intervention.

Prisoners also play this game of alternative baptisms, yet in a crucially different way. In the *San Quentin News*, Shrdlu's weekly column titled "Bastille by the Bay" serves as a kind of *New Yorker*-style "Talk of the Town" for convicts. The day after the *Godot* performance, we read the following comment: "WITS ABOUT THE YARD are belaboring the obvious as the result of the recent stage play and the recentest flick. Seems the picture was 'Doctor at Sea' with Dick [sic] Bogarde and Brigitte you-know-who. Which leaves the quipsters enough ammunition to chortle: 'You live your life and I'll live mine, I'm waiting for BARDOT!!!'"³⁷ To the prisoner, Godot's arrival seems as unlikely and as impossible as the arrival of a celebrity or the incarnation of Bardot out of her projected image. Bardot is at no less a remove from the prison yard than Godot, yet she enlists the prisoner in a different sort of waiting. Bardot gives the prisoner an image, whereas Godot gives merely the promise (through an intermediary, no less) to arrive. The image of Bar-

dot is already in the prison, and its projection into the prison space allows the filmgoer to contour his desire to the screen. The theater, by contrast, gives something closer to a rumor, the rumor that someone cares, and hence is closer to the endless waiting that goes on in the carceral setting.

Strategies of renaming Godot gibe with the fact that people remember Godot's absence more than they remember the vagabonds' waiting. Yet it is this arduous process, rather than its purported and vaguely apprehended goal, that we see on stage. The headline of the *San Quentin News*, written by prisoners, provides useful contrast to the one already cited from the *Chronicle*: "Workshop Players Score Hit Here: San Francisco Group Leaves S. Q. Audience Waiting for Godot." The transaction that takes place in this headline leaves a bitter flavor in the mouth. *Godot* is not just a hit but, as a "hit scored," a robbery. The gang (the actors) got in and got out (they retained their freedom). In the process they leave an ambiguous gift at the crime scene. The gift of the play is not the play itself ("Waiting for Godot" is not italicized in the headline) but rather something meshing indistinguishably with the everyday condition of the prisoner. Beckett's lesson is neither moral nor conveyed by Brechtian slogans. The prisoners were aware of this. In his review titled "The Play's the Thing," inmate C. Bandman observes, "It asked nothing in point, it forced no dramatized moral on the viewer, it held out no specific hope."³⁸ While the hope the play offers may not be specific, Bandman does not say that there is no hope, much less that the play nihilistically embraces hopelessness. Kafka's observation that "there is hope, but not for us" leaves hope in the world but only as something unaddressed to us: we cannot take hope as one of our belongings. Bandman has something similar in mind here. He senses that the play offers no *specific* hope, but possibly an unspecific or generic hope. The hope that Godot offers the inmate is akin to the grasp of a new kind of drama: the absurd (and absurdly courageous) articulation of one's own powerlessness.

The lesson of the play brings to reflection what the prisoners were already doing, though perhaps without quite realizing it, and certainly without realizing it as a stageable drama.³⁹ This lesson includes, and even depends on, the recognition that the actors, unlike the inmate audience, are free to go home. When the actors are released, the abandoned condition of the characters on stage is transferred onto the inmate-spectators. There is no specific hope in Beckett's play, yet as the *San Quentin News* headline maintains, the visit of the actors and the nonvisit of Godot have already redefined the time spent behind bars. During the performance and in its

aftermath, the prisoners formulate their relation to the empty time of the prison.

The prison does not trust the prisoner to wait. Waiting in prison, though a requirement for parole (at least among the nonlifers), is not a means to an end: it is not a waiting *for* something. Here, waiting is pure expenditure. It is not voluntary waiting, and it is not defined through desire or expectation for a thing or outcome. This waiting is society's punishment for the prisoner whose crime is one of emotion and control. Before serving his sentence, the prisoner effectively refuses perhaps the fundamental axiom of civilization: to defer gratification, to delay, to wait. So the institution takes waiting out of the hands of the prisoner. *Waiting for Godot* stages this conflicted relation to waiting, rather than the one that people assume in appropriating its title.

In Bandman's review of *Waiting for Godot* in the *San Quentin News*, he suggests that the vagabond's waiting on stage may be forcible detention. Bandman draws attention to the message relayed by the boy, and delivered twice in the play, that Godot will be coming—tomorrow. He calls the boy the "immemorial child-conscience which prods [Gogo and Didi] into waiting for something more, tomorrow night. Keep them waiting. Even though they cannot help it."⁴⁰ *Keep them waiting. Even though they cannot help it.* That they cannot help waiting implies that they do not choose to wait. The process cannot be begun, interrupted, or stopped. Waiting is not subject, claims Bandman, to deliverance or the idea of deliverance. The boy who delivers the promise of Godot's coming, standing in for Godot himself, provokes the painful illusion in the hobos that there will be an outcome, "something more" to the waiting than just waiting itself.

In the same edition of the prison newspaper, another reviewer writes that the boy "holds the slender thread of realism" of the play.⁴¹ The boy holds a thread in the manner of Ariadne, as a means out of the labyrinthine prison, promising a possible end to waiting. The instigation to wait, not the illusion that one waits for, is real to the prisoners. Its realism is located in the physical quality of the promise that prods Vladimir and Estragon into imaging a purpose for their being on stage. In this moment they lose the chance to realize that they are just waiting, apart from any object, any outcome, or any Godot. The realization that the prisoner's life is consumed by a waiting done, somehow, by someone other than himself, by an agent other than the "I," comes across in an exchange in *Endgame* in a similar way. "Do you believe in the life to come?" Hamm asks Clov. Clov replies, "Mine was always that." In this format life is a living for a future that will not be

part of life. Equated with life, waiting promises not more life but only more waiting.

Waiting versus Expectation

I suppose he is Lucky to have no more expectations.

—Samuel Beckett⁴²

The successful reception of *Godot* in prison has much to do with this waiting beyond expectation. In *The Theatre of the Absurd*, Esslin claims that *Waiting for Godot* succeeded with the prisoners “not because it confronted them with a situation in some ways analogous to their own” but rather because “they were unsophisticated enough to come to the theatre without any preconceived notions and ready-made expectations, so that they avoided the mistake that trapped so many established critics who condemned the play for its lack of plot, development, characterization, suspense, or plain common sense.”⁴³ The prisoner’s wait is different from the critic’s. Whereas the critic approaches the play knowingly and employs his familiarity with theater to process his encounter with the performance, the inmates are waiting but without anticipation: they are used to waiting for nothing. The critic employs his expectation to pass judgment and condemns the play. The prisoner, ironically, avoids the “mistake that trapped so many established critics.” Esslin’s observation testifies to the need to stage *Godot* not only in *unexpected* settings (in the prison, after the flood, during the siege) but in *unexpected* ones. Jonathan Kalb notes that one of Beckett’s legacies is the way “he actually changed many people’s expectations of what can happen, what is supposed to happen, when they enter the theatre.”⁴⁴

Godot forces us to realign the relationship between our expecting and our waiting. Vladimir’s question “Will night never come?” seems to counterbalance his refrain that they are waiting for the title character to come. There is no inevitability to the night sky of the stage. Vladimir’s beseeching question about the arrival of night strikes the audience, particularly those seated in the prison cafeteria, as a fruitless expectation. Expecting Godot to arrive is no less uncertain. Pozzo links the two events: “If I had an appointment with a Godin . . . Godet . . . Godot . . . anyhow you see who I mean, I’d wait till it was black night before I gave up.”⁴⁵ Esslin suggests that prison prepares inmates for this type of waiting within the play.

Why is expectation destructive of our experience of the play? No doubt because it seduces us into thinking we can envision the end of waiting and that we can see through to its other side. Where the performance of *Godot* begins unexpectedly—in Sarajevo, New Orleans, and prison—the waiting on stage continues the waiting inherent in the setting but, by staging the latter, transforms it. In other words, by showing that this waiting is stageable and dramatic, Beckett makes that real-world waiting (in the rubble of a besieged city, on the bayou, and in prison) worthy of fiction—and therefore life. In these settings Beckett's intention that the theater is to be re-expected becomes transparent.

Waiting on Beckett's stage and waiting in prison merge with one another. A letter to the editor of the *San Quentin News* gives us an opportunity to look at the dynamic of expectation and waiting in a particular convict by the name (or pseudonym) of "Ed Realart":

THE EDITOR—

I had to go to work before the play was over. Right between the first and second act. Will you please publish how it came out?

—Ed Realart

The editor responds: "It came out fine."⁴⁶ The inmate is forcibly removed from the audience because of work detail, and he is transferred from the cafeteria where the play is staged to another sector of the prison. Yet the interruption of his *Godot* experience does not make him stop waiting. Crucially, he does not employ his expectations at this instance ("it wasn't what I expected") to block further thinking about the play. He implicitly wants to submit to a further undoing of his expectations. He can neither guess "how things came out" nor believe the synopses volunteered by his fellow inmates (that the play really loops back on itself, the second act concluding in a fashion identical to the first). He thus becomes an author and writes a petition in order to become a reader of the play. He would like the newspaper to print the part of the play that he was not permitted to see. The editor replies laconically, Beckettianly: *it came out fine*. To one who has seen the play, his answer is simultaneously extreme understatement and hyperbole. Instead of delivering the kind of useful wisdom or opinion that one expects from such a column, the editor offers only a vague euphemism, but one that does justice to the difficulty of saying precisely how it comes out. His answer offers no satisfaction, no illusory wrap-up.⁴⁷

Godot and Bariona

Waiting for Godot offers few concessions to prisoners, the audience that would presumably desire these most. It is illuminating in this regard to compare *Waiting for Godot* not to Sartre's *No Exit* but his first play, *Bariona, or the Son of Thunder*.⁴⁸ Sartre wrote *Bariona* while a prisoner of war in Stalag XII, and, on Christmas day in 1940, he performed it with and for his fellow prisoners. The play is set in Judea during the Roman occupation. Bariona, head of a small village, receives news that imperial Rome wishes to astronomically increase taxes. Bariona declares that his town will not pay the tax. After threats from the Roman army, he states that his town will pay the tax but "after us nobody will ever pay taxes again."⁴⁹ He proposes that the town no longer reproduce: he wants everyone's family tree to slowly resemble the one onstage in *Godot*. Sartre fabricates a landscape of growing destitution as the conditions for his carceral theater. Bariona adopts Beckett's asymptotic approach to poverty but in the form of his public policy, as an official order on resignation and dwindling. Beckett's work similarly dabbles in eugenics as a means of unreproducing the world, a critique of mimesis expressed by a draining of the gene pool. In Beckett's first play, *Eleuthéria*, Dr. Piouk articulates a sterility project a bit less sanctimoniously than Bariona.⁵⁰ Indeed, the nonreproductive policy of *Eleuthéria* may shed light on some features of *Waiting for Godot*, its all-male cast, and its literal superimposition of birth over the grave.

Yet Sartre, unlike Beckett, relinquishes what his title character calls the "religion of nothing."⁵¹ Halfway through *Bariona*, there is a sudden dramatic turn. What arrives in Sartre's play is closer to God than even Godot: Bariona witnesses the birth of Christ. Birth is suddenly hailed as the hope for prisoners. Bariona proceeds into the street with his armed townsmen to fight the Romans. Sartre's play stages an allegory for the transformation of autonomous literature (one that, like Beckett's, withdraws from our grasp) into a literature of commitment. But this commitment is underpinned by the holiday of Christ's birth. The play concludes not with an aside from Bariona but with his direct address to the audience at Treves:

BARIONA. *to the prisoners:* And you prisoners, this is the end of the Christmas play which was written for you. You are not happy, and maybe there is more than one of you who has tasted that taste of gall in his mouth, that bitter salty taste I'm talking about. But I think that for you, too, on this Christmas day—and every other day—there will be joy!⁵²

Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* is dedicated to that taste of gall in the mouth, the taste we cannot quite define. Just as Beckett avoids the dramatic downward turn, the *catastrophe*, his characters never turn directly to address the condition of the audience. That condition becomes apparent through the context of its performance. Sartre provides a play for prisoners, not a play about prison. Beckett generates a hermetic and microcosmal play that allows an alienated spectator to connect with it. Sartre's play, by contrast, uses the holiday on which the play is performed, the celebration of the birth of Christ, to bring its poverty to an end. Bariona seemed to be undertaking the long wait, a wait to which he would give his existence. What interrupts his wait is the very day of its performance, the sanctioned and measured time of the calendar.

A Prison Faces the Study

Waiting for Godot nowhere names the prison. Unlike Genet's *Haute Surveillance*, it does not take prison as its explicit setting. This quality is consistent with Adorno's observation about *Endgame* that "the name of the catastrophe is to be spoken only in silence."⁵³ Beckett described this quality as wariness toward "explicitation," that is, not only explanation but also anything that would upset the implicit and discreet quality of his work.⁵⁴ Beckett keeps mum about the motivating crisis, maintaining an anonymous core to his play. This sustains the challenge of Beckett's work: it is without ambiguity, at all moments as precise as an eye chart whose coherence at a formal level does not somehow add up at an abstract level, commit itself to our understanding, or reward us with digestible themes. Diverse strands of Beckett criticism unite around the effort to supply a name to these articulating silences. Joseph Roach reads the poverty of Beckett's work in connection to the Irish famine. Writing about the dead voices heard by Vladimir and Estragon but unheard by the audience, Roach observes, "To anyone who is prepared to listen, they speak of the consequences of the potato famine, or the Great Hunger, the effects which endured long after its deadliest years, 1845–51."⁵⁵ Noting that Lucky's dance is called "the net," James Knowlson deduces that "for Beckett man is, as Lucky's dance suggests, imprisoned in a net" and that we can see this dance "as expressing in a dramatically arresting way a much wider view of man as what might be termed a 'prisoner of life.'"⁵⁶

What Esslin calls the "immediate grasp" of the play by the criminals suggests that the play does not necessitate the mediated grasp of the theo-

rist. Though Roach claims we need to be “prepared” to listen and have our ears “sensitized” to the values he finds in Beckett, the desensitized prisoners with little interpretive training successfully connect with the play.⁵⁷ What theorists most urgently want to mediate about *Godot* are its breaks and silences, the qualities that make the play uniquely available to prisoners. *Godot* is “about” prison, but not because the institution is its content. The dimensions of the play I have highlighted—the exposure of the vagabonds, the routines of the actor, their management by an authority external to the actor, the closed space of the stage, and the separation of waiting from expectation—give only a *latent image* of the prison. These dimensions are “about” prison in the sense that they stake themselves near or around the institution, but without mirroring it. The danger of handling the silences of Beckett’s work comes from confusing the activity of speaking about the play with speaking for it. It is tempting to ascribe a content to Beckett’s silences and to move too quickly to metaphorize it. It seems unlikely that a prisoner serving a life sentence would speak of man as “prisoner of life”—or, for that matter, speak of prison at all within quotation marks.

The performance of *Waiting for Godot* before an audience of criminals helps us rethink the silences of Beckett’s work. The prisoners’ immediacy of reaction suggests that the latent image fulfills itself through their recognition. The imprisoned audience works to familiarize the play to themselves rather than trying to access the play through concepts that may help them interpret its meaning. The prisoners do not try to make sense of the nonsense of the play; instead, they recognize the nonsense as familiar.

Beckett’s characters speak frequently of reasoning (“Stoutly reasoned!” shouts Pozzo) but almost never of reason *per se*. In like fashion, the prisoners adjust themselves to the reasoning of the play (which may resemble the reasoning of a joke, a bureaucracy, or a set of prison rules), but they make no amends for the absence of reason.⁵⁸ The fact that Beckett does not burden his characters and dialogue with context or explicit history makes these characters accessible to the audience at San Quentin. The director of the performance, Herbert Blau, writes that the play “had such an impact on the prison that the language of the play, the names of the characters—a Gogo, a Didi, a Pozzo—became part of the therapeutic vocabulary at San Quentin. It may be so to this day.”⁵⁹ A “Lucky” becomes a man on death row, “Pozzo” a bull (a guard).⁶⁰ In the next chapter I discuss how Chan and Sontag took the name “Godot,” already pointing toward the wings of the stage and toward an imminent arrival, and redirected it beyond the stage entirely, at authorities noticeably absent from the crisis at hand. Signifi-

cantly, the prisoners show no interest in bestowing the title of Godot on anyone. Absorbed in the negative labor of waiting, they appropriate only the names of figures waiting on stage, relocating the names of Beckett's trapped characters into the prison hierarchy. In addition, they also transfer the gestures of power from the stage to their world. In Etain Shrdlu's column "Bastille by the Bay," we find not a review of *Godot* but evidence for the way it cut into the prison environment: "One clown dropping his head-gear from the fifth tier caught a ground-floor eye. Eschewing the polite request, this one pointed the fateful finger: 'Haaat!'"⁶¹ The one who loses his hat from the fifth tier does not ask politely for it; instead, he becomes Pozzo, the character with the whip who condenses his orders to Lucky into single words: "Baassket," "Stool," "Think." The prisoner who dropped his hat reenacts Pozzo's shorthand, in which no elaboration, no address to the subject, is needed to get him to come running.

A biographical anecdote may help us specify how Beckett situates the theatrical institution in relation to the carceral institution. Beckett's apartment on the seventh floor at 38 Boulevard Saint Jacques has a view of three landmarks: Notre-Dame, the Panthéon, and the barred cell windows of the gray Santé Prison. In his biography of Beckett, James Knowlson notes that the prison faces Beckett's study.⁶² In a direct sense, then, Beckett lives about the prison. He cannot help but note its proximity, for whereas the Panthéon never made a sound, he hears cries from the prison even at odd hours of the night. Beckett replies to the prison, using a mirror to communicate messages in Morse code to an inmate "housed in a cell clearly visible from Beckett's study window."⁶³ Beckett's German translator, Elmar Tophoven, reports that he came by the apartment to find "Beckett standing at the open window, clearly signaling to someone. Beckett promptly raised and lowered his arms to indicate to the prisoner across the way that the exchange would have to be interrupted because someone had just called to see him. He explained to Tophoven: 'They have so little to entertain them, you know.'"⁶⁴

This anecdote offers a sense of the way that *Waiting for Godot*, which describes life as light that "gleams an instant" as off a mirror, speaks to prisoners. The method of communication that Beckett takes up is not very different from what prisoners use to communicate among themselves (e.g., tapping on a pipe). Without leaving his study, Beckett slips into the prison, communicating with the prisoner through unofficial channels. He foregoes the bureaucracy of visiting hours and phone calls made to someone visible through Plexiglas. This is not a choice, however, since Beckett, at least prior to communication by mirror, does not know anybody in the prison

other than the pimp who stabbed him years earlier: whom would he say that he wants to see? Beckett begins by communicating with no one, until a gleam of light comes back at him and initiates a different flow, a new triangle formed by the sun, Beckett's window, and the cell.

In some ways this scenario fulfills a wish that Beckett expressed at a dinner party in 1937, when he was asked, "What would you most like to create?" Beckett's answer: "Light in the monad."⁶⁵ Yet the scenario also gives us something surprising, a light that comes from the monad.

Beckett's study faces the prison: Knowlson's description of the architectural layout of the Boulevard Saint Jacques is a model for the orientation of Beckett's work toward the prison. As a study of man, a dramatic anthropology of man's essence, *Godot* fulfills the humanist protocol. Prison never makes an appearance in Beckett's study, and yet it exerts pressure on it, countenances it, even shines a beam of information into it. Beckett says he was entertaining the prisoner from his study. He means that he entertains the prisoner as part of his study—something that enters his thought and temporarily retains in his thinking, but not as the subject of direct concentration, as he can only see Santé when he looks up from his work. Entertaining the prisoner from his study, his play became entertainment for the prisoner. Beckett's work, the condition it depicts, asks to be confronted by the prison, something that in fact happens when his plays are performed there.⁶⁶

Beckett writes *Catastrophe* for a particular prisoner, Václav Havel.⁶⁷ The dedication "For Václav Havel" stands as the address "of" the play, paradoxically both where it is and where the play is going. As in *Godot*, there are no cells, chains, guards, or uniforms. It presents a director speaking to his assistant about an immobile, exposed, "ashen" figure standing on a plinth on a stage (looking like Didi or Gogo after the second blast). The director tells his assistant to make some alterations (whiten the subject's face, remove the gown). The assistant responds to the imperatives of the director ("I can't see the toes. I'm sitting in the front row and I can't see the toes") by saying, "I make a note."

The play's absence of explicit statements about prison seems to be at odds with the fact that the play was Beckett's contribution to a festival in which dramatists, including Ionesco, submitted one-act dramas as protest to Havel's incarceration. Enoch Brater describes two possibilities for theater, one aesthetic and the other political. "The energy of *Catastrophe*," he says, "cannot be contained by anything as neat as a swift denunciation of repressive regimes, however attractive such a statement from Beckett might

be."⁶⁸ Brater concludes, "*Catastrophe* is far more a discourse on method, specifically theater method, than an argument about ethical imperatives from an agent provocateur. Theater tactics, not power politics, are implicated here."⁶⁹ *Catastrophe* is a study of a study: a rehearsal of a play in which the audience is to study this figure on stage. As the stage directions indicate: "D[irector] and A[ssistant] contemplate." Beckett in fact underbids the protest gesture by incorporating the assistant, who not only takes the requests of the Director to alter how the body is exposed on stage but also writes them down. She greets each request with the line "I make a note." What is the nature of this note-taking, this note-worthiness of the director's suggestions? He puts stenography (or narrow writing) on stage since it is the most neutral shorthand for expression. Beckett does not direct the audience to think in prescribed ways about power. Rather, he induces us to similarly make note and register the study of the play. The writing of the stenographer lives up to its name by narrowing the distance separating us from the effects of power.

Author as Warden

Before *Waiting for Godot* could appeal to prisoners, it first had to appeal to the prison warden who makes decisions about what kind of performances are allowed: it had to be compatible with the culture of prison. The warden permitted the performance of *Waiting for Godot* at San Quentin because of something missing from Beckett's stage, something that it filtered out of the picture, along with laughter and comfort: women. No women were allowed in the prison, and Beckett's play does not feature one. Entering the prison to perform requires the actors to go through another filtering for the prison: "We could take in nothing metallic."⁷⁰ At entry the actors were told that the prison would not negotiate for their release were they to be taken hostage by the prisoners during an escape attempt.⁷¹

Literary critic Mary Bryden makes an observation about *Godot* that we might conceivably find in a memo from Warden Duffy: "On the face of it, then, women (especially the fertile ones) are potential agents for disturbance, and are best excluded or (as in many Biblical genealogies) left in the wings."⁷² Beckett objected to productions that featured women in the roles of Vladimir and Estragon. Thinking perhaps about the physiological basis for the incontinence suffered by the character Vladimir, Beckett justified his rationale by observing, "Women don't have prostates." Beckett's injunction

has not prevented all-female productions of the play, such as Bruno Bous-sagol's at the Avignon Festival in 1991. These productions offer a reply to Beckett: the prostate is something performed, not given.

By agreeing to allow the play to be performed not because of what it contains but because of what it eliminates, the warden seems to enhance the alarm system already in place.⁷³ Likewise, the instruments of discipline employed on Beckett's stage were managed and shown to remain in the control of the guards. The troupe was permitted to use the rope and whip only under the condition that a guard hand the props to the actor who played Pozzo as he went on stage and take them back immediately upon his exit. The prison was evidently afraid of these items becoming useful objects to the prisoners, either for threatening others or for hanging themselves. Prisoners grasp the wistfulness of Estragon's line "If we only had a little more rope." The warden surveys the stage exclusively in terms of security, with the performance itself and the handling of props remaining under the constant monitoring of the guards.⁷⁴

The work of the author who wants to remove ego from the stage gets along remarkably well with an institution that wants to do the same. Describing the tonal consistency of Beckett's work, Adorno picks up on this aspect of monitoring and control: "There is a constant monitoring to see that things are one way and not another; an alarm system with a sensitive bell indicates what fits in with the play's topography and what does not. Beckett keeps quiet about the delicate things as well as the brutal."⁷⁵ Adorno here compares Beckett's work to a securitized space, though he says it is done out of delicacy (*Zartheit*), not control. Beckett monitors everything that enters the stage and everything that transpires on it. It is as if Beckett were working during the tradition of actors being thieves, disrespectable reprobate types, and he needed to direct accordingly. The stage is fantastically sparse: the singular tree seems as if it were pulled through a barbed wire fence just to make its appearance. This stringency of Beckett is noted by Blau, who writes that *Waiting for Godot* and *Endgame* are plays "with magnitude, achieved through the most excruciating constraint. . . . Old endgame, lost of old, every move a crisis."⁷⁶ Blau emphasizes the constraint, Beckett's exterior exertions over the stage, rather than some hypothetical self-restraint by his characters. Beckett set a trip wire around his stage in order to produce, paradoxically, a shockingly *unalarmed* theatrical space. Nothing on Beckett's stage raises the characters' eyebrows or calls undue attention to itself, and nobody reacts or commits a wrong move. The stage requires us to take our shock up on our own time.

The Closed System

A recurring motif within Beckett criticism is the comparison of his work to a “closed system.” Some background to this concept and its application to Beckett’s work is needed before appreciating how the term might be relevant to Beckett’s theater. Beckett invited the term into critical discussion of the work. His novel *Murphy* constitutes an anthology of theorems, generated by and applied to the world of the tavern. In the novel, the character Wylie says, “The syndrome known as life is too diffuse to admit of palliation. For every symptom that is eased, another is made worse. The horseleech’s daughter is a closed system. Her quantum of wantum cannot vary.”⁷⁷

Picking up Beckett’s cue in this passage, Hugh Kenner divides this moment of the closed system into the first and second laws of thermodynamics: “It is a world locally freakish but totally shaped by two laws, the law of conservation of energy and the second law of thermodynamics. The former law states that nothing is added to or subtracted from the system, but simply mutated, and the latter states that the degree of organization within this closed system grows constantly less and so constantly less improbable.”⁷⁸ Kenner sees abundant examples for this hypothesis in Beckett’s work. Wylie demonstrates the first law. To this we could also add the opening sentence of the novel, which heralds *Godot*’s description of the sun’s repertory: “The sun shone, having no alternative, on the nothing new.”⁷⁹ The second law of thermodynamics, according to Kenner, is the “real theme of Lucky’s headlong oration,” with its unfinished labors and its dissipation into “fading, fading, fading,” “wastes and pines,” “the great cold the great dark.”⁸⁰ Darko Suvin’s analysis of Beckett is deeply indebted to Kenner’s discussion. *Terra Beckettiana*—Suvin’s scientific term describing Beckett’s world—“is an aimless island universe, not only desolate but constantly running down.”⁸¹ Yet for Suvin, Beckett’s universe is not accurately described by the first two laws alone: “There remained unnoted [in Kenner’s discussion] . . . the third law of thermodynamics (Nernst’s theorem: absolute zero can only be approached asymptotically, i.e., getting ever closer to it without reaching it) which is just as characteristic of Beckett’s rhythm and vision, and which should be accorded as important a place in any conclusion about him.”⁸² Suvin’s inclusion of the third law addresses how Beckett’s system tends toward an ever-reduced impoverished minimum, rather than the sheer zero of nihilism.

David Houston Jones’s *Samuel Beckett and Testimony* offers the most recent and suggestive reading of the closed system. Like Suvin, he recalls

a scientific figure left out of the critical discussion thus far: “Maxwell’s demon,” a thought experiment by James Clerk Maxwell, which hypothesizes an imaginary being able to prevent the loss of heat in a closed system, keeping entropy at bay, a scenario that would invalidate the second law of thermodynamics.⁸³ Jones claims that Maxwell’s demon (a figure that enters into some of Beckett’s aesthetic essays) sheds light on how Beckett’s narrators “are neither (in *The Lost Ones*) part of the population of searchers nor human beings looking into the closed space from a distance [in *Long Observation*]. The details of Maxwell’s scenario corroborate the immersion of the narrator in the closed space texts . . . while signaling his existence as *hypothetical*.”⁸⁴ Jones therefore utilizes Maxwell’s thought experiment to entertain the idea that Beckett’s “closed space texts” are simulations, themselves experimental: “Rather than indicating a fully realized fictional world, they draw attention to the limited and unstable nature of that world, problematising the reader’s imaginative investment in it.”⁸⁵ Pushing toward the function of testimony in Beckett’s work and the interface between technology and the human, Jones observes, “The extraordinary abdication of narrative authority in the closed system works also to produce a space which . . . must be understood as archival.”⁸⁶

The fourth contribution to the closed system theory of Beckett’s text is less situated in scientific law. Former inmate Cluchey, whose case study I will discuss later in this chapter, uses the term while discussing the development of a drama workshop in San Quentin a few years after Herbert Blau brought *Waiting for Godot* to the inmates there. He writes, “All of the plays were acted and directed by convicts for convict audiences. And so every weekend in our little theatre in San Quentin, it was standing room only for imprisoned Americans; and rightly so, because if as Beckett has stated, his plays are all closed systems, then so too, are prisons. I personally can say that San Quentin is a closed system, a very tightly closed system!”⁸⁷ For Cluchey, his own experience is central to his contemplation of the closed system. He emphasizes its physicality, its tightness, rather than the law behind its operations.

In his analysis of the closed space of Beckett’s *Lost Ones*, Jones explores the testimonial function of the narrative and what he calls the hypothetical status of the narrator. Cluchey basically says that the prisoner does not live in the world of thermodynamics or scientific principles. Only the first term of the phrase “closed system” catches the prisoner’s attention, since the prison is not evidently closed but, as Cluchey says, tightening. It is paradoxically always closing. In his “believe-you-me” stance, Cluchey evokes not only his general understanding of the system but also his per-

sonal experience of the everyday pressure it exerts upon him. Only through the tightness of its collar does Cluchey become aware of how the system operates.

Staging *Godot* in prison gives Cluchey a heightened awareness of the closed system of the prison. He evokes the phrase while describing the physically crowded space of the San Quentin Workshop performance. Cluchey's use of the term "closed system" arises literally within that theater, rather than in application to it from the outside. How does "standing room only" for a Beckett play performed by and in front of convicts elicit Cluchey's citation of a "closed system"? First, the density of the group, the close proximity of convicts to one another, owes itself to the way the prison recycles old spaces: the San Quentin Workshop rehearsed and performed in the space previously occupied by the prison gallows.⁸⁸ In a closed system, the place for hangings is repurposed into a space for theater—and probably without much change. We can only wonder about the atmosphere this gave to the performances, and about how much room it provided for spectators. In his book on the sublime, Edmund Burke remarked that contemporary theater was so stultifyingly artificial that if ever an announcement were made of a hanging in the public square, audiences would rush out of the middle of a performance in order to attend it.⁸⁹ Divested of theatrical tinsel, Beckett's stage merges inconspicuously with the gallows on its day off. *Waiting for Godot* is the substitute sentence for execution: getting life.⁹⁰ The closed system of the prison allows these two spaces to overlap.

Cluchey employs the term "closed system" to describe the strange airless space that exists between convicts in the audience and their fellow inmates on stage. This must have had the same déjà vu quality as a masquerade ball on a cruise ship from which one is never allowed to disembark. What were these performances, free of outsiders, like? What desires did this strange monadological theater serve?⁹¹ Do we not have here something different from theater (representation, action, drama), something closer to the transfer of heat? What becomes of what Suvin called Beckett's "aimless island universe" when it is performed within the aimless island universe of San Quentin? Cluchey says that at this moment, the inhabitants of the closed system packed the "theater" to look at Beckett's theatrical closed system. To Jones's question about Beckett's "cylinder" narratives, "How can a closed system be observed?" we must add "within a closed system."⁹² Cluchey answers by making the closed system synonymous with jail: the prison mediates Beckett's play, rather than being a conception imposed from without. Through a sudden reversal, not only of Beckett and prison but also of reality and fiction, Cluchey claims that prison is packed

with Beckett characters. His comment sounds vaguely like the one made by Esslin, who found the unknowing voice of Beckett's work coming through the bars of the pimp's cell. Writes Cluchey:

If the critics are right when they proclaim that Beckett's characters are drawn from his early life in Dublin, the streets, bogs, ditches, dumps and madhouses, then I can only add that the most informed, knowledgeable and qualified people to portray Beckett's "characters" would be the inmates of any prison! For here more than any other place in the world, reside the true Beckett people. The cast-offs and loonies, the poets of the streets, and all of the "bleeding meat" of the entire system. The real folks of our modern wasteland.⁹³

For a brief instant, the world outside the prison enters into the picture for Cluchey. The closed system is inhabited by the "bleeding meat" of the "entire system." Beckett's characters, Cluchey says, are best portrayed by people already in prison: prison has cultivated the Beckett character. This is another way of saying that prison produces only fictional or, to use Jones's term, *hypothetical* individuals. In prison, life is life in the same way that, as Beckett said about the stage of *Godot*, the sky is a sky: in name only. Adorno writes that Beckett's plays show us only "what is left of the subject," namely, "its most abstract characteristic: merely existing, and thereby already committing an outrage."⁹⁴

Perplexed by the Prisoner's Response

About the impassioned response to *Godot* by his fellow inmates, Cluchey writes: "Our 'affinity' with the works of Beckett has perplexed many critics, but never our audiences."⁹⁵ In what follows, I will explore four examples of that affinity in prisoners, the way they express it, and how it pertains to the environment in which they dwell. I suggest that we can learn something particularly important about Beckett by learning how not to be perplexed by the prisoner's affinity with Beckett's plays.

What is our obstacle to understanding this affinity? Are we perplexed because we imagine prisoners to be less capable of empathy than ourselves? What is empathy to a convict, either within or outside a theater? Do we allot them only moral tears, those of regret? The empathetic convict contradicts the stereotype of callousness and brutality that seems to mark criminal life before, during, and after prison. If we stand within this bias, it

becomes difficult to picture the criminal feeling something like an elective affinity for Beckett's work. Following a performance of *Godot* at the Florida State Penitentiary at Raiford, Sidney Homan remarks on how the prisoners rushed the stage, eager to talk about the play with Homan and the actors. He recollects "the discussions, those extraordinary discussions where these hardened, sullen men had opened up their hearts, had confronted a mystery in *Godot* that we can no more solve than avoid."⁹⁶ Even this description is fringed with Homan's surprise at the seeming paradox of the moved prisoner.

Our second obstacle to the prisoner's response pertains to an implicit understanding of Beckett's work. Do we honestly feel it is a play with which to empathize? *Waiting for Godot* persists in critical discourse as a marvel of theatrical experimentation. The obstructions it places before the capacity of our critical intelligence to identify what happens on its stage limit our capacity to identify with it. We note the difficulty of his text first, and then we assume that this difficulty pertains to (or even hinders) the feeling it may give us. Noting how the play fastidiously measures its breaks and the cadence of its silences, Blau writes: "*Godot*, indeed, gives the definitive turn to the idea of Alienation. A subterranean drama, appearing to care for nothing but its interior life, it searches the audience like a Geiger counter. No modern drama is more sensitively aware of the presence of an audience, or its absence. . . . *Empathy is controlled with diabolic precision.*"⁹⁷ In calling *Godot* the "definitive turn to the idea of Alienation," Blau suggests not only that Beckett's play subdues our experience of pathos (in the same way that Brecht's plays critique Aristotelian dramaturgy) but also that it benumbs the consciousness that is usually the windfall of distanciation. Blau writes provocatively that the play sweeps the audience like a Geiger counter; that is, the play seemingly looks back at the audience for the afterlife (or, to go with the radioactivity of Blau's metaphor, the half-life) of our feeling for the play. What could this possibly mean other than that the play exposes us to feeling (our own as well as the characters'), and that our encounter with the exposed figures on stage leaves an emotional deposit within us, belatedly and almost subcutaneously? The radical challenge of Beckett's posttheatrical drama in fact rests in how we empathize with his vagabonds, how we orient ourselves toward what they expose (rather than simply give) to us. Is the way we encounter the vagabonds we see on stage any different from the way we encounter them in the street, where we might be able to *recognize* something (a gesture, a look, a walk) in the hobo's condition and yet pause before we call him *familiar*? Cluchey takes this a step further. He notes: "While all over

the world audiences were puzzled and fascinated, the critics astounded by the plays of Beckett, we, the inmates of San Quentin, in fact found the situation normal."⁹⁸ What is normal for individuals who turned their backs on normal? How do the disjunctions of Beckett's theater become a mechanism by which the alienated recognize something about their place in the prison system? Blau says that our empathy is *controlled with diabolical precision*. Watching Beckett, prisoners identify with figures who cope under that diabolical control.

The prisoners help us unlearn certain habits of thinking about Beckett's play. A case in point: Cluchey notes that prisoners view the figures on stage as *couples*. Upon seeing Vladimir and Gogo, followed by a man whipping another, named Lucky, with a rope around his neck, "Prisoners knew the score."⁹⁹ Critics refer to these as "pseudocouples," a designation coined by the narrator of Beckett's *The Unnamable* to describe the characters Mercier and Camier.¹⁰⁰ The term has migrated from Beckett's fiction into critical discussion about that fiction. Discussing Vladimir and Estragon, for example, Jonathan Boulter remarks, "His plays and novels are filled with characters in painful relationships which seem to offer nothing positive. Beckett referred to the people in these relationships as 'pseudo-couples' because often there is nothing formal (like marriage or blood relations) binding them together."¹⁰¹ In isolating the prisoner from the bonds of matrimony and family, prison activates new terms for recognizing the couple. Prisoners do not recognize Vladimir and Estragon as a "couple" in quotation marks. Prison inmates understand the couple as they who wait together. For them, the couple is formed nonconsensually, through their needs, their interaction, their inaction, their pathos. In *The Unnamable*, Beckett speaks of the "little murmur of unconsenting man, [murmuring] what it is their humanity stifles."¹⁰² Vladimir and Estragon are a couple not formed by vow; they are tied through their endless murmur, a tie stifled by the officially sanctioned badge of "humanity." The stage, and not mutual fondness, desire, or even consent, bring Vladimir and Estragon together. They have nothing. Should we then disqualify them for having nothing in common? In 1955 the New Repertory Theater asked permission to stage *Waiting for Godot* with two actors whose temperaments, acting styles, and physicalities could not have been more antithetical: Buster Keaton (as Vladimir) and Marlon Brando (as Estragon).¹⁰³ If this production had gone forward, the end of the first act would have witnessed Brando/Estragon estimating that he and Keaton/Vladimir had spent "50 years maybe" together. Where would this statement uttered by Brando to Keaton acquire credibility? Where *but in a prison cell*?

Prisoners on *Godot*: Godot as Prisoner

The rest of this chapter will investigate four instances of prisoners who illuminate our understanding of Beckett. Each reads *Godot* in a different manner through the environment in which he sees the play performed: the prison context. K. F. Lembke, whose letter to Beckett provides this chapter with its epigraph, is not only the first prison reader of *Godot* but the most fanatical, breaking parole in order to meet its author. In 1953 in Lüttringhausen Prison, Lembke gets a copy of *En Attendant Godot* and proceeds to direct, cast, and stage his translation, titled *Man Wartet auf Godot*. (Lembke's rendering of the title emphasizes the anonymous "one" who waits, rather than subjectless waiting.) The actors and spectators are a UN delegation of scowflaws, the criminal castes whom he enumerates for Beckett in his letter dated November 29, 1953: "thieves, forgers, homos, crazy men and killers." Lembke's response to *Waiting for Godot* is symptomatic of the way that prisoners seize *Godot*. Lembke's letter makes clear that ownership of the play, performed in prison, has been transferred to the prisoners: "Your Godot was a triumph, something wild!—Your Godot was 'our' Godot, ours, our very own!" ("Votre Godot ce fut un triomphe, le délire—Votre Godot ce fut 'Notre' Godot, à nous! bien à nous!")¹⁰⁴ Repeating "ours" and "our own" several times, Lembke speaks of appropriation, not representation. His enthusiasm for the play befits its status as a piece of contraband. The delirium of someone enjoying Beckett behind locked doors (locked from without, not from within) is a curious rejoinder to the conventional wisdom about the tactical uselessness of modern art.¹⁰⁵

Lembke's understanding of Beckett's play emerges within this affective connection to it. In his assertion that "your Godot is our Godot," we overhear the claim *Godot—he's one of ours*. Lembke's twist is not that we are waiting for Godot, where Godot designates some redeeming agency at a distance from us (like the warden). Instead he says, "We are all waiting for him and do not know that he is already here. Yes, here. Godot is my neighbor in the cell next to mine. Let us do something to help him, change the shoes that are hurting him!"¹⁰⁶ Lembke suggests that Godot (the figure, not just the play) is being held in Lüttringhausen. In the sea of prisoners, however, Godot's number does not stand out. We are waiting, but he is here: "Yes, here," Lembke repeats himself, as if having anticipated Beckett's (or his own) disbelief at the thought. Incarcerated, Godot is transformed into Gogo: "Let us help him then, change the shoes that are hurting him!" Lembke's analysis recasts the unseen Godot as one of the figures we see on stage. Godot ceases to be the promise both endlessly deferred and endlessly

broken and becomes the adjacent and sluggishly corporeal figure who overdoes it on his carrots.

Lembke reads the play as an imperative to help one's neighbor. He inverts the dynamic of need in the play. We do not need Godot; our neighbor needs us. He turns the play from a destitute state of "nothing to be done" into an urgent call to assistance. Since this crucial first line follows Gogo's struggle to get his boot off, Lembke responds in Brechtian fashion to the situation: if we change Gogo's boot, we change the philosophy of the play. At the same time, the pragmatic moral that Lembke finds in the play cannot thoroughly withstand its transfer into the prison without modification. In trying to deflate the transcendence of Godot by assigning him a spot contiguous to ours, Lembke runs into a problem with the staging of his remake (his interpretation) of *Godot* inside the prison. This staging issue is apparent in the aftertaste of iron (rather than the taste of irony) left in our mouths by Lembke's phrase, "the neighbor in the cell next to mine." Proximity and distance are not antonyms in jail. Contiguous cells are impossibly removed from one another, and prisoners in adjacent cells communicate to one another in Morse code, the language of passing ships. Coming to one's neighbor for anything in prison is as difficult as finding a new pair of shoes for him. It raises the question: where precisely is Lembke pointing when he asserts that Godot is *here*, "Yes, here"? The here of the prisoner is always usurped by the "there" of the guard, and the way the carceral institution manages the movement of convicts through its space. This "here" is neither public nor private, only a perpetually scrutinized and unfree space: precisely the quality of prison that makes it resonant with Beckett's theatrical vision. Though he set out to attune our ears to the call of our neighbor, Lembke ends by envisioning a new play based on the infinite separation of neighbors: *Waiting for Gogo* (or maybe *Gogo Waits*).

Lembke's desire to make Godot less ghostly to us applies equally to his relation with Beckett. He invites Beckett to see the performance, and though Beckett declines, he casually suggests that Lembke call whenever he is in town. Lembke probably feels baffled by this impossible invitation of hospitality to him, an incarcerated man, as he is by Godot's absence. Lembke proceeds to go to work on Beckett's absence. He does this by breaking parole and journeying all the way from Wuppertal to Paris, showing up at Beckett's door unannounced. Lembke ceases writing letters to Beckett in favor of sending himself and accepts Beckett's invitation not formally but in person. Knowlson reports: "A frozen figure, dressed in lightweight summer clothing, turned up at the theater in a freezing cold Paris. . . . The penniless, half-starved prisoner had broken parole to come to see him. Blin offered

temporary shelter and provided him with warmer clothing."¹⁰⁷ Since the prisoner has no identity papers, he cannot be checked into a hotel. Beckett, wary of meeting the prisoner on the lam (possibly because of his earlier run-in with the knife-wielding pimp), never goes to his door but gives Blin money to pass on to the prisoner, along with the information that Beckett supposedly will not be back in town for a long time. Lembke, having broken the law and turned himself into one of Beckett's vagabonds in his pilgrimage to the author, proceeds to reenact on Beckett's doorstep what he learned from Beckett's play and Lüttringhausen alike: he waits.

Prisoners on *Godot*: Waiting to Empathize

One of the most intriguing essays on *Waiting for Godot* is the review written by Bandman in the *San Quentin News*. The front page article of the November 14, 1957, edition of the paper offers straight reportage on the play and interviews with the actors (noting, for example, managing director Jules Irving's admission that "frankly, we were scared to death.") Bandman's column, by contrast, is an astonishingly creative response to *Godot*, unruly in its effort to devise a language for what took place on the stage in the "barn-like space of the North Dining Hall." Though Bandman structures the review as a summary of the play, he addresses the reader through a series of imperatives ("now look closely," "but wait," "see master Pozzo as the compelling spirit"). Bandman thereby directs our attention at what he is critically imagining for us. The essay is literally a re-view from the prisoner's standpoint, at once a description and a hallucination. The essay moves erratically across the registers of interpretation, imperative, hypothesis, objective description. About Vladimir and Estragon in act 2, for example, Bandman directs us to "watch them finalize into precursors of doubt, depression, and death." "Finalizing into precursors" is the prisoner's personal articulation of the mixed temporality of the waiting process. Vladimir and Estragon simultaneously terminate and herald as they metamorphose into the sign of their waiting. Bandman's sentences are tightly compressed, with dense terms crammed at odd angles to one another.¹⁰⁸ Each sentence constitutes both a holding pen and the effort to see over its wall.

Bandman's review is also a landmark in Beckett criticism for the way in which it speaks of *Godot*, years before its canonization, as a "world play." The phrase departs, however, from contemporary uses of the term: for Bandman, the term designates an object from *beyond the walls* of the prison. The term "world" recurs throughout Bandman's essay: he calls Pozzo the

“drive that makes the world go round,” a figure who “occasionally turns the shaft straight in our collective backs.” Both worlds—the world on stage and the world outside the prison—turn at the expense, the exclusion, of the prisoner. Of each world, the prisoner is a pivot rather than one of its denizens. (Bandman writes the essay in the collective “we” of the yard.) Our notion of Beckett’s play as a world play and as microcosm begins here, in the response of one deprived of world. The paradox of these two worlds is institutional rather than logical for Bandman: both worlds exclude the prisoner. So he brings in the term once more in a strong effort to appeal to his audience, to put it in their terms: “If you will allow an explanation, see this play with us as the *vast world* housed right inside your own mind.” The prisoner in his cell may already suspect his cell, in its mixture of familiarity and unreality, to be his mind, and the walls of the prison his cranium. This staple interpretation of Beckett’s theater has its origin in the nagging suspicion of the inmate.¹⁰⁹ The world shuts itself up in the mind when the prisoner loses the world.

More importantly, Bandman’s essay bears witness to the ways in which the prisoner is conflictual in his empathetic response to Beckett. This hesitation is overlooked in Esslin’s claims about the immediate response of the inmates. The title of Bandman’s review, “The Play’s the Thing . . .,” is a partial citation from *Hamlet*. Hamlet’s mental anguish and self-divided monologuing provide an interesting antecedent to the harassed thinking of Beckett’s homeless figures. Yet the title withholds the remainder of Hamlet’s line: “wherein I shall catch the conscience of the king.” Hamlet stages *The Mousetrap*, which “plays something like the murder of my [Hamlet’s] father,” in order to see if his uncle will evince signs of a guilty conscience while watching the play.¹¹⁰ The reference touches a sore spot for Bandman, as it proposes theater as an instrument of institutional memory: *The Mousetrap* is designed to catch the involved spectator, whose emotional responses are turned into his rap sheet. *The Mousetrap* is supposed to *con* the King. Bandman voids the rest of Hamlet’s quote because he argues that Beckett’s play mobilizes catharsis but does so with a purpose other than pricking conscience or making guilt manifest.¹¹¹ Featuring two waiting vagabonds forgetful of where they were yesterday, *Waiting for Godot* elicits, for Bandman, a complex dynamic of emotion and reflection in the prisoner. His essay ends by returning to the quote: “The play’s the thing. This one was effective.” The essay shows us how prisoners discover new effects in Beckett’s play, in percussion with their imprisoned state.

The dramatic structure of catharsis implicating both prisoner and prison gets particular attention in Bandman’s discussion. Empathy for

another's suffering begins on stage in act 1, when Pozzo arrives with his servant Lucky, who is tied with a rope and carrying his master's stool and lunch basket. In a gesture seldom seen in Beckett characters, Vladimir actually *objects* to Lucky's treatment: the stage directions indicate he is "exploding" as he exclaims, "It's a scandal!" Pozzo replies, "Are you referring to anything in a particular?" This reply is particularly cutting: Pozzo wants a citation for Vladimir's shock and disbelief. Vladimir tries to put his finger on the scandal, but is ultimately only able to repeat the phrase: "(*stutteringly resolute*) to treat a man . . . (*gesture toward Lucky*) . . . like that . . . I think that . . . no . . . a human being . . . no . . . it's a scandal!"¹¹² Estragon chips in with "It's a disgrace!" but the stage directions indicate that he is more interested in "gnawing on his carrot." Act 1 therefore calls for empathy and then defeats it. Lucky's state remains unaltered, and Pozzo remains uncriminalized. The play seems here to weld itself shut as a situation bearing no intervention.

Bandman's essay focuses on the improbable reemergence of empathy in act 2, when Pozzo reappears with Lucky. Pozzo is now blinded, a condition as inexplicable as Lucky's servitude, and cries for help. Bandman comments:

Hear Pozzo's cries for help, for mercy. Feel pity for a beaten Fury, and hold out your hand—but wait! Should we forget what we've learned in waiting and watching? What's it worth? If we help him, then what? Let us ponder and discuss: weigh the pros and cons. And then, overcome with "spiritual" effulgence, help this flailing vital force in its sightless death throes. Yet in our selfless charity we overlook the obvious. Even blind, he is stronger than we! We fall. But resiliently. We are pulled down by the dying only to become renewed, and in turn set death on its feet again.¹¹³

Hear Pozzo's cries, feel pity, hold out your hand . . . *but wait*. At the very moment the spectator's hand is figuratively extended over the proscenium to the character, Bandman says to hold it right there. He thereby usurps the play's imperative to wait and lodges it within the immediate impulse to feel something for Pozzo. Bandman does not ask his spectator to be detached (Brechtian) or immersed, but rather to review his emotional allegiances. Recalling the undertow of futility in the play, he suggests that nothing is to be done either by the characters or for them: "Should we forget what we've learned in waiting and watching? What's it worth?"

Vladimir and Estragon bicker about empathy's worth on stage. Regarding their assistance to Pozzo as a promising employment opportunity,

they debate how much they should charge him for their services (one hundred francs? two hundred francs?). Whereas the characters on stage debate the price for helping Pozzo, Bandman urges the inmate spectator to assess its cost: "If we help him, then what? Weigh the pros and cons."¹¹⁴ Exactly what kind of advice is this to convicts, whose very name is given to the negative side of the ledger? Emotional catharsis is a losing wager for the criminal, and Bandman proceeds to lay out the reason why. "Do not overlook the obvious. Even blind, he is stronger than we!" The spectator remains curiously watched, not only by a blind man but by a blind man on stage. Feeling sorry for this blinded tyrant makes the inmate forget where he is in the auditorium. Bandman says, "Wait!" Look away from the stage not to cry into your sleeve but to remember the guards posted at every exit.

Bandman asserts that emotional release ultimately works to sustain something (a theatrical but clearly recognizable figure of power) that leaves the inmate spectator unfree. He says, "We fall. But resiliently. We are pulled down by the dying only to become renewed, and in turn set death on its feet again." What Bandman calls our "spiritual effulgence" toward the stage is something akin to a rendezvous, not unlike the one that is supposed to take place in the play: the spectator's emotional investment in Beckett's play, but this renewal is a meager concession from a process that destroys him. Fallen power merely cons the inmate's feelings and reasserts his place within the structure of authority. Bandman concedes that it makes the prisoner feel better and "renewed," yet he observes that this emotional transaction only allows a greater negativity to reassert itself. Theatrical catharsis originally serves a civic function: to purge distortion and emotion from the spectator and thereby clarify the citizen's judgment.¹¹⁵ Its contrary theatrical model, Brecht's alienation, shared the same goal: "The point is not to leave the spectator purged by a cathartic but to leave him a changed man, or rather, to sow within him the changes which must be *completed outside the theater*."¹¹⁶ Catharsis loses its therapeutic function and retains only a negative one when access to civic space is denied. For the prisoner seeing *Godot* in San Quentin, unlike Brecht's or Aristotle's spectator, there is no "outside the theater." The emotional release is choked up by the cognizance of guards standing at the exits of the cafeteria. Using a Beckettian turn of phrase, Bandman says that the prisoner's catharsis merely helps readjust death's posture, as if it had simply been taking a breather: we "set death on its feet again." Bandman describes the dynamic between audience and stage as an exchange of postures: death stands up, and we fall as if we were standing, "resiliently."

A *resilient fall*, a more wakeful version of what Beckett would call in his late work a “slumberous collapsion,” is Bandman’s way of charting positivity (“spiritual effulgence”) within an exchange that only ends up on the bad side. The counter-Hegelian dialectic he detects between audience and stage never synthesizes, never resolves. It is Bandman’s way of saying that the negative moment goes unredeemed. Or, in the language of the prison context, the con goes unrehabilitated. This aspect of Beckett’s work has been widely noted by critics.¹¹⁷ In his notes to Beckett, Adorno observes: “Very enigmatic remark about a kind of positivity contained in pure negativity. In view of such absolute negativity, one could be said to *quasi* live.”¹¹⁸ Bandman’s observation differs from Adorno’s insofar as Bandman discovers this “*quasi*” life within the prisoner’s emotional investment during the play, rather than within philosophy per se. For Bandman, the spectator’s immediate reaction to Pozzo sheds light on a curious kind of darkness: his own. Instead of “positivity contained in pure negativity” (Adorno), Bandman speaks of *Godot* as “the most provocatively negative synthesis of the mechanics of human culture that it has been our pleasure to enjoy for a long time.”¹¹⁹ The situation of the prisoner-spectator who “weighs the pros and cons” realizes the abject math of Beckett’s play.

Bandman calls out to the spectator to employ a balance, the kind that Justice might use, yet he urges this metaphor upon an audience of thieves. His audience, Beckett’s audience, knows the weight of that scale upon them; they cannot use it disinterestedly to monitor their own experience. So as he urges deliberation in the middle of their emotional surge, Bandman notes a very contrary effect of *Godot*. He calls it “an expression, symbolic in order to avoid all personal error, by an author who expected each member of his audience to draw his own conclusions, make his own errors.” The resolute and methodical proceedings on Beckett’s stage impress Bandman as an invitation to err. Beckett’s work encourages the spectator to put the scales of justice aside. To make one’s own errors, to undergo unguarded emotional investments and mental experiments, must have been appealing to the rule-bound audience.¹²⁰

Prisoners on Beckett: Theatrical Recidivism

Cluchey says that before *Godot* came to San Quentin in 1957, he “had never even been in a theater, not even to rob one.” The joke tells us something about what we expect a prisoner to take away from culture: nothing but the cash box. The theater is too bereft to heist. The aspect of the stage that

turns away Cluchey the criminal ensnares him as a protégé of Beckett by issuing him a dare: what does one take from Beckett's destitute work? How does one undo its lock? Cluchey's work as a performer of Beckett's drama, as the playwright of *The Cage* and *The Wall Is Mama*, and as one of Beckett's preferred actors, indicates his debt to Beckett's theater. To understand the shadow that Beckett and *Waiting for Godot* cast over Cluchey, we have to reverse the agency in the joke: Cluchey did not break into the theater. The theater broke into him.

The circumstances under which Cluchey encounters the *Godot* performance tell us something about the trajectory to come. While 1,500 inmates packed the north hall cafeteria to watch the play, Cluchey, in prison for life and considered an escape risk, is forced to remain in his cell. Yet Cluchey has no choice but to listen to the performance, as it is piped over the prison's radio system into his cell. How strange it must have been to hear such lines as "The English say cawm" and "How's the carrot?" through the apparatus that habitually barked out the daily routine of the prison. It may have been the distance enforced between Cluchey and the play, rather than his proximity to it, that left its mark on him: *Godot* greets him not as a captivated audience but as a confined one, behind bars. The layout of Cluchey's first encounter with *Godot* inscribes him already as a Beckett character. Beckett's *Company* begins: "A voice comes to one in the dark. Imagine." The situation forces Cluchey, and us, to imagine that voice, that solitary one, that dark. Even though he commits no crime in a theater, Cluchey keeps returning to the scene. His life constitutes an incredible itinerary toward Beckett, toward that encounter he missed but which nevertheless came to him in his cell.

Where Lembke's pilgrimage to Beckett takes spatial expression, walking from Lüttringhausen to Paris, Cluchey's path is through acting Beckett. A telling memento is the slippers (Beckett's own) that Cluchey wears in his performance as Krapp in *Krapp's Last Tape*, under Beckett's direction in Berlin in 1977, and which Cluchey donated along with his papers to the Depaul University Library. Beckett is unhappy with the sound generated by other slippers against the floor of the stage. Only Beckett's own make the sought-after shuffling noise. Cluchey wears these slippers through several performances of Krapp over the next decade, performing the Krapp out of them and eventually donating the tattered slippers, held together by tape, to an archive. Cluchey therefore makes a pilgrimage, but only in character: he follows the path cut by the back-and-forth of his character across ump-teen stages, and does so only in Beckett's slippers, which make the precise sound desired by the director.¹²¹

Cluchey's time in prison prepares him to be a Beckett actor. He founds an acting workshop in San Quentin, and between 1961 and 1963 he stages thirty-five performances of Beckett's cycle (*Waiting for Godot*, *Endgame*, and *Krapp's Last Tape*).¹²² If prison, as Lenin claims, is a university for revolutionaries, then it might also be an acting school for performers of Beckett.¹²³ Cluchey methodically contours himself so closely to the everyday discipline of prison life that he does not break a single rule in his twelve years there. The warden announces this at Cluchey's release through a governor's pardon. "That's something," the warden adds, "when you think of all the rules we have here."¹²⁴ Cluchey strikes no revolutionary or transgressive stance while in jail and internalizes the irrational rules of the institution. This constitutes preparation for acting within Beckett's sensitively alarm-wired stage. Beckett's stage directions issue a restraining order on improvisation.¹²⁵ Cluchey himself notes how Beckett requires the actor to stop acting, to learn inaction, and to acquire "a commitment to listening."¹²⁶ Looking for greater colorlessness to the voice, Beckett would tell Cluchey, "Don't say it like that—they won't hear you." Beckett sees Krapp as "trapped in himself" and "full of a dangerous, concentrated violence."¹²⁷ His advice to Cluchey in performing this role is "Make the thing your own in terms of incarceration."¹²⁸ Beckett summons the prisoner to reappear on stage as Krapp. To make the character his own, Beckett suggests he use the terms of his incarceration. This is curious advice, since the thing that Cluchey was while in prison, "driven mad by my own calendar maker, the Warden and State of California," was not his own.¹²⁹ This self forcibly disowned of self inhabits Beckett's stage.

Cluchey's play *The Cage* revises *Waiting for Godot* from the standpoint of prison. The one-act play unfolds within the contained space of a stage bounded by prison bars, with occasional interruptions by the guards. It shows us the relations improvised between four prisoners in the cell: Al ("a deformed petty thief"), Doc (a black convict), Hatchet (criminally insane), and a new prisoner, Jive, who may or may not have just murdered his girlfriend. The play culminates in a mock trial of Jive, over which Hatchet presides as "judge." At the play's conclusion Hatchet gathers the verdict and strangles Jive before washing his hands in the water from the toilet at center stage. Unlike Lucky's monologue (to which his rants bear some resemblance), Hatchet's insanity comes with consequences.

The Cage resembles a transcription of *Godot* from memory: what Cluchey cannot recollect he fills in with his experience as a prisoner. This recidivism, in which Cluchey repeatedly returns to prison through the stage, is literally part of the play's conception.¹³⁰ Cluchey wrote *The Cage* while in San Quen-

tin, using a typewriter he accessed in spare time while working in the chaplain's office. After parole, Cluchey substantially rewrote it in the process of bringing the play to prisons throughout the United States, employing only ex-convicts in the roles. *The Cage* materializes the no-man's-land of *Godot* within a prison cell. The curious immobility of Beckett's characters at the end of each act is no longer an overdetermined and half-internalized condition. Cluchey's play renders Beckett's "They do not move" more tangibly as "They cannot be moved . . . without authorization." *The Cage* articulates this immobility not as a stage direction but through the décor (the bars surrounding three sides of the stage). Cluchey's play does not imitate Beckett's play but acts as a developing agent upon it. Earlier I described how prison forms a latent image within Beckett's work and how it confronts his study rather than being ingested by it. Cluchey makes more patent the institutional force of prison felt in Beckett's theater. His play makes space on its stage for the guards who handled the props of Beckett's play offstage during the San Quentin performance of *Waiting for Godot*.

These guards in *The Cage* show how Cluchey gives a coercive turn to the inconsistency and discontinuity of Beckett's dialogues. When the play opens, two guards bring in a new prisoner. They rattle off instructions to the prisoner, speaking in alternation, before the prisoner who never speaks. Here are just a few of the lines that cover two pages of the script:

Keep yourself clean at all times. Wash regularly—avoid disease. Never waste time, be productive. Stay busy, use the time well. Report everything to us. Remember gambling is forbidden. Never accept favors from other prisoners. Because they expect favors in return. It only leads to trouble. Cooperate with us, we'll help you. Do your time and let us run the prison. If you don't receive your mail don't worry. If you see trouble brewing, we're helping you. We want you to learn new ways.¹³¹

Separately, the lines all stand on their own, as insular as axioms. The statements are hard to remember because they perform different functions: they threaten, they cajole, they place ultimatums, they invite, they describe, they warn. The discontinuity is exacerbated because some of the lines continue the preceding thought ("Because they expect favors in return"). The total effect of this list is not unlike the abstract incoherence that plagues much of Beckett's dialogue, only in Cluchey the dialogue and effect is addressed to a particular subject: the prisoner, who must sit in witness to the dialogue and use it, hypothetically, as a way to survive in prison. The list of imperatives does not add up, and yet the prisoner must not make any mistake

about them. Like Kafka, Cluchey makes us do a double take at the concern shown to us by officials and subsequently has us wonder about his intent: "If you don't receive your mail, don't worry" could be a message from Kafka's Castle.

Cluchey's play gives a more discernible shape to Beckettian futility. In *Godot* this futility is existentialist in nature and goes on and on. In Cluchey it goes on and on before a power. Beckett's waiting has frozen into detainment. Moments from Cluchey's play match up with others in *Godot* so that their gestures ghost one another. These afterimages in *The Cage* materialize the prison-ghost on Beckett's stage. In *The Cage* the new prisoner, insisting on his innocence, shouts to the exiting guards, "Does the Warden know I'm here?" and "Tell the Warden I'm here. I have to see him right away, it's important."¹³² This resembles Vladimir's answer to the boy who asks what message he should deliver to Godot: "Tell him . . . (*he hesitates*) . . . tell him you saw us. (*Pause.*) You did see us, didn't you?"¹³³ Vladimir articulates the uncertainty of being seen either by the boy or implicitly by us, the spectators. By contrast, we detect the futility of the prisoner's question through its urgent repetition rather than through ellipses or hesitation. The plea to make an appearance before the warden takes the place of Vladimir's doubt about whether his existence on stage has been witnessed. The power structure of the prison in Cluchey's scenario resets the phenomenological doubt of Beckett's stage. Whereas Vladimir's question concludes each act of *Godot*, the prisoner's hopeless petition of the warden begins Cluchey's play. We are introduced to Cluchey's character by being introduced to his plea falling on deaf ears. The statement accompanies the arrival of the prisoner in the no-man's-land. Cluchey's cell telepathically channels and remixes lines from Beckett in accordance with the new stage reality of the cell. The nothing-to-be-done intoned within Beckett's absence of environment is reconfigured by Cluchey's character, who says simply, "I don't belong here. I didn't do anything."¹³⁴ In neither *Godot* nor *The Cage* is the stage a place where one belongs. On Cluchey's stage, the apprehended prisoner must endlessly revise Estragon's proclamation to himself: *nothing was done; I didn't do anything*.

Cluchey takes the dispossessed state of Beckett's vagabonds and shows it to be a thoroughly managed condition. Maybe it always was a managed condition, Cluchey suggests, only one managed in our world by the institution of prison, rather than for the stage by the institution of theater. Cluchey turns the vague and fruitless landscape of *Godot* into a structural wasteland. Beyond the stage lies not a void, à la Beckett, but merely more of the same, more cells. Offstage space acquires its unknown quality only by the

prohibition placed on the prisoners' access to it.¹³⁵ The sound of "a steel door, the rustle of heavy keys, voices, pans" send the convict, Al, leaping to the bars, yelling, "Hey, it's garbage time. Hey Jesus, hurry up with the turnips will ya. I'm starving."¹³⁶ It is not accidental that Beckett's prop, the turnip, makes a reappearance here (or rather fails to). The meagerness of the tramp's life on Beckett's stage is pondered through a turnip that Vladimir has scavenged, kept in his pocket, and shares with Estragon as a poor substitute for a carrot. The inadequate quantities of carrots and turnips on stage enable Beckett's tramps to debate their comparative taste and produce an immediate nostalgia for carrots ("I'll never forget this carrot"). Yet in Cluchey's prison, the turnip is Godot. Food is rationed by an agency beyond the stage, that is, *outside the bars of the cage*, instead of from within, from the folds of Vladimir's pocket. Al's starvation is a transitive condition, performed on him by the prison that starves him, as opposed to Estragon's description of his condition: "I'm hungry!" In this way the rationality of the prison system exacerbates the absurdity of Beckett's stage.

Beckett's Silences in the Prison

The audiences of prison performances of *Waiting for Godot* are famously raucous, something unimaginable to the critic or theatergoer accustomed to decorum. Records of prison performances describe inmates' reactions almost as if the actors were in the yard with them, not before them on a stage. They interrupt the performance by shouting questions, making fun of events on stage, and thinking aloud loudly. Unlike critics or traditional theatergoers, the prisoners are not willing to trust that the postponement of their understanding of what happens on stage will eventually pay off. The performance of the play, rather than reflection on the performance, provides the prisoner with an opportunity for its interpretation. The comments and questions the inmates shout are in a sense the instant verbalization of the inchoate critical reception. The shouted comments indicate impatience with the stage action and with some of Beckett's more enigmatic formulations. In fact, as Sidney Homan notes, the audience of his production of *Godot* in Raiford Prison did not even allow Vladimir to complete his second sentence. Replying to Estragon's "Nothing to be done," Vladimir says, "I'm beginning to come around to that opinion. All my life I've tried to put it from me." As Homan describes: "At this point an inmate leaped to his feet and cried out, 'What the hell do you mean by *put it from me*?'"¹³⁷ The inmate immediately poses the question again once it becomes clear that the

actors, refusing to fall out of their roles, will not answer: "I said, what the hell do you mean by *put it from me?*" The prisoner's confusion is not a question of vocabulary. The line, the third in the play, also seems to cut close to the intimate exchange the prisoner has with the power exercised over him. Vladimir uses physical terms to describe his attempt to forget or shrug off a conviction, as if this opinion ("nothing to be done") were something he had to literally relocate far from himself. The prisoner in the audience would be the first to wonder: where is it to go? What means are available to erase a conviction, in a place where every gesture is scrutinized and where every convict is synonymous with his crime and his sentence?

Photographs of the 1988 production of *Waiting for Godot* in San Quentin inspire Beckett to observe that he "saw the roots of my play" there.¹³⁸ Yet the mute images compel Beckett to raise a question about what he cannot hear in them. He asks Jan Jönson "about 'the sound' of his play in the prison environment. He wanted to know what 'the silence' of the play was like behind prison walls."¹³⁹ Are we to hear a bit of concern in Beckett's question? What chance does a silence have between the infinite clamor, the literal *mur-mur* that happens between prison walls? Alternatively, the prison would seem to give an opportunity for silence to happen. Sontag remarked that the silences of *Godot* permitted the sounds of sniper fire and armored vehicles to filter in to the stage and make an acoustic imprint upon the play. This sonic breach of the stage is not an option within the prison, where nothing enters without first being frisked. So the silences within the prison are inordinately connected to the silences that greet them from the outside world. Similarly, the silences of Beckett's stage in the play are not just the absence of noise from the characters but the sound of Godot's failure to respond. "The air is full of our cries," says Vladimir. Yet in the airtight system of San Quentin these cries are out of earshot of the outside world. No sounds from the streets can accidentally fill the silences of the play. In the stagnant recycled air of San Quentin, even these cries mesh with the silence. The cries fill the air, yet they form a kind of white noise.

Beckett's question goes to the heart of his play, noted in the earliest critical responses. Jacques Audiberti's review of the premiere of *Godot* at the Babylon Theater notes that the characters "speak like Charlie Chaplin. As he would have spoken, not as the Count of Limelight, but when he had nothing to say."¹⁴⁰ Speech and silence are deeply indebted to one another in *Godot*. Nowhere is this more evident than in Beckett's own production in Berlin. Beckett punctuates the play with sixteen moments of silence and stillness called *Wartestellen*, or points of waiting.¹⁴¹ Walter Asmus notes Beckett's remarks about these tableaux: "There are fixed moments

of stillness, where everything stands completely still and silence threatens to swallow everything up. Then the action starts again."¹⁴² The stage directions give numerous indications of silence, as if it were something that could not adequately be conveyed merely by having no words on the page, or having come to the end of a sentence. So Gogo, quoting Pozzo, commands Didi, "Think, pig! (*silence*)." Or when Gogo asks Didi, "Do you see anything coming?" Didi responds "No," and Gogo replies "Nor I," followed by the stage direction "*(They resume their watch. Silence.)*." Beckett's production notebook underscores the text as a Cagean production of silences.

Yet the silences broken by the prisoners' replies are not the same silences prescribed by Beckett's stage directions. Again, this illuminates how the prison performances are helpful to understanding the play. The prisoners call attention to new and unforeseen silences. The prisoners ask for clarification from the characters about what their words imply. The inmates' questions try to drag into the open what remains unsaid within characters' articulations. During performances where theater etiquette imposes silence over the spectators, these moments of nonsense habitually go unresolved and hover in the air between stage and audience.¹⁴³ By contrast, the prisoners are quick to speak when things do not add up: they do not wait silently for meaning. Homan reports that Lucky's speech, a conspicuous anthology of incomplete meanings and a hymn to unfinished labors, was interrupted fifteen times. When Lucky proclaims, "God quaquaquaqu with white beard," for example, a prisoner shouted, "You taking His name in vain or something?"¹⁴⁴ Rightly, a prisoner knew to voice his suspicion of this speech that takes all names in vain, in a play in which things can only be done in vain. The interjection, which is both question and threat, sounds like the last words before throwing punches. The prisoner has added "or something" because he wants to allot Lucky a space of ambiguity, possibly to permit Lucky (if he could engage in dialogue!) a way out. He wants Lucky to back down or at least to clarify the matter and take accountability for his own monologue. At another moment in Lucky's speech, a prisoner shouts, "You know something those assholes behind you don't?" Once more, these are fighting words. This prisoner responds to the paradox presented by Lucky's fragmented and turbulent monologue, which begins at Pozzo's injunction to "think, pig!" yet offers only debris of knowledge (formulas, snippets of legalese and logical proofs, the taxonomies of sport). You think, the prisoner asks, but do you know something different from the assholes behind you? The disposition of the prisoner's question brings the ambiguity of Lucky's performance to a different level: it is both an invitation and an ultimatum.

In the closed universe of the prison, knowing something different from the others may be remarked upon with greater surprise and urgency. The prisoner greets Lucky's avalanche of speech with a coercive reply: you know something? Then let's have it! The prisoner adopts a practical and muscular stance toward dramatic ambiguity: he interrupts the torrent of Lucky's monologue to ask, "What's to know?" and "How is this performance any different from what we've heard already?"

In these instances, the prisoners raise some of the fundamental questions about the play, not in an essay or review but by hurling the questions at the play itself and at the character on stage: What is a performance of thinking? What knowledge (useful or otherwise) is rendered by the characters? How do we separate blather and thinking? When does the thinking on stage become our own thought? There is a vast difference between the prisoner's speaking at the character and rubbing his chin over these questions.

The play takes great measures to keep the characters' thinking from coagulating into knowledge, something for either us or them to know. We know that Vladimir and Estragon hate interrupted thought. They agree that "the worst is to *have* thought," where thinking stops, acquires a past tense, and becomes something to be assessed in retrospect. They renounce the Hegelian perspective in which the owl of Minerva only takes flight at dusk. As the play transpires in a trapped twilight ("Will night never come?" asks Vladimir), the owl of knowledge seems neither to leave nor to land. The prisoner breaks the hermetic seal on Lucky's monologue. Only by interrupting speech does thought come forth. Yet the prisoner does this not because he is interested in knowledge per se. The inmate wants to know if Lucky is just another asshole: who he is and how he figures, rather than what he knows.

Homan notes that the actors were frequently forced to explain and further define their roles to the audience. For example, after Vladimir says, "All my life I've tried to put it from me, saying you haven't tried everything yet. And I resume the struggle. So there you are again!" and Gogo answers, "Am I?" one of the spectators at Raiford Prison shouted, "Doesn't he know whether he's here or not?" Here, the convict heckler doubts Gogo's doubt and suggests that Cartesian doubt will never do away with existence in prison, that prison (and possibly the stage) condemns you to appear and offers no hiding places. Prison never gives you the chance to forget you are in prison. The prisoner asks, "Doesn't he know whether he's *here* or not?" rather than "there" (as Vladimir specifies). What seems to be a misquotation by the prisoner is in fact testament to the ineluctable and indivisible reality of prison. The slippage from *there* to *here* demonstrates

how the prisoner is not in the same place as the critic. Novelist Alain Robbe-Grillet observes that the situation of the hobos on Beckett's stage "is summed up on this simple observation, beyond which it does not seem possible to advance: they are *there*, they are on the stage."¹⁴⁵ Further on, he notes: "They *are there*; they must explain themselves. But they do not seem to have a text prepared for beforehand and scrupulously learned by heart. They must invent. They are free."¹⁴⁶ To the critic, *there* designates the yonder of the stage. The proscenium allows the critic to divide the existence on stage from his own. The prisoner shrugs his shoulders at this claim: the point "beyond which he cannot advance" is not an irreducible existence on stage but existence (including the existence of the theater) in prison, in *here*. The critic points to the stage. The reality of the closed system (*here*) is one to which one need not point: the prisoners sit with crossed arms. Instead of being sanctioned by theatrical custom (a text that would place their characters in a recognizable world), Vladimir and Estragon have the opportunity, or rather the obligation, to explain themselves. The prisoners implicitly agree with Robbe-Grillet, yet their response demonstrates the inadequacy of the vagabonds' self-explanation. This inadequacy is not a matter of clarity but of address: the prisoners want the characters to align themselves to the prison context. The comments and questions shouted to the stage suggest a keen awareness of the unfreedom of the characters, rather than their ability to constitute their world at each moment. The contextlessness of existence is painful, rather than inviting, to the prisoner.

Literary critics describe these interruptions as tearing down the "fourth wall" of the stage. As Erin Koshal notes:

The fourth wall of theatre enables spectators to become absorbed in the spectacle onstage in a way that ignores the physical and spatial contiguity between audience and actors, reality and fiction. It also helps construct a unilateral relation between dramatic performance and spectator in which the former reflects, educates, or in some way serves the reality outside it. These inmates, however, in offering their own advice to the figures, treated Didi and Gogo not simply as characters occupying a fixed dramatic register but as two figures occupying a theatrical space adjacent to their own.¹⁴⁷

Koshal implies that the prisoners' responses have an unintended Brechtian effect, shattering the hermetic world of Beckett's stage. Fragmenting gesture, even forcing characters to repeat their lines, the audience distributes fractures into the play according to their needs. Koshal argues that this process tears down the fourth wall of the theater: the illusion of separateness

“between audience and actors, reality and fiction” is undermined. Koshal here insists on the peaceful coexistence between stage and prison: the characters on stage “occupy a theatrical space adjacent to the [prisoners’] own.” Koshal’s analysis overlooks the ways in which the prisoners’ responses are both more conventional and more alarming. The convicts engage the characters conventionally, through empathy. At the same time, however, this empathy is strangely coercive. Koshal’s summary of these responses as prisoners “offering their own advice” to the characters misses the simultaneously empathetic, brutal, and above all analytic (on equal footing with critics) nature of these intrusions. In addition to experiencing a kind of *transference* (of a psychoanalytic nature) onto Beckett’s characters, the prisoners undertake their *transfer* as well. Here we can reverse the directionality of Homan’s comment that “it’s as if they want to get into the play.” It seems rather that the responses of the convicts constitute an attempt to transfer Beckett’s characters from the stage to a world more familiar to the inmate: the prisoners want to authorize the movement of the characters from the institution of the stage to the institution of the prison. The hermetic state of Beckett’s stage becomes surprisingly communicative to the inmates, whose responses merge the nowhere of the play into the *now here* of the prison. The convicts subject the proceedings to review, not of the traditionally critical sort (a critical review in which they evaluate or analyze), but rather a review that one might give to troops (actors form troupes, after all), something closer to a frisking, a pat down, a calling to order, an asking to declare. Vladimir, Estragon, Lucky, and Pozzo are called to explain themselves to the inmates and fall into line with the everyday power relations that structure the lives of the audience. Where critics deem Beckett’s world unfamiliar, the prisoners set about to familiarize the characters to themselves, beginning with the gesture of hailing the character on stage as if he were just another person in the prison yard. The voice of the inmate is expected to turn someone, even someone on stage. Cluchey comments that he “felt secure with [Beckett’s] characters . . . because they were so like the people in San Quentin: *extensions* of disconnection, decay and uncertainty.”¹⁴⁸ This term “*extensions*” suggests that the literary and theatrical space appears as an add-on to the closed world of the prison, a space quickly annexed by the prisoners. Shouting at Gogo not to “take all that crap” and asking Lucky why he submits so silently and uncomplainingly, the prisoners request that the characters on stage reckon with the invisible forces that subject them. The prisoners’ responses thereby call attention to (and thereby make more palpable) the coercion that pervades Beckett’s play in a latent state, like the directives submerged within the stage directions

(whatever keeps them from moving, or the fact that Lucky enters with a rope around his neck). The prisoners actively force the characters to take stock of the subtle dynamics of subjection and domination in which they are trapped but to which they seem blind. Through their interjections, the inmates drag out into the open what otherwise goes unsaid. Lines such as Pozzo's "The road is free to all" produce a kind of hollow echo, as if the assertion were waiting for someone to counterbalance its laissez-faire outlook with the state of unfreedom palpable on Beckett's stage. The convict assumes this articulatory agency.

Contrary to Koshal's assertion, these interruptions do not dispel the fictional status of the stage. As Homan observes, "Audiences don't speak to you in character."¹⁴⁹ The inmates' identification with the characters is so intense that it withstands, or is even articulated through, their shouting. These shouts do not address the actors, nor do they call attention to the artifice or judge the quality of the performance. The actor here is just a useful tool to the character, a conduit through which the character explains himself further, rather than the agency behind the character.¹⁵⁰ The inmates are not critical spectators, in Brecht's sense of the term. The distance the inmates take from Brecht is as vast as the one they take from the thing Brecht criticized, namely, empathy in order to forget oneself (we cannot accuse the prisoners of seeking "escapism"). This distance between the inmate audience and Brecht's alienated spectator can be measured through their smoking habits. Brecht advises the audience members to sit, removed from the action, behind their cigars. The prisoners, meanwhile, throw their lit matches in the air behind them after lighting their cigarettes, producing a "flickering luster."¹⁵¹ En masse, the prisoners illuminate the stage with a cosmos of matches, investing the stage with the world familiar to them. They do not need a play to become alienated; they are already that. Instead of tearing down the fourth wall of the theater, they persistently remind the characters on stage that they are enclosed within the fourth wall of the prison—the one behind the audience's back.

Audiences attending *Godot* premieres in London, Dublin, and Brussels are equally incited to shout, but for reasons entirely different from those of the prisoners. These theatergoers react vociferously to what the play represents rather than to the intricacies of how it unfolds on stage. In Brussels, for example, a scandalized old lady stands up in the middle of the performance and shouts "to her astonished companions in the stalls, 'Why won't they work?'"¹⁵² This irate patron wants the characters to do something useful, to produce the meaning, conflict, and action expected from actors on stage. Implicit in her objection is a criticism that Beckett's play

does not perform its theatrical duty and that it does not “work” for her. A theatergoer at the London premiere yells, “This is why we lost the colonies!”¹⁵³ Civilian theater patrons feel free to assault theater etiquette under the affidavit of official culture. These comments bear the ethic of compulsory labor or melancholy for the dissolution of the British Empire. Breaking decorum becomes an opportunity to vent a greater outrage, as if the decision to interrupt the audience’s silence during a performance revealed a symptomatic wound and not just an isolated instance of boredom pushed to the boiling point. These patrons address their complaints to their fellow audience members rather than to the stage. At the *Godot* premiere in Paris, disgruntled audience members take their seats after intermission, only to depart loudly at the beginning of the second act. These theatergoers take advantage of the fact that there are no armed guards stationed at the exits of the Babylon Theater, as there are at San Quentin. The critical gesture of disaffection depends entirely on the conjunction of these cries of outrage with the movement of the group out of the theater. The demonstration of these patrons, in other words, signifies only that they are spectators, not prisoners.

At the end of one of the performances, Homan notes that one of the prisoners yelled, “You guys—you oughta live here. That’d show you!”¹⁵⁴ Such an invitation can only be issued to a group that somehow already strikes the criminal as *familiar*, a group that has become recognizable (“you guys”) to the cons through their interruptions. (“OK! I know this guy! Now, you can get back to the play,” says one inmate after being answered.) As with the prisoner Lembke, who claimed that “Godot is among us,” this vociferous prisoner offers not a reading but a *sentencing*: the audience member foregoes the activity of judgment on the play (the Brechtian response), the trial, and immediately offers them life in prison. What, exactly, would prison show them? That convicts know more about the total futility of waiting, starting with the fact that it lasts longer than two acts? That waiting may enlist our most miserable solitude, one whose non-sense exceeds the banter of the vagabonds on stage? That you live in prison as a character, and not as an actor? That your agency, your actor, is felt at every moment to have been locked out of the prison? That prison is a dangerous space in which one may be addressed as “pig” but commanded to do more than think? What does it mean to show the theater something? Is it not that this particular prisoner senses that Beckett’s world is somehow attentive to the prison (studies the prison) but does not somehow yet incarnate the prison? That Beckett’s stage is the prison’s antechamber, or even its rehearsal? The shout reverses the priority of subject and predicate within Knowlson’s

description of the view from Beckett's apartment. The prisoner says, "Let your study face our prison. You should see your study from where we stand."

The Etiquette of the Theater

Koshal writes that "[it] is precisely their experience as the exceptions to [universal discourses of a shared humanity] that allowed prisoners to empathize with Didi and Gogo."¹⁵⁵ The supposition that prisoners do not have the status of humanity seems as cruel as giving a watch to someone with a life sentence. Prisoners exist not outside humanity but outside the discourse of etiquette and the pieties of bourgeois theatergoers. The inmates defy the idiom of "captive audience" that scholars winkingly apply to them.¹⁵⁶ In this regard they take their cue from the play itself: Vladimir and Estragon compare what they are doing onstage to vaudeville and the circus. Critics have noted these affinities between the antics of Beckett's characters and less refined forms of popular entertainment. Kenner notes, for example, how the "antecedents of Beckett's plays are not in literature but—to take a rare American example—in Emmett Kelly's solemn determination to sweep a circle of light into a dustpan: a haunted man whose fidelity to an impossible task . . . illuminates the dynamics of a tragic sense of duty."¹⁵⁷ Yet the comparison remains abstract for cultured audiences: Pascal as played by Fratellini's clowns. Only the inmates respond *as* a vaudeville audience.

Though Esslin claims that the prisoners are a "hypnotized audience," they are not hypnotized out of speech like well-to-do audiences, whose only assault on theater decorum is the sound of a nagging cough. In *Eleuthéria*, Beckett inscribes the spectator onto the stage. A character named Audience Member climbs over the proscenium and engages the actors in dialogue: tellingly, the first thing he does is to emphatically clear his throat: "This farce—(He again clears his throat, but this time instead of swallowing the result, he expels it into his handkerchief)—this farce has gone on long enough."¹⁵⁸ The "audience member" claims that he is a kind of collective subject: "I am not one audience member, but a thousand, all slightly different from each other. I've always been like that, like an old blotter, of extremely variable porosity."¹⁵⁹ Unlike *Eleuthéria*, *Waiting for Godot* does not inscribe the audience within its text. Yet the performances of *Godot* at the Florida State Penitentiary allow us to see how convicts assume, with great passion, this blotter function. A blotter is "written upon" only acciden-

tally, as a surface underneath the paper to which one applies ink. The purpose of the blotter is to get the ink flowing from the pen onto the page: although a secondary surface, it enables the writing to begin. Using the figure from *Eleuthéria*, we might describe the criminal audience as being a blotter of such dense porosity that it absorbs *Godot* into carceral space. For the reasons I discuss, some lines of Beckett's bleed through more noticeably than others. This transfer of ink, like the prisoner's attempt to transfer the characters into the yard, describes a movement between institutions: from theater to prison. So much ink transfers to the blotter that this process produces a new script, the script of prison, composed of its gestures, its rituals, its relations under surveillance, and the immediacy of shouting at someone to get their attention. The blotter digests and bleeds back across the theatrical fiction of *Godot*. *Eleuthéria* depicts the audience-blotter as a passive surface that merely registers the excess ink. In prison, this blotter becomes the means by which Beckett's characters *are registered* with the audience and admitted into prison. The performance becomes intimately entwined with its effect on the audience, the mark that it leaves on the criminal blotter.

This absorptive porosity of the criminal audience becomes an agency during the performance. The inmates transfer their porosity over to the text itself, as if the ink absorbed by the blotter began to show through the page. Their interaction strangely fulfills what Beckett describes as his goal toward language. In a letter to Axel Kaun, Beckett states his desire "to bore one hole after another in it, until what lurks behind it—be it something or nothing—begins to seep through."¹⁶⁰ Refusing to be bored, the audience of criminals opens unforeseen holes in Beckett's text in order to let the content of the play seep into the something/nothing of prison. In the process, their responses open holes in our thinking about *Godot*.

Performances of *Waiting for Godot* in the Florida State Penitentiary system force us to consider how indebted our understanding of Beckett's play is to the conventions of the theatrical institution. Theater decorum ensures the riddle of Beckett's work as well as its canonization. One can speak only at the intermission or at the conclusion of the play. Our piety toward etiquette in turn requires that we internalize our questions and postpone our impulse to respond to Beckett's play. We must bite our tongue so often throughout the performance that this organ of articulation is in sorry shape by the time we are called upon to actually say something. We may never stop postponing our response to, and hence our encounter with, *Godot*. Indifferent to etiquette, the prisoners abandon their silence and thereby force the characters to abandon theirs (the unspoken rule that an actor speak only what is written in the script). Perhaps more than any other play,

Godot benefits from the decorum of the theater to sanctify a particular type of silence, to endorse those gaps authored by Beckett himself. *Godot* meshes with the simplest rules of bourgeois theater etiquette, the “Shhhhhh!” that provides Beckett’s *Film* with its only sound. Concerned more about forcing the characters to explain what is inaccessible to them than postponing their own misunderstandings, the prisoners reject the wait-and-see attitude. In the process, the inmates refuse to have their silence hijacked as the meaning of Beckett’s play, to have mere decorum be mistaken for the grandiose silence of an unresponsive Godot.