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GRAVE ACTION:Last Rites in Brecht's *Mother Courage* and Beckett's *Endgame*.

... all is ... corpsed ...
(Samuel Beckett)¹

Vigorous tenacity versus absurdist lassitude, war history versus post-existentialist stasis, sedulous epic action versus traumatic, post-nuclear paralysis, the kinetic tumult of a crowd versus the threatening silence of only a few *dramatis personae* — there could be, it seems, no more meaningful opposition than that between the works of two of the internationally most influential dramatists of the twentieth century: Bertolt Brecht (1898-1956) and Samuel Beckett (1906-1989). Such contrasts would surface in most comparisons of the two playwrights' famous plays, for instance if one were to juxtapose *Die Dreigroschenoper* (*The Threepenny Opera*) and *En attendant Godot* (*Waiting for Godot*). This essay, however, is specifically concerned with Brecht's anti-war play *Mutter Courage und ihre Kinder* (*Mother Courage and Her Children*),² composed in 1939 in Scandinavian exile, and Beckett's postwar *Fin de partie* (*Endgame*), written in Paris and published the year Brecht died — in French, the adopted language of the Irish émigré's choice, rather than his native tongue.³

¹ Samuel Beckett, *Endspiel, Fin de partie, Endgame* (Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp, 1974: 44). All references to the play are to this trilingual edition, and indicated in the text as *FP* and respective page numbers. In French, Beckett wrote "Mortibus" — dative or ablative plural of Latin "mors", meaning either the abstract "death" or the concrete "corpse". Beckett himself rendered it as "corpsed" in English, while Elmar Tophoven translated it as German "aus" (*FP* 45). The English neologism is most concrete, strikingly signaling what is at stake in this article: the omnipresence of incapacitation and mutilation, of injury, pain, wounds, bandages, deaths, corpses, shrouds, and burials that mark the settings and the protagonists' predicaments in both dramas.

² Bertolt Brecht, *Mutter Courage und ihre Kinder: Eine Chronik aus dem Dreißigjährigen Krieg* (Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp, 1963: 11). All German references to the play are to this edition, and indicated in the text as *MC* and respective page numbers. All English references to the play are to Tony Kushner (Trans.) and Charlotte Ryland (Ed.), *Bertolt Brecht: Mother Courage and Her Children* (London: Methuen Drama, 2010), and indicated in the text as Kushner and respective page numbers.

³ Gathering papers of a Dublin symposium, the International Brecht Society dedicated volume 27 of *The Brecht Yearbook / Das Brecht-Jahrbuch* to this comparison, titling it with an Adornean ring:

It is within the realm of their alleged contrariety — comparison is most compelling, when things appear to be dichotomous at first but less so at second glance — that this contribution focuses on Brecht's and Beckett's key positions of dramatic revolt and theatrical innovation, and, more specifically, on their ultimately engaged ways of handling a prevalent theme in memorable scenes that haunt the minimalist global stages of their plays: the human struggle with the barest and rawest of realities, with the wounded, ailing, dying, and dead body, with shrouding, burying, and mourning. While providing readings of *MC* and *FP* with the theoretical prisms of Brecht's soi-disant *epic* and Beckett's soi-disant *absurd* theater in mind, "Grave Action" hones in on their protagonists' committed as well as omitted climacteric actions. The stress falls on the affect theatrically expressed in the face of pain, and on the ghostly ubiquity of death which both plays — opposed as their authors claimed to be to the illusion of feeling — emphatically convey.

To be sure, beyond the incongruities mentioned initially, there are further characteristics that distinguish *MC* from *FP* — amongst these the post-nuclear setting of Beckett's play, which is deprived of identifiable minutiae and hence geographically flexible. We hear but twice of actual places, first when Hamm's parents reminisce about the Ardennes / Sedan (*FP* 28) and Lake Como (*FP* 32), and later when Hamm in his epic interlude tells us of Kov (*FP* 74). This situation forms a stark contrast to the actual theaters of the Thirty-Years War that provide the historical setting for *MC*, ranging from battlefields of Sweden to those in Germany and Poland. Further, Brecht's epic play is a loose sequence of twelve scenes (Brecht called them *Bilder*) without acts, whereas the tragicomic *FP* is a play in one act, but not subdivided into scenes.⁴ Also, Brecht more radically than Beckett violates the classic doctrine of the three units, and sets *MC* outside. The most domestic locale in the play is nomadic Courage's traveling canteen wagon, which is at the same time her mobile business. Beckett's play, on the

Where Extremes Meet: Rereading Brecht and Beckett. Eds. Anthony Tatlow and Stephen Brockmann (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2002). Significantly earlier, Werner Hecht had written on Brecht's unrealized plans to translate *Waiting for Godot*, humorously challenging comparison altogether: "[o]ne can compare virtually everything: the banana with the rhinoceros, the egg-shell with the urn, the recording tape with the palm tree. One can [...] also compare Brecht with Beckett." Werner Hecht, "Brecht und Beckett: Ein absurder Vergleich", *Theater der Zeit* 21.14 (1966: 28). His provocative suggestion of absurdly comparing egg-shells with urns, or, to phrase it differently, wombs with tombs, procreation with decay, seems uncannily apropos for the present discussion.

⁴ The etymology of "scene" is expressive of Brecht's emphasis on theatrical performance over dramatic text, in that "scene" derives from Greek "skene", "stage." Brecht intensifies this visual significance by replacing "Szene" with "Bild", "picture" or "image." The absence of acts is appropriate for Brecht's theater, for "act" derives from Latin "actum", referring to a done deed. Brecht, however, considered action as never complete and necessarily ongoing, beyond a play's alleged end. It is ironic that Beckett's piece is characterized as "a play in one act", since *FP*'s action is neither easy to grasp, nor does it seem to be complete at the play's endpoint. Brecht and Beckett challenge "scene" and "act" as the time-honored subdivisions of dramatic works.

other hand, takes place in the private, interior space of an enclosed room by the sea (plus Clov's adjacent kitchenette, a space apart that remains as hidden from the audience as the interior of Courage's wagon), which is diametrically opposed to Brecht's scenario and evocative of kitchen-sink drama as well as of a bunker or prison cell — the curtained little windows are so far up that Clov needs a step-ladder to look outside, and even the picture faces the wall (*FP* 8).

While Hamm is confronted with his senile parents and ponders on their as well as his own death (he thinks biologically, referring to them as procreating fornicators and part of a universe of stinking corpses, *FP* 18, 20, 66), in *MC*, the three children are murdered rather than a parent — a mother committed to survival at all costs. Moreover, none of the two plays is, traditionally speaking, either a tragedy or a comedy, although despite the survival of the main characters at the end of both plays, the question of their tragic potential has been posed more than once. They are neither tragedies nor comedies, also since ongoing ironies keep mediating between the two genres: Beckett relies on the odd couple, but renders their situation tragicomic, whereas Brecht challenges the implications of the traditional tragic family by lending it a bittersweet comic twist. For example, after Courage's provocative presentation of her story to him, which culminates in her frolicsome debunking of clichés and partially exotic-sounding names, the sergeant sarcastically calls Courage's "[e]ine nette Familie" (*MC* 11; "a nice wholesome family", Kushner, 13), referring to her unconventional past and her children's three different fathers.⁵

However, above and beyond these and likely more discrepancies and incompatibilities, there are crucial elements that the two works share. These commonalities include external factors, such as the fact that both plays are exilic works and premiered abroad, the Hegelian and Marxist dialectics (master and slave), which, to some degree, informs Brecht's drama (Courage as a slave of warfare) and, to a higher degree, Beckett's (Hamm as Clov's master), Brecht's and Beckett's strong interest in parodic Biblical intertexts, and finally, what one may wish to call a lowest common non-Aristotelian denominator. To phrase it differently, *MC* and *FP* give similar twists to the idea of a plot's beginning, middle, and end. Both plays are marked by contradiction and *non sequitur*. Teleology is only an issue in the plays insofar as, along with illusion, needs to be destroyed. Repetition compulsion is evident in the echoed actions and passions of Beckett's and Brecht's protagonists alike, and they likewise portray the idea of beginnings and endings as haunted by paradox: "La fin est dans le commencement et cependant on continue" ("The end is in the beginning and yet you go on", *FP* 96). In a similar vein, *MC*'s last scene mimics the play's beginning, except that it now shows survivor Anna Fierling alone, a dummy master and slave of war, pulling her wagon,

⁵ The theme of parenthood (including adoption) plays a central role in Brecht and Beckett, in and beyond *MC* and *FP*.

painfully rather than courageously immersed in her violently imposed direction, and no longer a mother.

In reference to World War Two and its aftermath, which is the historical context for Brecht's and Beckett's plays, Adorno writes of "Vorgänge, welche eigentlich auch die Überlebenden nicht überleben können" ("events which even the survivors cannot really survive").⁶ For all we know, Courage may start over, or just keep going, which, given the thoroughly brutalized circumstances of her socio-politically dysfunctional world, to which she herself cannot help but contribute, would pretty much yield the same results. The soldiers sing:

Der Feldzug ist noch nicht zu End!
 Das Frühjahr kommt! Wach auf, du Christ!
 Der Schnee schmilzt weg! Die Toten ruhn!
 Und was noch nicht gestorben ist
 Das macht sich auf die Socken nun. (MC 108)

The snow has gone, so draw a breath!
 Let Christian souls crawl out of bed,
 Pull on their socks and conquer death!

The world will end, and time will cease!
 And while we live we buy and sell!
 And in our graves we shall find peace –
 Unless the war goes on in hell! (Kushner 205)⁷

These are the final words of the play, presented in a song that haunts ("*Singen von hinten*" MC 107, "*offstage singing*" Kushner, 203) the beginning of the unpromising future of a woman who lost her son Schweizerkas in Poland, just left behind her

⁶ Theodor W. Adorno, "Versuch, das Endspiel zu verstehen", *Noten zur Literatur II* (Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp, 1961) 192. And Theodor W. Adorno, "Trying to Understand Endgame," trans. Michael T. Jones, *New German Critique 26: Critical Theory and Modernity* (1982: 122).

⁷ Brecht's German is typically colloquial ("sich auf die Socken machen") and relies on the final formula of the fairy tale: "Und wenn sie nicht gestorben sind, dann leben sie noch heute" ("And they all lived happily ever after", which unlike the German, does not mention death). Kushner's powerful contemporary adaptation takes many liberties with translation, albeit to an enormous dramatic effect. He not only cuts passages ("Die Toten ruhn!"), while adding others ("Unless the war goes on in hell"), but also literalizes Brecht's vernacular expressions (such as "to pull on socks"). More idiomatic translations of "sich auf die Socken machen" would be "to get weaving", "to cut along", "to take a hike", or "to hit the road". Further, Kushner's version neglects the allusion to a famous German song about Jesus's farewell ("Wach auf, du Christ"), which implies death and sacrifice, and is the very ground for Brecht's parody. Brecht vehemently criticizes such sacrifice through his war-damaged figure of Courage, and had parodied the song even harder in *Die Dreigroschenoper*, where Peachum sings to / of a "rotten Christian" ("Wach auf, du verrotteter Christ").

daughter Kattrin's corpse in Germany, and erroneously believes that her favorite son Eilif is still somewhere among the living.

FP's overture is marked by a desired end, or beginning of the end, with Clov's increasingly less assertive statements parodying the last words of Christ, *consummatum est* (according to the Gospel of John 19:30): "Fini, c'est fini, ça va finir, ça va peut-être finir" ("Finished, it's finished, nearly finished, it must be nearly finished" *FP* 10). As Clov wishes for Hamm to die, and is clearly enraged about his master's stubborn life-force against all the odds, Hamm exasperatedly wonders whether his mother Nell (and that thing called life altogether) will ever be over: "Vous n'avez pas fini? Vous n'allez donc jamais finir? [...] Ça ne va donc jamais finir?" ("Have you not finished? Will you never finish? [...] Will this never finish?" *FP* 36). As the play progresses (for lack of a better word), Nell does Hamm the favor of dying, and Nagg briefly mourns her. Neither Hamm nor Clov, however, are dead at the end of their unending endgame. At best, they mimic death in their two sketchy painterly gestures of theatrical tableaux — Hamm silent, static, and covered, and Clov, although dressed for the road, nonetheless frozen in this instant of pretended departure, likewise speechless and motionless.⁸

In Clov's powerful mnemonic act of repeating a version of Christ's words — words of another that unlike the past aspect of a fulfilled *consummatum est*, move on to the future tense and irresolution of a "peut-être" — suffering is remembered. Parody debases authority and sublimity, but is as much a form of commemoration, memory *ex negativo*, so to speak, but memory nonetheless. Parody is extremely aware of its forerunner, and the words of Clov's precedent are those of Christ on the Cross, the Western symbol of pathos. When Clov expresses his hope for Hamm's end at the very beginning of the play, not only the ashbins are draped, but Hamm was as well, with even his face covered by the very "grand mouchoire sale" ("large dirty handkerchief" *FP* 8) that is to return so triumphantly (as if with a vengeance) in the play's very last lines as the "[v]ieux linge" — the "[o]ld stancher" that the stage directions still call "mouchoir" ("handkerchief", *FP* 118).⁹

MC and *FP* are plays about loss — the loss of language and the language of loss, the loss of sense and coherence, of senses and limbs, of words, movements, and lives. Both works portray the bareness of life, of war and postwar life in particular, and the physical and mental pain it imposes on the living, ailing, and dying. If a difference lies in Brecht's

⁸ This final image is reminiscent of the one in *Waiting for Godot*, where Didi asks Gogo: "Alors, on-y va?" ("Well? Shall we go?"). While Gogo answers affirmatively ("Allons-y." / Yes, let's go"), the stage directions point out that none of the two budges: "Ils ne bougent pas." ("They do not move"). Samuel Beckett, *Warten auf Godot, En attendant Godot, Waiting for Godot* (Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp, 1971: 232).

⁹ It is interesting to recall in this instant of (un)covering that in spite of the general Christian rejection of nakedness, it is the undraped figure (known as the "Antioch type") that is considered to be the most canonical version of representing the (pathos of the) Crucified. Cf. Kenneth Clark, *The Nude: A Study in Ideal Form* (New York: MJF Books, 1956: 231).

criticism of capitalist warfare versus Beckett's rejection of such semantic concreteness, none of the two plays lacks in absurdity, and none of them is "polite" when it comes down to tabooed presentations of life's hard facts.¹⁰ These include blood and wounds, maiming and mutilation, not as deformations from birth, but as the cost of war and the trauma inflicted by it in / and the nuclear age. Most of the characters in the two plays are bleeding and bandaged, disabled, or dying.

Courage's sons are killed and her daughter Kattrin is violated, muted, and eventually shot. In their bellicose men's world, no good deed remains unpunished. Hamm's parents, Nagg and Nell, are senile folks with failing sight and no legs ("moignons", "stumps" *FP* 20), housed, or practically taken under, stored away, lidded, and sat upon ("Boucle-ie! [...] Assieds-toi dessus" / "Bottle him! [...] Sit on him!" *FP* 20), as Hamm has it, in dustbins that signal premature and undignified burial. Nagg and Nell are proto-waste, and when Hamm encourages Clov to sit on one bin's lid, Clov, who is physically unable to sit, cannot accomplish the task. His misery, if you will, is portrayed hilariously, trans-generically (tragicomically).¹¹ Hamm is blind and can neither stand nor walk, while Clov can stand and walk but not sit. The situation is summarized sardonically: "Chacun sa spécialité" ("Every man his speciality" *FP* 20). And last but not least, even the toy dog lacks a leg and keeps falling over (*FP* 56).

Although most of these pains and cruelties are presented seemingly lightly, Brecht and Beckett hardly make light of suffering. In fact, the opposite. The former's technique of de-familiarization (*Verfremdung*) finds some correspondence in the latter's

¹⁰ Although he points to further specificities and intricacies of the "absurd" afterwards, in his introduction to *The Theatre of the Absurd*, Martin Esslin, who coined the titular term, mentions various implications of the "absurd", among these "out of harmony with reason" as well as Eugène Ionesco's understanding of the term as "devoid of purpose", which results in loss and the absurdity of human action and the human condition. *The Theatre of the Absurd* (Woodstock/NY: The Overlook Press, 1973: 5).

¹¹ The idea of sitting on somebody to keep her or him down or under, as if in wrestling, is similarly expressed as the tyrannical father's fear in Franz Kafka's "Das Urteil" ("The Judgment"), where the father senses that his son wants him to die (as Hamm, who points out that he has been a father to Clov, assumes that Clov wants him to die). In Kafka's story, the old father stays in a dark, high-walled room, wears a heavy gown, has white hair, no teeth, and a tired face. His head sinks upon his chest on occasion. The son lifts the father from his armchair, takes off his gown, pants, and socks (gets him "ready", as it were, as Hamm asks Clov to get him "ready", *FP* 12), and carries him to bed. The father clings to his watch chain (as Hamm clings to his whistle) and once in bed, covers himself, asking his son to make sure that he is covered well. When the son confirms, the father, in a fit, throws back the cover, stands upright on his bed, and accuses his son of wanting to take him under (cover him) all too soon. In the end, the son likely dies in an absurd accident on a bridge, the father falls heavily upon his bed, and a frightened servant covers her face with an apron. In the context of dying and shrouding, there is clearly more than one parallel between Kafka's story and Beckett's play, including the absence of certainty regarding the characters' deaths. Cf. Franz Kafka, "Das Urteil", *Die Erzählungen und andere ausgewählte Prosa* (Frankfurt/Main: Fischer, 1998: 47-60). Beyond this comparison, Kafka and Beckett share a similar sense of dark humor and love of incongruity/tragicomedy.

inscription of tragicomedy. Neither Brecht nor Beckett deploys big words; instead, they both prefer the idiomatic power of the vernacular, which they often literalize into ferocious parodies beyond twisted pleasantries and bourgeois sensibilities. “It was out of respect for the audience”, according to Peter Brook, “that Brecht introduced the idea of alienation, for alienation is a call to a halt: alienation is cutting, interrupting, holding something up to the light, making us look again.”¹²

Brecht and Beckett, when composing scenes of death and dying, practice their own techniques of distancing that result in their audiences being pulled out of their cushy complacency, out of the convenience of their hardly committed comfort zones. Brook writes:

A girl, raped, walks on to a stage in tears — and if her acting touches us sufficiently, we automatically accept the implied conclusion that she is a victim [...]. But suppose a clown were to follow her, mimicking her tears, and suppose by his talent he succeeds in making us laugh. His mockery destroys our first response. Then where do our sympathies go? The truth of her character, the validity of her position, are both put into question by the clown, and at the same time our own easy sentimentality is exposed. If carried far enough, such a series of events can suddenly make us confront our shifting views of right and wrong. (Brook 81)

While in this section on “The Rough Theatre”, Brook’s concern is Brecht, distance by the mocking of violence and employed in order to reach a destruction of clichéd sentimentality and indiscriminate judgment, also applies to Beckett’s *FP*, where visceral pain is captured from a distance, and where laughter, if not sympathetic (and not

¹² Peter Brook, *The Empty Space* (London and New York: Penguin, 2008: 81). Brook’s using the common English translation *alienation* for Brecht’s *Verfremdung* renders his point slightly ambiguous. Both, *Verfremdung* and *Entfremdung* have been translated as *alienation* in English, which has caused some confusion in understanding the precise meaning of Brecht’s concept. Distinguishing *Entfremdung* (*alienation*) from *Verfremdung* (*de-familiarization*) is paramount, since Brecht announced in no uncertain terms a deliberate de-familiarizing of what is familiar, rather than voicing a concern with an existentialist crisis. Brecht believed before Adorno that without art, alienation is total — and that without de-familiarization, alienation goes unnoticed. Cf. Gerd Rienäcker, “Verfremdung, der Entfremdung zu begegnen”, *Helene Weigel (1900-1971): Unerbittlich das Richtige zeigend* (Berlin: Stiftung Akademie der Künste, 2000: 101-103). The instrumentalized distance inherent in the techniques of epic de-familiarization, of which not only the numerous songs in *MC*, but also Hamm’s and Nagg’s storytelling in *FP* are fine examples, is an antipode to alienation, precisely because such detachment motivates active reflection. In this vein, one can say that *FP* is not first and foremost a play about alienated existence, in that it operates with post-Brechtian mechanisms of epic distance in order to drive home another truth. Adorno, as a matter of fact, characterized the situation in *FP* as parodic of existentialism: “Parodiert ist der Existentialismus selber; von seinen Invarianten bleibt nichts übrig als das Existenzminimum” (Adorno 191), and Adorno/Jones 121: “Existentialism itself is parodied; nothing remains of its ‘invariants’ other than minimal existence.” For a summary of Brecht’s de-familiarization, cf. Martina Kolb, “Verfremdungseffekt” (forthcoming in *Routledge Encyclopedia of Modernism online*, ed. Stephen Ross, 2015).

meeting Hamm's grandiose desire for compassion), may eventually turn cathartic. Comedy is an outlet for repressed emotion, a place where catharsis through laughter may happen, and where Clov is "der Clown, dem man den Endbuchstaben abgeschnitten hat" ("the clown, whose last letter has been severed", Adorno 226 and Adorno/Jones 144). *Then where do our sympathies go*, to repeat Brook's words, in the scenes of death and burial in *MC* and *FP*? While laughter and other forms of interruption play crucial roles in Brecht's and Beckett's dramaturgies, and while their opposition to bourgeois theater and their questioning of popular morality are comparably radical, the concern with death and burial that they have both written into their characters is steeped in another cultural tradition: that of the last rite — either granted or refused.

In an expectedly unconventional sort of will (but will nonetheless), Murphy asks for the following, in a note Neary reads out to Celia after the identification of Murphy's badly burnt body:

With regard to the disposal of these my body, mind, and soul, I desire that they be burnt and placed in a paper bag and brought to the Abbey Theatre, Lr. Abbey Street, Dublin, and without pause into what the great and good Lord Chesterfield calls the necessary house, where their happiest hours have been spent, on the right, as one goes down into the pit, and I desire that the chain be there pulled upon them, if possible during the performance of a piece, the whole to be executed without ceremony or show of grief.¹³

This moment in the novel portrays the habitual degree of self-irony and irreverence, and at the same time betrays his desire for his future ashes to be placed in the way that Murphy considers best — flushed down the toilet. Although Miss Counihan says that she considers Murphy's "last wish sacred" and is "bound to honour it", she quickly proceeds to the idea of "dump[ing] anywhere" (272) a bag, which, for the scarcity of "receptacle[s] for refuse" Cooper ends up "freely distribut[ing] over the floor of the saloon" (*Murphy* 270-275). Murphy's wish implied a return to Ireland (but the ashes do not make it) and is at the same time a paradoxical reminder to forget commemoration. Murphy wants to end at home, and is bent on ensuring some ritual for what has yet to happen: his death. Murphy's lines imply a preventively ordered last rite in the guise of a last will that simultaneously interrupts and continues tradition. With it, Beckett characteristically renders his protagonist's prophylactically arranged rite hilarious, by way of de-familiarization.

Although presented far more sardonically, Murphy's unfulfilled wish is reminiscent of Hamm's, whose sentimental inquiry about Mother Pegg, which Clov answers with the news of the light being extinguished, is marked, and motivated, by his deepest desire for Pegg's and his own diligent burial:

¹³ Samuel Beckett, *Murphy* (New York: Grove Press, 1970: 269).

Hamm: Il y a de la lumière chez la Mère Pegg?
 Clov: De la lumière! Comment veux-tu qu'il y ait de la lumière chez quelqu'un?
 Hamm: Alors elle s'est éteinte.
 Clov: Mais bien sûr qu'elle s'est éteinte! S'il n'y en a plus c'est qu'elle s'est éteinte.
 Hamm: Non, je veux dire la Mère Pegg.
 Clov: Mais bien sûr qu'elle s'est éteinte! Qu'est-ce que tu as aujourd'hui?
 Hamm: Je suis mon cours. *Un temps*. On l'a enterrée?
 Clov: Enterrée! Qui veux-tu qui l'enterre?
 Hamm: Toi.
 Clov: Moi! Je n'ai pas assez à faire sans enterrer les gens?
 Hamm: Mais moi tu m'enterreras.
 Clov: Mais non, je ne t'enterrerai pas!

Hamm: Is Mother Pegg's light on?
 Clov: Light! How could anyone's light be on?
 Hamm: Extinguished!
 Clov: Naturally it's extinguished. If it's not on, it's extinguished.
 Hamm: No, I mean Mother Pegg.
 Clov: But naturally she's extinguished! What's the matter with you today?
 Hamm: I'm taking my course. *Pause*. Is she buried?
 Clov: Buried! Who would have buried her?
 Hamm: You.
 Clov: Me! Haven't I enough to do without burying people?
 Hamm: But you'll bury me.
 Clov: No, I shan't bury you. (*FP 60-62*)¹⁴

Beckett's play with the literal and metaphorical implications of light (Pegg's bulb or lamp, on the one hand, and the light of her life, on the other) is reminiscent of Shakespeare's famous double entendre in *Othello* V, 2 ("put out the light, and then put out the light"). It is through Beckett's play on the word "lumière" that the plain, if putative truth (for lack of a better word) is driven home to Hamm, as Clov fashions himself as one who is too busy to have time to take care of, care for, or bury people. In fact, his same industriousness is mentioned earlier, when he similarly refuses to cover Hamm and get him ready for bed:

Hamm: Prépare-moi, je vais me coucher.
 Clov: Je viens de te lever.
 Hamm: Et après?
 Clov: Je ne peux pas te lever et te coucher toutes les cinq minutes, j'ai à faire.

Hamm: Get me ready. I'm going to bed.

¹⁴ "Shan't" (shall not) signals more strongly the component of Clov's adamant refusal than "won't" (will not) or the French future tense.

Clov: I've just got you up.

Hamm: And what of it?

Clov: I can't be getting you up and putting you to bed every five minutes. I have things to do. (FP 12)

Ironically, while the servant Clov, in Hegelian manner, is not only defined by his relationship to his master, Hamm, but also by his work (he repeatedly points out that he has got things to take care of), his only transparent labor consists in catering to none other than Hamm, something that he keeps doing obediently, or so he says, except for the refusal to cover and promise to bury him later-on.¹⁵ Even if Clov wanted to bury Hamm, his means, for all we know, would be limited: one has not only run out of rugs and pain-killers, but of coffins as well (FP 94, 100 and 108). Among the many items that are no longer available (including pap, bicycle wheels, nature), these three missing objects (rugs, pain-killers, coffins) specifically refer to cold, pain, and death.

Clov states that he did not bury Pegg, will not bury Hamm, and makes clear that he finds Hamm's questions in this regard outrageous, which is evident in his return questions to Hamm ending with exclamation rather than question marks ("De la lumière!" / "Enterrée!" / "Moi!"). Between assuring Clov that all he is doing is taking his course, and his mention of burial, Hamm pauses a first time, before this disheartening dialogue ends with yet another pensive pause on Hamm's part, now one that immediately precedes his recollection of how much fun Pegg used to be back in the days when everybody was younger, and together with his related identification and self-pity constitutes Hamm's most affectively charged preoccupation in the entire play: that of his undraped and unburied body. Clov's scaremongering words are his only source of power vis-à-vis Hamm, and yes, they do thoroughly thwart Hamm's expectations — and come to pass. Eventually, Clov declines Hamm's request for an anticipated last rite:

Hamm: Encore une chose. *Clov s'arrête.* Une dernière grâce. *Clov sort.* Cache-moi sous le drap. *Un temps long.* Non? Bon. *Un temps.* A moi. *Un temps.* De jouer. *Un temps.* Avec lassitude: Vieille fin de partie perdue, finir de perdre.

Hamm: One thing more. *Clov halts.* A last favor. *Exit Clov.* Cover me with the sheet. *Long pause.* No? Good. *Pause.* Me to play. *Pause.* *Wearily:* Old endgame lost of old, play and lose and have done with losing. (FP 114)

Hamm deeply wishes for Clov to have granted Pegg the proper rite, and immediately distracts himself from the indubitable pathos of his own looming predicament (an unburied corpse), by thinking of livelier times past. If Clov wants for

¹⁵ As Clov keeps himself busy running around in circles, if you will, Courage, too, is a slave, in her case to a master called war. She, too, is defined by her master as well as by her work for that master. Her business and industriousness seem just as ludicrous, albeit for other reasons than Clov's.

Hamm to end, Hamm's own desire for his end, in spite of his emotive appeal to Clov to put him in his coffin (*FP* 108), remains far more ambiguous than his desire for his parents' deaths. And while Clov finds the end (also that of Hamm's story) terrific, Hamm prefers the middle, which he states immediately before the epic instance (in Brecht's understanding of the term) of the story that he forces upon Clov (and not for the first time) about a man crawling on his belly, on the brink of death (*FP* 72):

Clov: La fin est inouïe.

Hamm: Je préfère le milieu.

Clov: The end is terrific!

Hamm: I prefer the middle. (*FP* 68)

If Hamm's wish for the end appears to be uncertain, his desire for the end to be properly ritualized is clear. Hamm, in other words, believes that a corpse needs to be buried. That Brecht's *Courage* should not herself be able to bury any of her brutally killed three children, leaves one with a comparable plethora of questions about death and burial, mourning and dignity. *Courage* is absent when her children die (and never properly learns of Eilif's execution), only sees two of the three children's bodies (Schweizerkas's and Kattrin's), and only tends to one, her daughter's, before handing it over to the farmers for burial, whereas the corpse of Schweizerkas is thrown upon a piece of common land, where cadavers are left at the mercy of scavengers.

The last rite does not always come timely. It can be an anticipated, premature ritual that expresses someone's death fantasies and anxieties, or it can be a retrospective, even retroactive rite initially denied. Instances of the former are Beckett's *Murphy* and *Hamm*, and the father in *Kafka's* story, whereas the latter is connected with sacrifice, and examples of it are *Palinurus* in the *Aeneid* and *Elpenor* in the *Odyssey* (his shade pleads with *Odysseus* to grant him proper burial), and *Brecht's Courage*, who eventually grants to her daughter what in the name of her own survival she had not provided for her son: the acknowledgment and shrouding of the body.¹⁶

¹⁶ Cf. Virgil, *The Aeneid*, trans. Robert Fagles (New York, Toronto and London: Penguin, 2006) 181: "[O]h, *Palinurus* [...] Your naked corpse will lie on an unknown shore." Cf. Homer, *The Odyssey*, trans. Robert Fagles (New York, Toronto and London: Penguin, 1996) 251: "He'd [*Elpenor*] not been buried under the wide ways of earth, / not yet, we'd left his body [...] unwept, unburied — this other labor pressed us. / But I wept to see him now, pity touched my heart [...]." And *Elpenor* replies (251-252): "remember me, I beg you! Don't sail off / and desert me, left behind unwept, unburied, don't [...] No, burn me in full armor [...] so even men to come will learn my story. / Perform my rites, and plant on my tomb that oar / I swung with mates when I rowed among the living." Ezra Pound refers to *Elpenor* in the first *Canto* in this precise context of initially refused burial: "Unburied, cast on the wide earth, / Limbs that we left in the house of *Circe*, / Unwept, unwrapped in sepulchre, since toils urged other." Cf. Ezra Pound, *The Cantos* (New York: New Directions, 1998: 4). Pound's addition of "unwrapped" is especially compelling for the present discussion.

The timing of the rite is ambiguous, and so is its precise location in life or death. Rites of passage are irreversible moments ritualized ceremoniously in transitional, transferential spaces, and are, as such, fictional in nature, located, or suspended, in “third” realms, where one is no longer one (alive, warm), but also not quite the other (dead, cold, buried, gone).

Covering, wrapping, draping, or shrouding — be it of a child or an elderly person, a patient or a corpse — is a gesture of care, of showing care, of externalizing concern. Such care and concern expressed in the act of covering or shrouding a body — dead or alive, another’s or one’s own — signals an attempt at providing privacy (at covering nudity and restraining voyeurism), at reducing a person’s further exposure to cold, sight or other infliction (including an intrusion by the draper’s own desire), at limiting the results of further harm by way of inserting a shielding layer of protection. In sum, the cover separates subject and object.¹⁷

Not only Hamm himself is freezing when Clov tells him that Nagg’s crying over Nell’s passing had already ended (and that covers were no longer available), but also his parents are cold, who lost their “guibolles” (“shanks”, *FP* 28) in a nevertheless exuberantly remembered tandem accident, and now ask one another about that part of their well-being, while considering the withdrawal of their amputated bodies into their respective dustbin:

Nagg: Tu as froid?
 Nell: Oui, très froid. Et toi?
 Nagg: Je gèle. *Un temps*. Tu veux rentrer?

Nagg: Are you cold?
 Nell: Yes, perished. And you? *Pause*.
 Nagg: I’m freezing. *Pause*. Do you want to go in? (*FP* 28)

While the gesture of shielding living bodies suffering from cold or pain is largely driven by practical and therapeutic considerations, the shrouding of corpses betrays a more complex sense of care. As it expresses affliction, anguish and distress, it does so in a state of shock and confusion. On the one hand, there is the survivor’s awareness that dead bodies no longer feel the same cold or pain they did when alive, but on the other hand, this knowledge is repressed in favor of the mourner’s illusion that (s)he may not only still be able to express care belatedly, but that the warmth and protection thus provided has a measurable effect not only on the provider, whose actual desire is veiled by shrouding, but on the dead body as well. The last gesture of covering is spurred by altruistic (taking care of the corpse) as well as egotistic (self-care) concerns, and the moment of covering the body before its burial is the last possible instant to physically

¹⁷ A “shroud”, other than protecting the corpse, separates the living from the dead. The word is a derivative of Old English “scrud”, which refers to cutting (“to shred”).

express one's care (while simultaneously taking precautions against desire), to be in direct contact with the one who has departed, who is deceased, or has passed, as we euphemistically put it, but is still physically present one last time, as a corpse, before the final placement in the tomb.¹⁸

If deaths and burials, including those of army officers (such as for instance Tilly's "hohe Leich" (MC 65; "estimable corpse", Kushner 117) permeate the entire play, Brecht's more memorable portrayal of loss and death in MC is concentrated in scenes one, three, eight, eleven, and twelve, where, one by one, Courage loses all her children. In the very first scene "kommt ein Sohn abhanden" (MC 7; "Courage loses a son", Kushner 5) — her older and favorite son Eilif — and the mother is characterized as "schmerzensreiche Gebälerin" (MC 716; "My womb only gave me grief after grief after grief!", Kushner 21). This expression is conventionally deployed only in reference to the Pietà as "mother of sorrows," a gesture of mordent piety and provocative allusion on Brecht's part that is lost in Kushner's translation. As Courage is distracted while haggling about a buckle, Eilif can be unresistingly recruited, and from this moment of his departure on, the audience intimates his imminent death. Eventually, the crisis becomes self-fulfilling. As a result of everybody being at a loss as to how to break the bad news to her, the fact of his execution never properly reaches Courage.

In a similar set-up, Courage's younger son Schweizerkas dies as a consequence of her too extensive bargaining. When the bier with his corpse is carried in front of her, she holds her daughter's hand,¹⁹ as the sheet that covers the young man's body is being lifted:

Zwei Landknechte kommen mit einer Bahre, auf der unter einem Laken etwas liegt. Nebenher geht der Feldweibel. Sie setzen die Bahre nieder.

Der Feldweibel: Da is einer, von dem wir nicht seinen Namen wissen. Er muß aber notiert werden, daß alles in Ordnung geht. Bei dir hat er eine Mahlzeit genommen. Schau ihn dir an, ob du ihn kennst. *Er nimmt das Laken weg.* Kennst du ihn? *Mutter Courage schüttelt den Kopf.* Was, du hast ihn nie gesehn, vor er bei dir eine Mahlzeit genommen hat? *Mutter Courage schüttelt den Kopf.* Hebt ihn auf. Gebt ihn auf den Schindanger. Er hat keinen, der ihn kennt. *Sie tragen ihn weg.* (MC 53-54)

Two soldiers enter with a stretcher on which something is lying, covered with a sheet. The Sergeant follows. They put the stretcher on the ground.

The Sergeant: Here's somebody, we don't know his name. It's got to be entered in the record, everything in its place. He bought a meal from you. Look and see if you know him. *He takes the sheet away.* Know him? *Mother Courage shakes her head.* You never saw him before you served him

¹⁸ Similar to covering or draping, an embalming ointment can be applied to both, the living and the dead, with the prospect of therapeutic and protective effects in the case of the former, and as the last rite of the extreme unction in the case of the latter.

¹⁹ When Hamm is cold and informed of Nagg's short-lived mourning for Nell (and of the absence of rugs or covers), he asks Clov for his hand or a kiss, thus expressing his desperate desire for warmth and intimacy (FP 94).

supper? *Mother Courage shakes her head*. Lift him up. Throw him in the pit. He's got no one who knows him. *They carry him away*. (Kushner 95)

When confronted with her son's corpse, Courage is explicitly asked to look at him. In order to secure her survival, however, she twice refuses to recognize his body. She answers the sergeant's questions negatively, if silently, with a repeated shaking of her head. Her disavowal is twofold: she not only twice refuses to identify him and herself as his mother, but at the same time also denies her son's corpse as a site of severe crisis. As a result, his body is carried off and thrown upon the "Schindanger" anonymously, while Courage prepares herself for the famous song of great capitulation — and moves on.²⁰

The first postwar production of *MC* took place after Brecht's and Helene Weigel's return from their Californian exile, in East Berlin in 1949. On this occasion, Weigel performed one of her most spectacular moments on stage, sounding the depths of Courage's act of denial, while performing her ingenuous painterly gesture of the *stummer Schrei* ("mute scream"). This putative scream was an almost sculpted gesture in stillness: Weigel sitting motionless, her head thrown back, her mouth agape, her hands resting on her lap. She invented this gesture to represent Courage's shock – and dilemma – in the face of her son's death, and her refusal to affectively acknowledge or verbally express the violence of a war that is at the same time her livelihood. Reminiscent of Beckett's dialogues, speech and silence powerfully coalesce in *MC*.²¹ Rather than evoking proximity or empathy, however, the image of the mute scream concentrates its energies on distance and mimicry: it resembles a skull and imitates, remembers, foreshadows, and probably even mocks death.²²

²⁰ Brecht's word is "Schindanger", which Kushner renders as "pit." More precisely, "Schindanger" used to be a piece of common land, where dead cattle was flayed and animal cadavers were planted. Such plots also served for the planting of criminals, prostitutes, actors, or suicides, who were denied a Christian burial — a denial that equals a *post-mortem* excommunication as a penal insult to the dead and a warning deterrence to the living.

²¹ Cf. Leslie Kane, *The Language of Silence: On the Unspoken and the Unspeakable in Modern Drama* (Rutherford, Madison and Teaneck: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, and London and Toronto: Associated University Presses, 1982: 108). Kane assembles "dramatists of the unspoken," but does not include Brecht, who generally counts among the outspoken. As a result of his alleged outspokenness, however, it is all the more conspicuous that he made Kattrin mute and had Courage refuse words in crucial moments of utmost crisis (shaking her head rather than speaking). Brecht's politicized response to and his respective representations of suffering are related. Cf. Raymond Williams on Brecht's "rejection of tragedy", in *Modern Tragedy* (Stanford University Press, 1966: 190-204).

²² Cf. Martina Kolb, "The Mask as Interface: Brecht, Weigel and the Sounding of Silence," *Communications from the International Brecht Society* 34 (June 2005: 80-93, especially 82-83). When Eilif pays his visit just before his execution, his face is "kalkweiß" and foreshadows his death (*MC* 86; "chalk-white" Kushner 157). Such approximations of the skull also appear in the form of Nagg's and Nell's nightcaps and "teint[s] très blanc[s]" ("very white face[s]") and their and Hamm's yawning (*FP* 10, 18, 24-25), as well as in Hamm's various imitations and intimations of death. Variations on this condensed image permeate Beckett's dramatic work. Another instance is in "... but the clouds ..."

Courage is happy about Eilif's announced visit, but nevertheless goes to town to do business, not knowing that he was only to return for one final farewell before his execution:

Der Feldprediger: Der Eilif!

Von Soldaten mit Piketten gefolgt, kommt Eilif daher. Seine Hände sind gefesselt. Er ist kalkweiß. [...]

Eilif: Wo ist die Mutter?

Der Feldprediger: In die Stadt.

Eilif: Ich hab gehört, sie ist am Ort. Sie haben erlaubt, daß ich sie noch besuchen darf.

Der Koch *zu den Soldaten*: Wo führt ihr ihn denn hin?

Ein Soldat: Nicht zum Guten.

Der Feldprediger: Was hat er angestellt?

Der Soldat: Bei einem Bauern ist er eingebrochen. Die Frau ist hin.

Der Feldprediger: Wie hast du das machen können?

Eilif: Ich hab nix andres gemacht als vorher auch.

Der Koch: Aber im Frieden.

Eilif: Halt das Maul. Kann ich mich hinsetzen, bis sie kommt?

Der Soldat: Wir haben keine Zeit.

[...]

Der Feldprediger: Und was solln wir deiner Mutter ausrichten?

Eilif: Sag ihr, es war nichts anderes, sag ihr, es war dasselbe. Oder sag ihr gar nix.

Die Soldaten treiben ihn weg.

[...]

Der Koch *ruft ihnen nach*: Ich werds ihr doch sagen müssen, sie wird ihn noch sehn wollen!

Der Feldprediger: Sagen Sie ihr lieber nix. Höchstens, er war da und kommt wieder, vielleicht morgen. Inzwischen bin ich zurück und kanns ihr beibringen. (MC 86-87)

The Chaplain: I think it's Eilif.

A grim contingent of Soldiers with pikes leading Eilif, whose hands are tied. He's chalk-white. [...]

Eilif: Where's my mother?

The Chaplain: In town.

Eilif: I heard she was here. They let me come to see her.

The Cook *to the Soldiers*: Where are you taking him?

A Soldier: No place good.

The Chaplain: What did he do?

The Soldier: He broke into a farmhouse. The wife – (*Gestures to indicate she's dead*).

The Chaplain: You did that? How could you do that?

Eilif: Same as I've always done.

The Cook: But it's peacetime. You can't –

Eilif: Shut up. Can I sit till she comes back?

The Soldier: We don't have time for that.

[...]

where the protagonist wears a "skullcap." Cf. Samuel Beckett, *The Complete Dramatic Works* (London: Faber and Faber, 2006: 417).

The Chaplain: What should we tell your mother?

Eilif: Tell her it wasn't different. Tell her it was the same. Or don't tell her anything.

The Soldiers shove him and he starts to walk.

[...]

The Cook (*calling after the Chaplain*): I have to tell her, she'll want to see him!

The Chaplain: Better not say anything. Or he was here and he'll be back, tomorrow possibly. When I get back I'll find some way to explain. (Kushner 157-159)²³

Eilif was not going to return, even though a part of Courage is set to believe in his survival all the way to the play's bitter end. The chaplain recommends that it is best not to inform Courage, and the cook looks into Courage's canteen wagon and finds Kattrin there, her head covered with a blanket (MC 88). Her gesture of hiding behind a layer of protective fabric is another instance of imitation: she may well cover herself not only in shock about Eilif's violence (Kattrin herself was violated), but also in anticipation of Eilif's and her own impending deaths. Presumably, his body was not to be granted a last rite, while Kattrin was cared for by Courage and the farmers.

At the end of MC, mute Kattrin unremittingly drums to save, as it were, the children that she cannot have (while the prayers by the others have no effect whatsoever). She is repeatedly advised to stop, but indefatigably continues, and is eventually shot on the roof top from which she was accomplishing her mission. While Courage succeeds in saving her own life but not that of her children, Kattrin manages to save the city but not herself, and when her mother returns from town, she finds Kattrin's body on the ground:

Vor dem Planwagen hockt Mutter Courage bei ihrer Tochter. Die Bauersleute daneben.

[...]

Mutter Courage: Vielleicht schläft sie mir ein. *Sie singt:*

[...] Eia popeia / Was raschelt im Stroh / Der eine liegt in Polen [Schweizerkas] / Der andre [Eilif] ist werweißwo. [...]

²³ Brecht's text does not explicitly speak of rape, but the case is clear: Eilif broke into a farmer's house and raped and ruined a woman (likely the farmer's wife) during a short-lived peacetime of which Eilif was unaware (the German "hin" may mean "dead", but could also mean "ruined" or "broken"). He is about to be executed for his crime. The brutal irony Brecht portrays is that in times of war, rapes committed by soldiers (including Eilif's) were not only habitual and went unpunished, but rapists were honored on occasion ("Im Krieg haben sie ihn dafür geehrt" MC 87; "During the war he got medals for things like this", Kushner 159). That Eilif is a criminal complicates our sense of him, our sense of Courage's loss of him, and our sense of his imminent execution. Eilif being a rapist awaiting execution de-automatizes the audience's reaction and enhances reflection (in Peter Brook's sense). This distance is also the result of Brecht's ironies opening up ethical gray zones. None of Courage's sons is killed in action; rather, both die as a consequence of so-called misunderstandings or the absence of a certain piece of knowledge. The audience's sympathies for Courage (or absence or wavering sense thereof) are now subject to far more complex reflection.

Der Bauer: Wenns nicht in die Stadt gegangen wärn, Ihren Schnitt machen, wärs vielleicht nicht passiert.

Mutter Courage: Jetzt schläft sie.

Die Bäuerin: Sie schläft nicht, Sie müssens einsehen, sie ist hinüber.

Der Bauer: Und Sie selber müssen los endlich. Da sind die Wölf, und was schlimmer ist, die Marodöre.

Mutter Courage: Ja.

Sie geht und holt eine Blache aus dem Wagen, um die Tote zuzudecken.

Die Bäuerin: Habens denn niemand sonst? Wos hingehen könnten?

Mutter Courage: Doch, einen. Den Eilif.

Der Bauer *während Mutter Courage die Tote zudeckt*: Den müssens finden. Für die da sorgen wir, daß sie ordentlich begraben wird. Da könnens ganz beruhigt sein.

Mutter Courage: Da haben Sie Geld für die Auslagen. *Sie zählt dem Bauer Geld in die Hand. Der Bauer und sein Sohn geben ihr die Hand und tragen Kattrin weg.*

(MC 106-107)

Alongside the wagon, Mother Courage sits, bent over her daughter. The farm couple stands nearby.

[...]

Mother Courage: Maybe she's sleeping. Sings:

[...] Eia popeia, / I see your eyes close. / One kid lies in Poland [Schweizerkas]. The other [Eilif] – well, who knows? [...] ²⁴

The Farmer: You had to go to town to hunt for bargains, maybe if you'd been here none of this would have happened.

Mother Courage: Now she's sleeping.

The Farmer's Wife: She isn't sleeping, stop saying that and look, she's gone.

The Farmer: And you have to go too. There are wolves around here, and people who're worse than the wolves.

Mother Courage: Yes.

She goes to the wagon and brings out a sheet.

The Farmer's Wife: Do you have anyone left? Anyone you could go to?

Mother Courage: One left. Eilif.

She uses the sheet to wrap Kattrin's body.

The Farmer: You've got to go find him then. We'll take care of her, she'll have a decent burial. Don't worry.

Mother Courage: Here's the money for what it costs.

She gives the Farmer some money. The Farmer and his Son shake her hand and carry Kattrin's body away. (Kushner 201-203) ²⁵

At first, Courage wishes for Kattrin to fall asleep, singing Brecht's parody of a famous lullaby whose lyrics summarize all her losses; then Courage pretends that

²⁴ The German text explicitly says "ist", thus expressing Courage's belief that one lies dead and the other is alive, while Kushner's translation is elliptic, thereby insinuating Eilif's death as parallel to and repetitive of Schweizerkas's.

²⁵ As a matter of fact, now *she's got no one who knows her*, to repeat the sergeant's words following Courage's earlier disavowal of Schweizerkas.

Katrin is asleep (as if relying on the ancient idea of death, *thanatos*, as the brother of sleep, *hypnos*); and at last, upon the farmer's wife's merciless instigation, Courage fetches a sheet and covers her daughter's dead body. Although she eventually hands the body to the farmers for a "decent burial" in yet another moment of transaction (she pays them), Courage is the one to initiate the last rite by draping the corpse in the precise moment she acknowledges Katrin's death. If this rite communicates the sense of an ending, it simultaneously acknowledges her vulnerability and visualizes the mental pain of ongoing separation. The shroud is a "Blache" of the kind that also covers Courage's wagon, and is certainly intended to preserve and protect Katrin's body, as well as to hide it from the onlookers' sight, which implies a sense of dignity in the act of avoiding the shame and insult that Katrin already endured during her life, and that Schweizerkas's unburied corpse was exposed to as well.

Degraded, Schweizerkas's corpse decayed on the piece of common land and just as that of Nell (and presumably of Nagg as well) in waste bins seems repulsive and undignified. This lack of dignity is starkly opposed to a decently carried out last rite, which usually implies a form of shrouding. Insofar as the shroud is the object onto which the survivor's emotion is projected — and the object that is handled in a way to enable hope and dignity — it does not surprise that the world's most famous shroud receives the amount of attention it does (of researchers and believers alike). The alleged burial cloth of Christ is on display in Turin, a precious sheet known as the *santa sindone* ("holy shroud"). This cloth is not only an affectively charged object of desire, but also an item surrounded by controversy and debate. Turin's *sindone* counts as the most studied object in human history, even though ongoing scientific research has heretofore not been in a position to prove that the shroud is that of Christ. Although there is not even a consensus on how the image on the cloth was created, millions ascribe profound meaning to their belief that it is the sheet that once wrapped Christ. All the Gospels mention the shrouding of the body of Jesus, so that the pronounced interest in the shroud's authenticity and the desire to be in contact with the materialized signs of traumatic pain and suffering are textually explicable.

The fetishized Turin shroud is not only evidence of long-gone pain and passing, but also of dignity. A fetishist's ambiguous stance toward absence and presence is crucial in this context. As an object of condensed force that crystallizes desire, as well as an object of subjective reverence, the fetish is a metonymic compromise that at once reveals and blocks the awareness of loss, and enables the simultaneous existence of "Verleugnung" / "disavowal" — in the case of the shroud, the denial of death as finite, of the absence of the body, and of the end of life — and the "Anerkennung" / "affirmation" of presence — in the case of the shroud, the marks of somebody's body, and possibly Christ's, who died in great pain.²⁶

²⁶ Sigmund Freud, "Fetischismus", *Studienausgabe* III, ed. Alexander Mitscherlich et al. (Frankfurt/Main: Fischer, 1997: 384 and 388). And Sigmund Freud, "Fetishism," *The Standard Edition*

The shroud is linked to desire, and its subtle marks are diametrically opposed to the blood-stained handkerchief that is rather less appealing, and that nobody but Hamm himself first removes from, and eventually puts back on his face (FP 10 and 118) — the two principal physical actions Hamm takes on his own. In this context, Adorno mentions an “Identitätsverlust des Gesichts”, “Verhülltheit [...] eines Toten”, and “den Lebendigen [...] schon unter die Leichen einreih[en]” (“the face’s loss of identity”, “concealed is the face of a dead man”, and “plac[ing man] already among corpses”, Adorno 207 and Adorno/Jones 131). Hamm emphatically holds on to his “old stancher” as his last possession, ready to utter the final words of Beckett’s play:

Hamm: Vieux linge! *Un temps*. Toi — je te garde.

Hamm: Old stancher! *Pause*. You ... remain. (FP 118)

He holds the cloth spread out before himself, prior to covering his face with it, remaining motionless in his wheel chair, and mimicking death in the exact same way he had done in the play’s opening, when Clov removed the sheet that had covered Hamm, while Hamm himself lifted the blood-stained handkerchief from his face. Herbert Blau has referred to this final image as “the cryptic sufferance of the last rites when, the circuit of pain restored, he [Hamm] seems to acknowledge another presence abjected onto himself.”²⁷ The play, in any case, “closes on this final image: Clov intent on Hamm, as he was at the play’s beginning; the chess pieces suggested by the title have moved back into their opening positions, much like those commanded by Mr Endon in *Murphy*. Yet, even here, Beckett adds considerable ambiguity to the repetition. The relation between Hamm and Clov has shifted. Nell is dead in her dustbin. As with Godot, *Endgame*’s world is both changing and changeless.”²⁸

When survivors dress corpses in wedding suits or dresses with their faces made up, they carry out an action that performs utmost denial. Such action is diametrically opposed to Hamm’s presentation of the soi-disant abject, as well as to cremation. Making up bodies clearly speaks to the survivors’ disavowal of death, as it caters to the illusion of life and addresses, in a somewhat macabre way and prematurely, the aesthetic concern vis-à-vis a body’s physical decay. Cremating corpses is the other end of the scale, as it results in the undoing of the body’s material, while preventing the hygienic issues of decomposition. Human dignity and other ethical and psychological concerns somewhat prosaically overlap in this context with aesthetic and hygienic issues of care. If dignity is hard to define, its relationship with worthiness, respect,

of the *Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud* XXI. Trans. and ed. James Strachey. (London: The Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psychoanalysis, 1961: 153 and 156).

²⁷ Herbert Blau, “Quaquaquaqu: The Babel of Beckett,” *The World of Samuel Beckett*, ed. Joseph H. Smith (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1991: 15).

²⁸ David Pattie, *The Complete Guide to Samuel Beckett* (London and New York: Routledge, 2000: 77).

affection, integrity, empathy, and perhaps courage is evident, and these ideas are intimately intertwined with that of granting a decent burial.²⁹

Throughout *MC*, Courage is touched by death in more than one sense, and at the end of the play, she is technically no longer a mother; those who defined her as a mother are dead. Her eventually questionable titular identity has an absurdist ring to it, as do Courage's repetitive, echoed actions with little variation, which beyond her survival in sheer misery are practically futile and devoid of any meaningful human relation. On the other hand, however, that which defines her identity as a woman surviving war by way of a cruel business is present to the very end, in an ambiguous disturbing ending with which Brecht intends to trigger his audience's serious reflection. Courage's refusal of a conventional reaction to death first strikes the spectator as de-familiarizing, but upon closer examination, Weigel's theatrical solution of the mute scream, for example, or Brecht's decision to have Courage tend to Kattrin's corpse the way she does, really opened up a new space for "de-familiarizing" de-familiarization itself. The mute scream is directed to the audience and turns away from the sergeant; importantly, it resembles a skull and as such foreshadows further death and disaster. And the four creatures in *FP* are practically shown in death in progress — a death that beyond Nell's case does not explicitly occur, but whose ghostly presence can no longer be masked, nor can the characters' mournfulness throughout *FP*.

Brecht's de-familiarization does not apply to Beckett, in that the Beckett of *FP* seems rather uninterested in soliciting political thought or action. It does apply to Beckett, however, since his characters counter pain, death, and alienation by a specifically Beckettian form of de-familiarization, thus rendering their existence bearable in their own way of tragicomic distancing. What Beckett's and Brecht's depictions share in the face of these massive human challenges, is the insistence of their plays on some form of onwardness.

A comparison of the omnipresence of corpses and the related grave actions that permeate *MC* and *FP* is not as absurd as that of a "banana" with a "rhinoceros", a "recording tape" with a "palm tree", or, alternatively, of an "egg-shell" with an "urn", to recall the suggestive provocation, quoted earlier, which Werner Hecht deployed in order to launch his comparison of Brecht and Beckett. It is hardly a coincidence that Adorno in his essay (literally so, as "Versuch") on *FP* mentions Brecht more than once in the context of terror and alleged subjective differences, writing the following:

Der Simplifikateur des Schreckens [Beckett] weigert sich, anders als Brecht, der Simplifikation. Er ist ihm aber gar nicht so unähnlich, insofern, als seine Differenziertheit zur Empfindlichkeit gegen

²⁹ Cf. Salman Akhtar, "Some Psychoanalytic Reflections on the Concept of Dignity," Presentation at the Panel Discussion *Dignity* at the National Meeting of the American Psychoanalytic Association in New York, January 18, 2014.

subjektive Differenzen wird, die zur conspicuous consumption derer verkamen, welche Individuation sich leisten können. Daran ist ein sozial Wahres. (Adorno 197-198).

The simplifier of terror [Beckett] refuses - unlike Brecht - any simplification. But he is not so dissimilar from Brecht, insofar as his differentiation becomes sensitivity to subjective differences, which have regressed to the "conspicuous consumption" of those who can afford individuation. Therein lies social truth. (Adorno/Jones 125)

MC's and FP's characters cannot afford individuation. Marked by universal affliction and massive attrition, their lives and actions are devoid of relation and point to the grave.

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