A strange situation: self-entrapment in Waiting for Godot

Waiting for Godot, a ‘tragicomedy’ in two acts, was first performed in Paris in 1953, quickly becoming an international success that established Beckett as a major figure in twentieth-century literature. Early commentators viewed the play in existentialist terms to such a degree it became almost synonymous with that movement (Kiesenhofer, 1993). Others have read the play in political or religious terms – Mittenzwei (1969) presents a Marxist perspective, Zeifman (1975) highlights the sense of suffering and its connection to the divinity, and Cohn (1962) sees Beckett as mocking classical Christian traditions. Anders (1965) believes the play is a parable, and most criticism views it as representative of certain abstract features of the human condition, or as a specific allegory. Worton describes a more contemporary view – the central problem of the play is ‘what language can and cannot do’, and it is ‘used to make the reader/spectator […] wary of the codifications [it] imposes upon us’ (Worton, 1994: 68). The present reading examines the play as an exposition of certain feeling-states within an emerging-self, which are actually manifested in the character relations, imagery, and so forth. The play reflects the internal world of a self struggling to integrate in face of disintegration anxieties triggered by separation from a loving, primary object. Nealon writes ‘in Waiting for Godot […] Vladimir and Estragon are trapped by their modernist nostalgia for legitimation in Godot: they have a totalizing, modernist world view in an infinite, postmodern world’ (1988: 526). However, one could suggest the play depicts a nostalgia for something absolutely required by the self (of which Vladimir and Estragon are manifestations). This is not any sort of legitimacy, which would imply a false-self compliance, but a secure internal sense of love and recognition. The characters cannot be literally nostalgic, since this primary connection is something they have not had. The ‘infinite, postmodern world’ is understandable only as a part of the totality of the human mental universe. It is the province of those
positions of the mind that are before the full integration and selfhood of the Depressive Position, but which are concomitant with it in the total psyche.

This brings the experience of the play in line with Anders’s comment that ‘where the world no longer exists, there can no longer be a possibility of a collision with the world’ (Anders, 1965: 145). Godot is the primary maternal object that is the world for an emerging-self, without which the self cannot ‘collide’, or engage, the world in a full, individuated way. The character Godot, who does not literally appear on stage, represents the maternal side of an early dyadic relationship in which the mother is experienced as absent, something that forms the emotional background of the play’s represented internal world. The various relationships within the play are dyadic and fluid, with characters assuming various mother/infant roles in condensation; the types of couples formed reflect the primary experience of maternal absence and failure of containment. The play reflects a state of being, or rather of not-being, with the mother, and the various constellations of characters and their emotional experiences enact this aspect of the narrative-self’s experience. The ‘codification’ and ‘impositions’ of language within the play are results of this primary rupture between primary containing and expressive aspects of the narrative-self, which struggles to be recognized within an entrapping, unheeding matrix.

The play’s appeal can be partly understood because of its elucidation of primary states of human experience. The emerging-self responds to traumatic disconnection from the world/mother with powerful admixtures of rage, despair, and hope, developing powerful imagos to connect these feelings. This chapter looks at a variety of relationships (between the tramps themselves, between Lucky and Pozzo, as well as between the two couples), and explores themes of starvation and primary failure in the nursing bond. In all of this, the dominant relationship that forms the drama’s major substratum remains one between an absent, alluring/withholding Godot-as-mother and an ill-seen infantile-self.

A personal god

Lucky’s monologue, delivered towards the end of the first act, expresses the emotional heart of the play, and of the oeuvre, by demonstrating the intrapsychic consequences of ruptures in the early mother–infant dyad. Beckett supported this centrality – in the 1975 Schiller Theatre production that he directed, the author opened the rehearsals, some-
what to the surprise of Walter Asmus, the co-director, with the monologue (McMillan and Fehsenfeld, 1988: 137). Lucky, having outlived his usefulness as servant to the self-centered Pozzo, appears destined to be abandoned at the fair. Pozzo represents the maternal side of a highly dependent early relationship, and is the provider of Lucky’s basic physical needs. He is the mother with whom the child must engage to survive, who provides the externality that allows for mutative changes in the internal landscape. Lucky’s long, fragmented speech is an elucidation of his own internal state; it begins by describing this ‘personal god’/mother who is ‘outside time without extension who from the heights of divine apathia divine athambia divine aphasia loves us dearly with some exceptions for reasons unknown’ (43). The primary object is experienced as unknowable, unreachable and uncaring and, even more damaging to the infantile-self, this ‘god’ provides a love felt to be available, though it is impossible for the child to connect what it is doing or what it is, at any given moment, to the criteria for this love’s bestowal. This ‘personal god’/mother loves according to an isolated, internal agenda outside the child’s potential experience and so, to survive, the infant must always remain close, or experience the anxiety manifested in the rest of the monologue. The mother’s arbitrary containment generates the ‘calm which even though intermittent is better than nothing’ (43), though normally it would establish an enduring capacity to ‘go on being’ by providing protection from psychic annihilation. I have heard this exact statement (‘it’s better than nothing’) on innumerable occasions from patients trying to explain to themselves, and me, their motivation for remaining locked into unsatisfactory relationships. The terrors of psychic annihilation that would result from moving away from a particular person, who represents in the transference a deeply needed primary object, is unbearable. The loss of the core internal object leads to an internal void felt to be worse than death. The importance of the personal god is elaborated in the following selective excerpt:

that man […] in spite of the strides of alimentation and defecation is seen to waste and pine […] in spite of physical culture the practice of sports […] of all kinds dying flying sports of all sorts […] to shrink and dwindle in spite of the tennis […] for reasons unknown […] and considering what is much more grave […] in the plains in the mountains by the seas by the rivers […] in the great cold the great dark […] the earth abode of stones […] in the great deeps the great cold […] the skull to shrink and dwindle […] the tears […] the labours abandoned left unfinished graver still abode of stones. (43–4)
This is as an experience of ruptured early nurturing, for despite the infant’s basic physical needs being met (‘alimentation and defecation’) there is a wasting (‘pining’) depression born of absence. Absence and abandonment (‘dying’) taint early socialization, represented by sporting activity, and the self ‘shrinks and dwindles’ in spite of it all. The infant cannot comprehend the genesis of the rupture in the loving bond to its mother (‘for reasons unknown’). This leads to a profound sense of isolation (‘in the great cold the great dark’) and a feeling of dead, meaningless futility (‘the earth [is] an abode of stones [i.e. a dead self and dead others]’). The last desperate images of an unborn self – ‘the labours abandoned left unfinished graver still’ – triggers an aggressive ‘silencing’ of Lucky by the others, as his speech strikes a depressive core that cannot be contained, a failed psychic birth (labours abandoned) ‘astride of a grave[r]’ (90). The abandonment of these labours to complete the infantile-self leaves it in a life ‘graver still’ than death, which can never be anticipated as a finality. The following clinical material elucidates some of these ideas:

Mr D. had suffered an early life of abject neglect and, as an adult, spent many years in near complete isolation. He made a ritual of turning off the lights at the start of our sessions, and one day made a slip of the tongue, referring to the sessions as being ‘at night’, when they actually took place in the early afternoon. Analysis of this led to memory/fantasies of being locked into a room for hours by a mother who would not heed his cries for contact. I pointed out his re-creation of this internal scene within our space, and how he experienced me in this way, as silent and uncaring. After speaking of his terrible sense of loneliness, he correctly guessed our time was up, saying he was glad to leave as he was about to cry. I said he feared his cries would be unheard, and for the first time in our therapeutic work he sobbed uncontrollably, speaking of the burning tears in the dark room, the sun hidden by blinds, and the annihilation anxiety of being without mother.

This patient’s core experience is surely that of Lucky, since both are abandoned, for reasons incomprehensible to them, by a personal god. The patient’s last words of that session echo the disorganized terror and imagery of Lucky’s speech: ‘alone … in the dark … in the dark room … the cold room … tears like fire … wanting her to come … hating her … hating myself for wanting … alone … with only my mind … alone.’ This patient learned, independently, about my interest in Beckett, searched out information concerning the author, and told me about a synopsis of *Waiting for Godot* he had discovered. He described his
feeling that, at times, I was absent during silences and that, like a Godot-figure, I was uninterested in him. He then described similar feelings experienced with his mother, announced that it was she who was really Godot and that, unlike her, I had arrived as a patient, concerned presence in his life.6

Pozzo’s own ‘speech’ occurs just prior to Lucky’s monologue, and the two are complementary, since the content and delivery of the ‘speech’ suggests the genesis of Lucky’s despair.7 Pozzo begins by inviting himself to speak (‘I can’t refuse you’):

Pozzo: (who hasn’t listened). Ah, yes! The night […] will you look at the sky, pig! (Lucky looks at the sky) […] It is pale and luminous An hour ago […] after having poured forth ever since […] say ten o’clock in the morning […] it begins to lose its effulgence, to grow pale […] paler a little paler until […] pppfff! finished! it comes to rest. But […] behind this veil of gentleness and peace night is charging […] and will burst upon us […] pppfff! like that (his inspiration leaves him) just when we least expect it. (Silence. Gloomily.) That’s how it is on this bitch of an earth. (37–8)

This description suggests life is a slow waning, to the point where one is given to a sense of tranquillity, only to be torn from the world in a sudden, violent rupture. This is imposed from without, by a dark ‘night’ that makes life futile, since any sense of achievement or ‘gentleness’ is a ruse – on this ‘abode of stones’ there can be no enduring meaning or value. Pozzo’s speech presents his own internal world, one devoid of enduring goodness, predicated on his own disconnection from a good internal mother. This is implied by his constant need for encouragement, his avoidance of genuine contact with the tramps, and his greedy, envious devouring of Lucky. This inner experience becomes transmitted intergenerationally between Pozzo/mother to Lucky/child: it is Pozzo who is the dark night that comes suddenly upon a tranquil day, invading Lucky’s emotional sphere with violence, shattering any ‘intermittent calm’, deflating any sense of esteem with neglect and abuse. He continually refers to Lucky in the third person, addressing him directly only to command or degrade him, calling him ‘pig’, ‘hog’, and ‘scum’, and with one word orders, ‘coat’, ‘stool’, and ‘up’. The development of a sense of internal goodness is destroyed in such relationships, a consequence reflected in the following vignette:

From as early as he could remember, Mr C.’s father treated him with utter disgust, referring to him as a ‘pig’ in the company of relatives, showing little interest in him, and abusing him physically when he was
unable to follow orders quickly enough. As an adult, Mr C. developed a manic-depressive disorder but, because the periods of mania were a relief from depressive despair, he did not seek treatment for years. He lived in an apartment he described as a ‘mess’, finding peace in isolation. He unconsciously kept himself a ‘pig’ by living in a messy environment, and treated himself accordingly, living recklessly, as if his own life did not matter. In therapy, this man slowly tolerated the deepest, most shame-ridden, raging part of himself that lived in constant fear of his father. This depressive core, so much like that of Lucky, was organized around his early relationships. This patient was slowly able to connect his sense of an internal, hostile father to that of the ‘dark cloud’ that he felt followed him, which sought to dampen any spontaneity or hopefulness. The dark cloud could become a monstrous, destructive tornado, throwing him into emotional despair and deep depression. The cloud came to be understood as containing fragments of memory and fantasy particles, of which the predominant themes were humiliation and rage centred on his early experience. During periods of calm, when joy emerged within him, the ‘cloud’ began to re-enter his awareness to dampen the development of his new way of experiencing life.

This sense of darkness, coming so suddenly and with such life-destroying force, seems connected to the darkness so eloquently described by Pozzo, which reflects both his own, and Lucky’s, internal experience. The abrupt eradication of the child’s sense of safety and goodness is a catastrophic event, and is predicated by the loss of the mother’s love. Other patients have described this hopeless despair as a fog or enveloping darkness. The blackness, a despairing depression, becomes an inviolate part of the inner experience of the self-with-other, and the constellation feels unchangeable because of the belief that it is something about the self that calls forth the darkness. It is important to remember that the primary maternal object, the source of inner goodness and calm, can be overshadowed by another person, as in the case of Mr C., whose father became the dominant figure in his internal world. Further analysis revealed his sadness and rage towards his mother, whom he felt had left him prey to the father because, he believed, he was unworthy of her love. Ultimately this emerged as the foundation of his feelings of futility and disconnection from a loving world.

In the Schiller production, Pozzo cannot contain Lucky’s powerful feelings; he cowers, covering his ears during the monologue. There is a re-enactment of the despair’s genesis – during the staccato section in which Lucky enumerates numerous sporting activities (‘tennis football
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running cycling’). Estragon bounces like a child, in obvious delight, for the only time in the play showing a clear indication he is authentically happy. Immediately the enumeration is interrupted (‘skating tennis of all kinds dying flying sports of all sort’, italic mine) and, at the word ‘dying’, Estragon’s joy is killed, his bouncing stops. Lucky’s use of this word seems generated by an identification with an envious or depressed primary object, and the effect is to destroy his own vitality, as it destroys Estragon’s own brief sense of aliveness. During rehearsals for the 1984 San Quentin production, Beckett supported the notion that Lucky’s internal state is partly created by his relationship to Pozzo. The playwright agreed with J. Pat Miller’s interpretation that he imitate certain of Pozzo’s mannerisms, made during his speech, in his own monologue as Lucky, ‘to create a visual parallel’ (McMillan and Fehsenfeld, 1988: 75). During the Schiller production, Beckett also commented that Lucky tries to ‘amuse Pozzo’ during the monologue, in order to touch him and be kept on (McMillan and Fehsenfeld, 1988: 39). This reflects an identification with the aggressor – the child becomes like the adult in order to please and be loved.” Beckett re-created Pozzo’s projective identification in his own instructions to the actor playing Lucky, by ‘making a threatening gesture with his finger’ during his instruction the monologue reveal the fact that man must ‘shrink and dwindle’ (McMillan and Fehsenfeld, 1988: 139). The author, in effect, plays a threatening ‘Pozzo’ who might create terror in an actor who wishes to please him by accepting the feelings

A background of absence

In Waiting for Godot, there are many examples of a maternal figure’s failure to contain early anxieties. For example, Vladimir consistently refuses to hear/contain Estragon’s nightmares, leaving his partner prey to internal demons. In the second act, he sings Estragon a lullaby, ‘Bye bye bye bye bye’, words that suggest ambivalence about his caretaking role. Maternal ambivalence is expressed elsewhere in Beckett, in the title of the play Rockaby, for example, where the rocking suggests early nurturing by a breastfeeding/lullaby-singing mother, as well as an image of aging decline in a rocking chair. The nursery rhyme ‘Rockaby baby on the treetop […] when the bough breaks the cradle will fall, and down will come baby’ was used by Winnicott as an example of maternal ambivalence towards the infant, something echoed in Hackett’s fall off the ladder in Watt. Murphy’s rocking (and Celia’s) also shares this
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ambivalence. In light of this, Godot is cast, at times, as a container of anxiety, an omnipotent object that allays despair. Early in the play, the tramps, tired of waiting, toy with the idea of suicide, but are unsure which of them is heavier, and should be hung first:

Vladimir: Well? What do we do?
Estragon: Don’t let’s do anything. It’s safer.
Vladimir: Let’s wait and see what he says.
Estragon: Who?
Vladimir: Godot. (17–18)

Godot is an object that will not only contain their suicidal despair, but process it, advising appropriate action through his function of thinking. Paradoxically, his very absence is the foundation of their despair, since without him they cannot experience the security that would make living a viable alternative. This is the foundation of their waiting, and of their sense of unremitting futility. They need the absent/bad mother to arrive as a good mother, to create the internal vitality that would make movement away from her possible. An aura of uncertainty surrounds Godot – the tramps are not sure why they are meeting him, what they have asked him for, or even what he might have replied. Their attitude towards him is deferential, referring to their imagined justifications for the continued absence, Estragon rationalizes: ‘It’s the normal thing’ (19). Soon more terrifying aspects of their abandonment manifest, and a sense of malevolence creeps into their representation of Godot. After stating their infantile dependence – ‘Where do we come in […] On our hands and knees’- and the loss of their ‘rights’ (19), the tramps are frightened:

Vladimir: Listen!
They listen, grotesquely rigid.
Estragon: I hear nothing.
Vladimir: Hssst! […] (They listen, huddled together.) Nor I.
Sighs of relief. They relax and separate.
Estragon: You gave me a fright.
Vladimir: I thought it was he.
Estragon: Who?
Vladimir: Godot.
Estragon: Pah! The wind in the reeds.
Vladimir: I could have sworn I heard shouts […] at his horse. (19)10

A sense of disorganized terror accompanies their primal abandonment, now experienced as hostile and sadistic. The mother’s voice, a
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wind in the reeds, is unpredictable and ambiguous, moving along a spectrum from loving concern to sadistic hostility.

The boy who arrives at the end of each act, to announce Godot will not come, is the only direct tie to the external Godot/mother. The boy’s existence reinforces not only the sense of abandonment, but of rivalry, as the Godot/mother clearly cares for other children. At the end of the first act, after the child is frightened by the loud uproar Pozzo and Lucky make while departing, Vladimir questions him. The child admits working for Godot, for whom he minds the goats, and that he is not beaten, though his brother (who minds the sheep) is:

Vladimir: And why doesn’t he beat you?
Boy: I don’t know, sir.
Vladimir: He must be fond of you.
Boy: I don’t know, sir.
Vladimir: And why doesn’t he beat you?
Boy: I don’t know, sir […]
Vladimir: You’re not unhappy? (The Boy hesitates) Do you hear me?
Boy: Yes, sir.
Vladimir: Well?
Boy: I don’t know, sir.
Vladimir: You don’t know if you’re unhappy or not?
Boy: No, sir. (51)

Through this interrogation, Vladimir hopes to become closer to Godot, perhaps to understand why the Godot/mother is available to the boy and not to himself. The child demonstrates an inability to ‘know’ the mother’s mind, which appears dominated by splitting (e.g. the beatings of the ‘bad’ brother). He does not know why he is not beaten, nor if Godot is fond of him, and cannot even identify whether his own internal state is one of happiness, all effects of the non-relationship on the infantile-self. Vladimir comments that he, too, cannot identify his internal state: ‘You’re as bad as myself’ (51). Godot is unpredictable and unknowable, and the need to remain attached to this primary figure shapes the boy (and Vladimir’s) internal experience. The boy’s inability to formulate a coherent narrative of his relationship to Godot diminishes his sense of autonomous, secure being. The roots of the psychic fragmentation and autobiographical incoherence that exist in the play, exemplified both in Lucky’s monologue and the tramps’ difficulties with memory and self-coherence, are highlighted in this tenuous relationship between Godot and the child/Vladimir.11 There is a sense in which Vladimir looks at an aspect of himself in the boy.
Neither is beaten, while the brother/Estragon are, and Vladimir’s wish for warmth and comfort beside the Godot/mother manifests in the boy’s relationship to Godot. During their second meeting, Vladimir asks the boy to remember ‘me’, not ‘us’, as in the first act, suggesting a collapse into an earlier state, in which the relationship with the mother is dyadic, as if Estragon no longer exists.

The play’s central psychological concern is a lack of inner security, predicated on a disconnection from the good mother. This prevents the resolution of the Paranoid Schizoid position, leaving the tramps in fear of constant retaliation from the world. Vladimir’s desperate comments at the end of each act make this clear – the words reflect a dissociated state, a fear of non-recognition, or a fear that any recognition given will not endure. From Act 1:

Boy: What am I to say to Mr Godot, sir?
Vladimir: Tell him ... (he hesitates) ... tell him you saw us.
(Pause.) You did see us, didn’t you? (52)

Act 2:

Boy: What am I to tell Mr Godot, sir?
Vladimir: Tell him ... (he hesitates) ... tell him you saw me and that ... (he hesitates) ... that you saw me.
( [...] With sudden violence.) You’re sure you saw me, you won’t come tomorrow and tell me that you never saw me! (92)

This is ‘seeing’ in its deepest sense, the mother’s recognition of the child as an autonomous being, which allows her to hold the child within her mind, containing and processing its anxiety so it can experience a secure inner state. Vladimir mirrors both a child’s primal fears of abandonment, and a paranoid mother’s anxiety about losing her child’s recognizing love (as Mrs Winter does in Footfalls, when she hallucinates the existence of her daughter). These scenes with the Boy suggest early experiences coalescing around a fear that a primary object does not contain an enduring image of the self, and therefore will not return – the fear, in other words, that love is transient (as discussed in Proust). In the Schiller production, Beckett altered the action slightly, the boy withdraws in a very calm, detached manner, walking in reverse. The ambience is dream-like, highlighting a sense of the stage as internal space, something further suggested by Beckett’s comment that the characters are ‘as thin as ghosts’, and that the stage design should reflect the fact they are ‘all trapped’ (McMillan and Fehsenfeld, 1988: 80). The
loss of the boy ruptures Vladimir’s connection to the mother. There is a suggestion that in the boy he experiences aspects of his own past attachment to a maternal figure, and has been looking into an intrapsychic mirror in the child’s face. In both acts, the moon traces a slow arc across the sky following the boy’s departure, accenting, as in Watt, a disconnection from a maternal figure. Vladimir’s comment at the end of Act I, that he (i.e. like the moon), is ‘[p]ale for weariness […] of climbing heaven and gazing on the likes of us’ (52) suggests he has re-introjected his own feeling that the moon/mother, which has just replaced the boy and the connection to Godot, does not find him worthy of recognition.12

Together again, for ever

Anxieties generated by the absence of maternal recognition permeate the inner relational world that the play depicts. When he first sees Estragon at the opening of the play, Vladimir appears not to notice him, before finally commenting ‘So there you are again’ and ‘Together again at last!’ (9), beginning a struggle between enmeshment and autonomy that forms the heart of a play filled with aborted separations. An unknown gang has beaten Estragon, while he was apart from Vladimir/mother:13

Vladimir: When I think of it … all these years but for me … where would you be …? (Decisively.) You’d be nothing more than a heap of bones at the present minute, no doubt about it.
Estragon: And what of it?
Vladimir: (gloomily). It’s too much for one man. (9–10)

Estragon’s separation from Vladimir links a hostile world to the primary abandonment of a Godot/mother who is either required for his protection, or who alternatively punishes autonomy. This exchange depicts Vladimir’s entrapping invasiveness, designed to keep Estragon close by disabling his sense of autonomy. Vladimir’s comment that without him Estragon would be a ‘heap of bones’ connects to important imagery in Beckett. McMillan and Fehsenfeld (1988) write: ‘In the story Echo’s Bones and his early autobiographical poem sequence, Echo’s Bones and Other Precipitates, bones represent the symbolic white residue of painful memories of dead loves. In both these works, as in Lucky’s speech, bones are finally replaced by white stone which is the final less individual residue of memory as the past recedes’ (78). In this sense,
Vladimir’s comment reflects his own anxiety about losing Estragon, rather than a concern for his friend’s welfare. Estragon, if killed, would become a fading residue (of bones) within Vladimir’s mind, suggesting the lack of an integrated presence that could remain internally alive. The comment keeps Estragon close and forestalls this loss. The sense that, in its deepest form, loss becomes stone-like reflects an autistically defensive frozen-self, failing to connect with properly introjected, good primary figures. The following clinical material may illuminate the dynamics that can evolve from such a frozen state:

The patient, a man in his thirties, entered therapy as the most overtly negative person I had ever met. Any glimmer of optimism or positive feeling was quickly dampened in our sessions by a hostile inner voice that mocked his aspirations for living. The patient’s mother, an extremely self-centered, anxious woman, needed constant attention to contain her anxieties. The father abandoned the patient as a child by spending more and more time at work. This inflamed the mother, leaving Mr B. to be the saviour and favourite son. To ensure that Mr B. would not abandon her, the mother would praise his activities or plans only if they directly related to her needs. She would disparage any activity or wish that she felt would only benefit the patient, just as she attacked any sign of self-confidence or independent joy, which she was incapable of sharing. As our sessions unfolded, I felt optimism ebbing away. By the end of a session, I often experienced a desperate sense of hopelessness that I would ever help this man and that, at best, we would continue on for ever in a quagmire. The interesting thing was that Mr B. would often perk up towards the end of a session, leaving noticeably happier. Often, he would exit laughing, making some small joke, and thanking me profusely for helping him to feel so much better. He would return for the next session, however, desperately negative once again. Mr B. was using me as a container of painful internal experiences, particularly ones that had been enacted with his mother from an early age. In our sessions, it was I who became Mr B. as an infant/child, as he became the mother, and his entire strategy was to keep me (as child) from leaving him (as mother). This occurred in two steps: firstly, by pouring out a continual stream of negativity and by expressing a futile attitude towards life, he slowly was able to relieve himself, somewhat, of an internal state of anxiety and despair. He often had diarrhoea before our sessions, and was clearly anxious about seeing me. He sensed the possibility of change, since unlike him I seemed to withstand the torrent of negativity, and carried on with life. This gave him hope, but also made him anxious, since it meant giving up the hold his mother had on him (and their way of being together), and that I might grow fed up
with him and decide to terminate his treatment. We came to under-
stand that the emptying of himself before sessions (the dumping out of
his ‘mother’s shit’) also meant that he would have room for me. In fact,
he later felt I provided a ‘good feed’ of tolerant listening and genuine
interest in his internal world. Mr B. realized being special in his ability to
contain his mother’s anxiety became deeply tied to his sense of himself
as a valuable, viable person, and this was the second stage of the
interaction between us, which again enacted an early, internalized
relationship within himself. For as he left the sessions in a relieved
mood, praising me as the only one who could help him, he attempted to
instill in me a sense I could not leave him, as he would fall into despair
without me, that I was indeed special. This sense of being a special
therapist was linked, however, to my working with him. The patient’s
mother felt herself disabled and frightened, probably because her
internal world was shaped by the death, at age two, of her father, and
her mother’s subsequent depressive unavailability. She projected this
sense of despair and anxiety into her son during stressful situations
when she felt she could not cope. This did two things: 1) it relieved her
anxiety and feeling of helpless abandonment, and 2) it caused him to
experience the world in a way beneficial to her. If the world was an
awful place, he would not leave her. If he was able to calm her (by doing
whatever it was she felt she could not do) he felt special, something she
fuelled by elevating him with praise. In his relationship with me, Mr B.
re-enacted this internal world. He had an anticipatory experience that
the world is dominated by this very type of relationship – a world filled
with Pozzos and Luckys, Vladimirs and Estragons, and mothers that
never quite arrive in any real or whole sense.

Vladimir’s words, like those of the patient’s mother, cut to the heart
of the infantile-self. Without Vladimir/mother, Estragon will be, like
Mr B., a helpless prey to a hostile world. When Estragon responds, in
futile defeat, ‘And what of it’, to the suggestion that he will die without
Vladimir’s decision making and support, his partner shifts his strategy.
He creates guilt within Estragon, pointing out the suffering his
’support’ is causing him, suggesting it is all ‘too much’, and that it is ‘too
late’ to ever separate. Estragon, in pain, struggling with his boot, now
listens to Vladimir’s nostalgic, suicidal fantasies, before finally getting
his partner’s attention again:

Vladimir: Boots must be taken off every day. I’m tired of telling you
that. Why don’t you listen to me?
Estragon: (feebly) Help me!
Vladimir: It hurts?
Estragon: Hurts! He wants to know if it hurts!
Vladimir: (angrily) No one ever suffers but you. I don’t count. I’d like to hear what you’d say if you had what I have.
Estragon: It hurts?
Vladimir: Hurts! He wants to know if it hurts! (10)

Vladimir continually ignores Estragon’s suffering, blames him for the problem, establishes himself as the thinking, more capable partner, and expresses his own sense of burden. Finally, told by Estragon, in clear protest, that the pain is real, Vladimir deftly reverses roles, becoming a sufferer unheeded by a selfish partner. The tramps’ relationship, one of entangled dependency, reflects the intense, contradictory, and ambivalent feelings the infant experiences towards a mother unavailable for containment of anxiety. For example, the second act opens with Vladimir spotting Estragon walking with his ‘head bowed’.

Vladimir: You again! [...] Come here till I embrace you.
Estragon: Don’t touch me!
Vladimir holds back, pained.
Vladimir: Do you want me to go away? (Pause.) Gogo! [...] Did they beat you? (Pause.) Gogo! [...] Where did you spend the night?
Estragon: Don’t touch me! Don’t question me! Don’t speak to me! Stay with me!
Vladimir: Did I ever leave you?
Estragon: You let me go. (58)

The relationship is confused, merged. Vladimir’s initial aloofness at seeing Estragon also suggests an inability to maintain a coherent image of his friend within his memory, reminiscent of a young child’s difficulties with ‘object permanence’. Estragon, as abandoned child, displays the type of protest and angry despair that Bowlby (1973, 1980) chronicled in institutionalized infants and children. He refuses the mother’s embrace, resists a sensual re-merger, and his reaction to the possibility of separation (‘Don’t touch me! [...] Stay with me!’) reveals the difficulty he has maintaining the mother as a whole object. He is in a borderline state, attempting to maintain contact with Vladimir-as-good-mother, while simultaneously raging at Vladimir-as-a-bad-mother who tolerates his absence, failing to prevent his departure, and leaving him prey to a hostile world. This confused sense of merger continues, as Estragon, having heard his partner sing in his absence, feels hopelessly defeated:

Vladimir: One isn’t master of one’s moods. [...] I missed you ... and at the same time I was happy. Isn’t that a queer thing?
Estragon: *(shocked)* Happy? [...] And now?
Vladimir: Now?... *(Joyous.)* There you are again ... *(Indifferent.)* There we are again ... *(Gloomy.)* There I am again. (59)

This demonstrates a blurring of mother/infant roles, and the enmeshed quality of the relationship, its impact on individuation, and the emotional consequences. Estragon is depressed and depleted (‘it’s over and done with’, 59) since he believes it is because he was gone that Vladimir felt the relief signalled by his singing. Such a feeling of pure badness is common in enmeshed mother/infant dyads, and operates in a reciprocal fashion. Mr B.’s mother became depressed or anxious when her son returned home to report he had enjoyed himself. Her feeling was similar to Estragon’s – she imagined Mr B. had realized how much of a killjoy she was, and would soon abandon her. She would then attack his joy by devaluing whatever activity he had engaged in, or enumerating the ways she had suffered while he was out having fun. Just as the tramps’ roles fluctuate in no neatly discernible way as separation anxieties and guilt entwine them, so Mr B. and his mother would enact the roles of abandoned child and suffering caretaker in turn. Vladimir expresses this volatility and sense of estrangement (‘One isn’t a master of one’s moods’), and the ambivalence is clear, if unsustainable (‘I missed you [...] and at the same time I was happy’). The ability to sustain separation and joy together is impossible, because an unreachable Godot/mother shapes their experience. Vladimir drifts from a joyous recognition of separateness (‘there you are’), through an indifference of mutuality (‘there we are’) and, finally, to a sense of gloomy solipsism (‘there I am’). Vladimir adopts the strategy of Mr B.’s mother, attacking Estragon’s sense of autonomy to keep the dyad together. When Estragon accepts that his partner suffers because of him, and admits he also feels better on his own, Vladimir asks why he always crawls back home:

Estragon: I don’t know.
Vladimir: No, but I do. It’s because you don’t know how to defend yourself. I wouldn’t have let them beat you [...] I would have stopped you from doing whatever it was you were doing.
Estragon: I wasn’t doing anything.
Vladimir: Then why did they beat you?
Estragon: I don’t know.
Vladimir: Ah no, Gogo, the truth is there are things escape you that don’t escape me, you must feel it yourself [...] it’s the way of doing it that counts. (59–60)
By infantilizing Estragon’s attachment to him (the ‘crawling back’), Vladimir reinforces the behaviour through humiliation. The boy’s constant refrain of ‘I don’t know sir’, discussed earlier, is a direct echo of Estragon’s own disorganized narrative in this exchange – Estragon is the helpless, child-like partner who causes the needed mother to feel gladdened at his loss. However, when Estragon expresses a willingness to separate, Vladimir quickly points out he is really a weak, disabled infant who needs a mother for protection. Like Mr B.’s mother, Vladimir projects his own anxious dependency into Estragon, as well as a sense of inadequacy – ‘the truth is there are things escape you that don’t escape me, you must feel it yourself’. He continually tells Estragon that he cannot think for himself, and that the world will attack him for simply being himself (‘it’s [your] way of doing it that counts’, my italic). Soon, the final effect of such projections becomes clear – Vladimir tells Estragon he must be happy they are back together, even if he is not conscious of this:

Vladimir: Say you are, even if it’s not true.
Estragon: What am I to say?
Vladimir: Say, I am happy.
Estragon: I am happy.
Vladimir: So am I.
Estragon: So am I.
Vladimir: We are happy.
Estragon: We are happy. (60)

Estragon is confused, feeling it necessary to fulfil Vladimir’s need for narcissistic control. Like the boy who stays with Godot, he asks for identification and validation of his own internal emotional state (‘Happy about what […] Would you say so’), although there is a sense of irritation and a realization that resistance is futile. Vladimir leads him into a merged state, in which he becomes an acquisition of his partner’s self: ‘I am happy […] We are happy.’ He draws his partner into dyadic entanglement, where one’s happiness is the ability to make the other’s wishes come true. The following vignette elucidates aspects of this type of forced-merger experience:

The patient’s father had sexually abused her from an early age. Bringing her fictional work to read to me in her sessions, it became evident a good figure had emerged in it. This figure, variously represented in different stories, protected her (as heroine) from abuse, by listening and believing, as I did (in actuality and transferentially). As the patient
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became conscious of this, she decided, for the first time, to begin a diary in which she documented her experience of abuse. She arrived one session to tell me she was making unprecedented progress in her fictional work, now that her father had been forced from it into a more conscious form of writing in the diary. However, an old phobia suddenly had become more intense. I told her she had awakened her father’s anger, by beginning to speak in her own undisguised voice for the first time (to me, and in the diary). She then described how her father often had spoken to her imploringly, in an infantile manner that demanded a correct response. If she failed to answer correctly, he became more insistent, until she felt such disintegration anxiety she felt compelled to reply as he wished. Throughout the years of abuse, she felt ensnared by his words, in merged union with a more powerful, controlling voice that could destroy her. This came from a father she hated, but whom she also loved, something mirrored in her fiction, where he was disguised. Subsequently, she read me an essay done years earlier, in which she focused on two dyadic exchanges in two plays. In both, one character was able, solely by the clever, manipulative use of words, to entangle, control, or ridicule the other. When she finished her reading she said, ‘I cannot believe that I have been writing about my father all my life.’

Her use of fiction to disguise a deeply depressed, raging part of herself resembles Lucky’s use of art, both in his metaphorical dance (see below), and in his monologue, to disguise (and reveal) his depressed feeling-state. Just as Lucky fears direct confrontation with Pozzo, and must resort to forms of expressive art, so this patient’s writing explored her inner sense of despair and rage. Like Estragon, who must say ‘I am happy’, this patient felt she had to respond to her father in a way that complied with his demand for omnipotent control. Her dependency on him as a primary object, coupled with a fear of abandonment, would eradicate her sense of self at those moments, just as Estragon loses the boundaries of his self in the exchange quoted above. Later sessions demonstrated the power of the subjugation. The patient felt that continuing to expose and confront her father would cause him to reach from beyond the grave to harm her. There was also the realization that it was a part of herself (the encapsulated experience of her father within) that she feared awakening. Ultimately, it became clear that much of her writing was also directed towards her mother, towards whom she felt terrible rage for having failed to protect her, and failing to understand her suffering. The writing, much of which was given to her mother, was an attempt to repair her sense of a damaged, primary relationship, in which she was ill-seen, and ill-heard.

This patient found that in the telling (indirectly, through her fiction, and directly to me) there was healing. Beckett’s short story, ‘Enough’,
explores the theme of entrapment through an incidence of childhood sexual abuse. The story also links reparation with the presence of a good, internal auditor that can witness the trauma-telling, and it touches upon the healing properties of fiction-making. The narrator begins:

All that goes before forget. Too much at a time is too much. That gives the pen time to note. I don’t see it but I hear it there behind me. Such is the silence. When the pen stops I go on. Sometimes it refuses. When it refuses I go on. Too much silence is too much. Or it’s my voice too weak at times. The one that comes out of me. So much for the art and craft. (186)

Whatever the narrator is experiencing, it is overly traumatic and causing a dissociation. The opening line (‘All that goes before forget’) can be read both as a declaration (i.e. ‘I forget all that goes before’) and as a self-command (i.e. ‘Forget all that comes before!’) based on the fact that ‘too much at one time is too much’ for the self to contain. Alternatively, of course, it can be an introjected command by the abuser to forget the abuse. These lines also describe the narrator’s concern with the auditor/transcriber. The narrator is aware that the pen that turns the experience into words needs ‘time to note’, and by concentrating solely on the present, the narrator leaves the traumatic memories within the other for containment. The pen, and presumably the auditor, is out of sight, behind the narrator, and this recorder’s motives are unclear, falling anywhere along a spectrum from interrogator, artistic creator, or even psychoanalyst. Since the motives are unclear, the opening line can also be a command to the recorder to forget the past trauma – the narrator may be insecure having the memory made real within another mind. On many occasions, patients have commented on my note-taking in these ways, their feelings mirroring this ambiguity. There can be a sense I am creating something beautiful and important out of their words and stories, which will help me understand and help them. Occasionally, there can be a paranoid sense that I am an interrogator, recording their stories to expose them to outside agencies, to later turn against them, using their own words as evidence against them. Primarily, the recorder in ‘Enough’ is an aspect of the self, a part-object, to whom the core self is able to speak, telling its story, putting itself into the other, and the words, for containment. Silence is unbearable, since it inaugurates separation from the other, who is vital for the containment of the anxieties implicit in the telling/reliving of the story/memory complex.
Both Mr B. and the female writer experienced overwhelming pressure to conform to the other’s thoughts, feeling compelled to take in those thoughts as part of themselves. The narrator says: ‘I did all he desired. I desired it too. For him. Whenever he desired something so did I […] When he didn’t desire anything neither did I. In this way I didn’t live without desires. If he desired something for me I would have desired it’ (186). These lines, a new paragraph, can be seen as the beginning of a new story/memory, or a development of an ongoing exposition. What is told is a blatant exposition of childhood sexual abuse, and of the merger and identification with the aggressor seen in all abuse victims: ‘When he told me to lick his penis I hastened to do so. I drew satisfaction from it. We must have had the same satisfactions. The same needs and the same satisfactions’ (186–7). The narrator, six years of age when the abuse began, was ‘barely emerging from childhood. But it didn’t take […] long to emerge altogether’ (187). What has emerged from childhood is not an autonomous self, which remains buried, anxious, and frightened, but a compliant, disguised false-self. The child was used as a non-human object, despite any seeming sense of genuine affection on the part of the adult. For example, the couple would walk side by side, holding hands that are gloved:

He did not like to feel against his skin the skin of another. Mucous membrane is another matter. Yet he sometimes took off his glove. We would cover in this way a hundred yards or so linked by our bare extremities. Seldom more. That was enough for him […] I would say that odd hands are ill-fitted for intimacy. Mine never felt at home in his. Sometimes they let each other go […] Whole minutes past before they clasped again. Before his clasped mine again. (187)

This passage condenses the internal experience of early abuse. Firstly, there is the sense it is the child itself that is ‘bad’ or ‘dirty’. The older man refuses, for the most part, to take hold of the child’s hand, preventing the intimacy of skin contact so vital to the young mind. The wearing of gloves brings a clinical quality to their relationship, as if the child might contaminate the elder, and perhaps, in non-sexual moments, the contact raises subtle guilt within the elder. The narrator/child feels something wrong – ‘Mine never felt at home in his’, and ‘odd hands are ill-fitted for intimacy’ seems to refer to the relationship as well as the age/handedness difference. The child seems compelled to clarify who is the true initiator of contact (‘Before his clasped mine again’). The overwhelming need for intimate, non-sexual contact becomes reason
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for an ongoing presence that, as the older man ages, blends into a sense of duty that blurs into a sense of love. Like Watt, Murphy, and the tramps in *Godot*, the child yearns for the touch of recognition of his true self: 'When I bowed down to receive his communications I felt on my eye a glint of blue bloodshot apparently affected' (189). The ambiguity is clear and poignant – what the child wants is a causal relationship, that its presence and patience would effect the elder, but instead receives an undone ('apparent') recognition of false affect. Ultimately, the child is dismissed, like Watt, without a clear, delineated reason, realizing, like Lucky, he is not loved 'for reasons unknown'. Like most in such relationships, this child experiences its final abandonment as its 'disgrace' (190). The recollections of abuse continue to intrude into the story, which weaves between present telling and past inner reality:

The ambiguity this story’s title reflects the contradictory emotions inherent in its telling. Mr C., sexually and physically abused as a child, once came to a session and after a brief moment where he experienced his rage as directed outwards, instead of at himself, yelled at some internal presence ‘Enough!’. When he regained his composure, he explained he had been speaking both to the perpetrator of the actual abuse (as if it were happening at that moment) and as well, he shouted at the internal agency that made him feel as if he were somehow to blame, torturing him by replaying the memories in the present. It was a defiant cry of protest at an internal abuser, and to an internal auditor (and of course a cry to me). Likewise, in the narrator’s tale are the roots of the child’s feeling of failing the elder, since the latter feels gloved contact is ‘enough’. There is hope that the telling will be enough for the auditor/part of the self that records and requires the telling, and that anxious rage will be allowed to pass. Finally, there is a defiant ‘no’ to the elder, as the narrator separates past from present, asserting separateness from the abusive situation. The loneliness of such relationships is expressed in its description as a timeless, endless wandering, and by the final line ‘Enough of my old breasts feeling his old hand’ (192), which demonstrates the enduring, entrapped quality the past maintains in the psyche of the abused child. The term ‘old breast’ can refer both to the past situation, and to an actual present and truly ‘old’ breast that still feels the old hand as if it were contemporary.
The last farandole

The most fundamental way early mother–infant bonding can be damaged is through ruptures in the primary nurturing situation. This section examines two scenes in which such fundamental disruptions occur. Towards the end of the first act Pozzo suggests that Lucky, ‘who taught [him, i.e. Pozzo] all these beautiful things’, perform for the entertainment of the two tramps:

Pozzo: Dance, misery! […] Lucky dances […]
Estragon: Is that all?
Pozzo: Encore!
   Lucky executes the same movements, stops.
Estragon: Pooh! I’d do as well myself […]
Pozzo: He used to dance the farandole […] the fandango, and even the hornpipe. He capered. For joy. Now that’s the best he can do. (40)

Lucky’s dance is a grotesque representation of both his self-state and his relationship to Pozzo-as-mother, demonstrating his role as a deeply depressed part of the self. He is called ‘misery’, an apt title that reflects what Pozzo projects into him through denigration and countless humiliations. Lucky once danced ‘for joy’, filled with a love of movement and physicality that is every infant’s endowment. Now, after years of suffering Pozzo’s neglect and abuse, his movements are mechanical, lifeless, suggesting a series of symbolic titles. Estragon sees the dance as ‘The Scapegoat’s Agony’ and Lucky serves the function of a scapegoat, being a repository of Pozzo’s negative projections and abusive attacks. Vladimir sees the dance as ‘The Hard Stool’, which accurately describes, in concrete terms, another aspect of Lucky’s sense of badness (equated with feaces), a poisoned, debased self-image that Pozzo forces into him, as well as the complementary imago of the sadistic mother.15 As infant, Lucky is too weak to re-project the bad feelings into Pozzo. In any case, they would be immediately returned, since Pozzo cannot tolerate the anxiety of accepting he is anything but perfect. The experience of a patient, who came to analysis suffering from narcissistic depression and rage, reflects this aspect of Lucky’s dance. He had been physically abused as a child, and as the analysis progressed he described feeling that at his core he was a ‘piece of shit’, a useless, worthless person who should die. In one session, seething with anger and despair, he felt something horrible inside of him, and that he had to defecate or vomit. He said it was now his abuser who was a
‘piece of shit’ that he had to expel from his own body, so he might be free of the tormenting.

The final description of the dance comes from Pozzo himself, who calls it, perhaps most appropriately, ‘The Net’. Pozzo’s intensive projections of his own inadequacy and dependency incapacitate Lucky, and the slave has become embroiled, enmeshed in a net with a mother like that of Ms A. This woman entered therapy because of a bingeing disorder, following a series of relationships with sadistic men who abused her, but upon whom she felt entirely dependent. As an infant, she imagined she would have tried anything to win her mother’s affection, believing she would only be loved by making her mother happy. It was the inevitable failure of these attempts that led to her feeling enslaved, since she needed her mother to survive. She could not tolerate growing out of her current dependency on sadistic figures because she felt she was still a helpless child. She feared both this dependency and its frustration, which would mean an outpouring of raging sadism that would destroy the very person upon whom she depended. She reported the following dream: She was dancing before a large audience and genuinely enjoying the freedom and beauty of her movements, as well as the bodily sensations they evoked. Her mother came upon the stage dressed in black, carrying a small infant who was hooked up to a large, frightening machine by a complex array of tubes and lines. The patient attempted to continue her dancing but it slowly became more lifeless and mechanical as she felt obliged to care for the infant, which she finally took from her mother. The patient’s associations led to an appreciation of this dream. She was the infant, hopelessly dependent, tied to this sadistic, withholding mother who envied and hated her attempts to feel free, to escape the deadly bond. The dancer was the hidden part of her, filled with a sense of freedom and joy, and it was these feelings that evoked the appearance of the envious mother upon her internal stage. The dancer’s inability to continue the dance demonstrated her dependency on the mother. However, the infant also represented the mother, seen as the dependent part of the dyad, and the guilty need to care for this mother-as-helpless-infant caused the dance’s cessation. The machine was a highly condensed symbol, alternatively her cold, mechanical mother, whose minimal affection was needed to keep the patient alive, but also the dead, mechanical part of the patient herself. In the transference, the patient saw me in varying lights. Firstly, I was the audience appreciating her dance of life, but later I became the machine, a transitional ‘mother’, who cared for her infantile-self, but whom she...
A strange situation was afraid to trust completely while her mother was still onstage. Finally, I would become the ‘dancer’ herself, trustworthy and loving, coming to help her-as-infant by taking custody of her infantile-self from the deadly mother, though there was a fear I would be destroyed by taking on this burden.

This dream elucidates aspects of Lucky’s dance, which also progresses from a joyous exhibition of a living-self to a mechanical set of desperate spasms. The rope that ties Lucky to Pozzo, like the tubes and lines connecting the infant to the machine, is a malignant umbilical that cannot be severed without an alternative source of internal nurturing. Lucky has no opportunity to develop autonomy, remaining entangled in the lines, ropes, and tubes of this broken, early dyad. His dance breaks down into a series of slow, dying expressions of his despairing entanglement. The tramps comment on this:

   Vladimir: A running sore!
   Estragon: It’s the rope.
   Vladimir: It’s the rubbing.
   Estragon: It’s inevitable.
   Vladimir: It’s the knot.
   Estragon: It’s the chafing. (25)

The rope becomes a grotesque travesty of the nursing bond, torturing and emaciating Lucky. It reflects the destructive connection between Pozzo-as-a-mother who fails to contain and enrich the Lucky/child’s internal experience, feeding him poisonous thoughts that undermine vitality and self-worth. The most primary early nurturing experience, the life-giving, physical connection that exists from the moment of conception, distorts into a macabre display of despair, and a plaintiff cry for love.16

Lucky, who once ‘danced for joy’, remains ‘tied’ to Pozzo in this deadly, enmeshed fashion, having somatisized his despairing internal world by becoming essentially mute. Pozzo claims Lucky is still ‘trying to impress [me], so I’ll keep him’ (31), and this is an integral part of the net of despair that Lucky’s dance symbolizes. The slave yearns to win Pozzo’s love, no longer because he truly hopes to share the inherent joy of life found in the early mother–infant bond, but because all that is left is the faint hope he will be tolerated. Lucky is so profoundly depressed he is unable to accept food from Pozzo, demonstrating an early infantile reaction to the bad breast, which cannot be trusted and is felt to be poisonous (as Pozzo’s words are). The most damaging effect is a
constant inability to feel secure, as the world/mother is always a poisonous threat, and the following exchange demonstrates the damage inflicted upon Lucky’s self-esteem, as it manifests in an apathy towards feeding. Pozzo, having finished eating, has just tossed several chicken bones on the ground, where Estragon ‘stares at them greedily’, and asks him whether he needs the bones:

Pozzo: Do I need the bones [...] No, personally, I do not need them any more [...] but [...] in theory bones belong to the carrier. He is therefore the one to ask [...] Estragon goes towards Lucky, stops before him.

Estragon: Mister … excuse me, Mister …
Pozzo: You’re being spoken to, pig! Reply! (To Estragon) Try him again.
Estragon: Excuse me, Mister, the bones, you won’t be wanting the bones?
Pozzo: (in raptures) Mister! (Lucky bows his head) Reply! Do you want them or don’t you? (Silence of Lucky. To Estragon.) They’re yours. (Estragon […] begins to gnaw them.) I don’t like it. I’ve never known him to refuse a bone before. (He looks anxiously at Lucky.) Nice business if he fell sick on me! (27)17

Lucky’s despair is so deep he cannot accept nutrition, but Pozzo reveals his own anxiety about losing him, since he cannot survive without the slave, whom he requires as a repository for the bad parts of himself. Pozzo is enmeshed as well as ‘enmesher’, like the mother-as-infant in Ms A.’s dream of dancing. He maintains narcissistic equilibrium through a grandiose sense of omnipotence, and an omnivorous, devouring attitude reminiscent of Mr Knott:

Pozzo: The more people I meet the happier I become. From the meanest creature one departs wiser, richer, more conscious of one’s blessings […] even you, who knows, will have added to my store. (29)

Pozzo diminishes dependency by imagining himself as an omnipotent omnivore for whom the world serves only to fulfil his need for goodness. Like a vampire who sucks the life out of the world, but is never fulfilled, he must seek out new victims. He cannot experience an enduring love for those meets, they are simply mirrors of his false autonomy. The following clinical vignette elaborates the psychological significance of the ‘chicken-bone’ exchange:

Early in his analysis Mr D. experienced me as hostile, grandiose, and withholding. During one period of our work he spoke about his mother

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An error occurred on line 23 of the document. The sentence could not be parsed correctly.
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– he felt she had only left ‘the crumbs’ for him, referring both to his sense of emotional deprivation and actual periods of unpredictability in early feeding. As an adult, he imbibed large amounts of sweetened drinks, much like he devoured the sweetened water he was given on an irregular basis as an infant, which had calmed him while he spent hours alone in a darkened room. Mr D. once angrily commented that I felt superior to him, only leaving him ‘crumbs’. I connected this not only to his recollections of his mother, but to a fantasy he had mentioned several times before, one he connected to a half-forgotten story he had read as a child. In this fantasy, he was a small boy who would go before a large ogre to ask for ‘more food’ (clearly a reference to Oliver Twist) only to be denied, mocked, and attacked. After my interpretation, he felt deeply saddened, saying he always felt he would not receive enough from the world, since it was a big, horrible monster in front of which he would have to beg.18

Mr D.’s Oliver Twist fantasy suggests a starving-self locked in a desperate struggle with an emotionally absent mother. The child is attacked for wanting life, represented both as actual food and as the mother’s nurturing love. Oliver, of course, never knew his mother, who died of hypothermia moments after his birth:

[T]he pale face of a young female was raised feebly from the pillow; and a faint voice imperfectly articulated the words, ‘Let me see the child, and die’ […] the surgeon deposited it [the baby] in her arms. She imprinted her cold and white lips passionately on its forehead, passed her hands over her face […] and died […] her blood had been frozen forever. (46)

Oliver’s entry into the world actualizes Mr D.’s sense of maternal abandonment. His feelings of physical and emotional starvation begin early (he is referred to in the third person and seen as a nuisance). Both Mr D. and Oliver are separated from the earliest experience with the mother, a loving nurturing close to her warm body. The confrontation with the ‘ogre’ (that Mr D. remembered from his childhood reading) takes place in the workhouse, where the other boys select Oliver to go forward:

Oliver […] was desperate with hunger, and reckless with misery. He rose from the table, and advancing to the master, basin and spoon in hand, said […] ‘Please sir, I want some more.’

The master was a fat, healthy man; but he turned very pale […] the boys [were] filled with fear.

‘What!’, said the master at length, in a faint voice.
‘Please, sir,’ replied Oliver, ‘I want some more.’
The master aimed a blow at Oliver’s head with the ladle, pinioned him in his arms, and shrieked aloud for the beadle. (56)19

Here is the central confrontation of the infant’s emerging-self, despairing with hunger and loneliness, reaching out for life and connection to a feared but needed maternal object, only to be attacked for its very love.

In *Waiting for Godot*, Vladimir’s song, which opens Act 2, echoes this exchange:

A dog came in the kitchen
And stole a crust of bread.
Then cook up with a ladle
And beat him till he was dead.
Then all the dogs came running
And dug the dog a tomb
And wrote upon the tombstone
For the eyes of the dogs to come:

A dog came in the kitchen
And stole a crust of bread [etc.] (57–8)

This starving, weakened dog/child, like Mr D., Estragon and Oliver, dares to ask for more food, but to be so bold as to ask for (or steal) a few ‘crumbs’, a few ‘bones’ or a ‘crust’ is tantamount to dying, since it will enrage the terrible, all-devouring mother.20 The never-ending, circular song makes clear the intractable, deeply encrypted nature of this internally ‘closed system’; the dog’s entombment creates a sense of hopeless foreboding, a warning that to seek to feed (or love) is to die or to kill. The cook’s use of the ladle as a weapon rather than as a means of nurturing ironically echoes the master’s own attack on Oliver, highlighting the hostility inherent in this particular constellation of self and other.

Oliver’s state, following his plea for more food, mirrors even more closely the internal worlds (and real worlds) of Mr D. and Lucky. Placed into solitary confinement, he cries bitterly:

And when the long dismal night came on, spread his little hands before his eyes to shut out the darkness, and crouching in the corner, tried to sleep […] drawing himself closer and closer to the wall, as if to feel even its cold hard surface were a protection in the gloom and loneliness which surrounded him. (59)

He is locked away, a ‘lost heart of the self’, in a dark, frozen chamber reminiscent of Mr D.’s cold, lonely room (both internal and real), and
Lucky’s abandonment ‘in the great deeps, the great cold’ (44). Oliver turns to the wall yearning for touch lest he, like Lucky, be pulled into the terrors of psychic annihilation. Its hard, cold surface, is an echo of his mother’s frozen body, and offers the solace of an autistic object. Here is the deepest, most isolated part of the self, surrounded by a withholding, absent mother whose non-recognition is death.

In the fantasy of Mr D., the story of Oliver, and the exchange between Pozzo, Estragon, and Lucky, one sees the terrifying power of the withholding/envious mother, the sense of being overwhelmed and annihilated by her rage/absence, or one’s own feelings of anger and depression. Mr D.’s conscious recovery of these memories/fantasies led to deeply depressive feelings once the anxiety and rage were worked through. Lucky has no such opportunity; he represents the most defeated part of the self, and loses all hope of love and nurturing. He refuses to take even the bones, losing the thread of connection to the good mother that Mr D. maintained with the hope of eventual restoration.

A major consequence of this persisting sense of damaged nursing is the continuation of a paranoid relationship with a withholding or envious internal world/mother, which often results in a feeling of chronic, empty futility. For example, early in the second act of Waiting for Godot, Estragon is frightened and requires soothing/feeding by Vladimir-as-mother, who seems depleted and has little to offer save for ‘bad’ food (turnips). At first, Estragon feels outraged, poisoned by the ‘bad’ food, until ‘good’ food is found (a carrot), though only one remains that must ‘be made to last’ (20). At this point, the idea of being ‘tied’ to Godot is raised, as Vladimir speaks of their having ‘got rid of’ their ‘rights’ (19). They are, in fact, children together, desperate for Godot-as-mother to provide food, protection, and a containing recognition. They sense Godot will forever fail to nurture them, and a paranoid submission to a dominant, withholding/sadistic world develops. Twirling the carrot-stub, Estragon says: ‘Funny, the more you eat the worse it gets’, to which Vladimir replies: ‘I get used to the muck as I go along’ (21). This poisoned dichotomy frames an internal world of paranoid resignation. Similarly, Mr B. reported that his mother threw sweet potatoes in his face when he refused to eat them as an infant, and stated this was the core of his negative despair. He either complied with the ‘shit’ the world offered and lost his own desire (got ‘used to it’), or he accepted it, as it was, with increasing despair, but maintaining a remnant of self-respect (‘the more you eat the worse it gets’). This
compression of internal possibility reflects the two poles of the paranoid stance the tramps enact, which is the source of their incapacity to stay, or to leave. Within this quiet, resigned despair lurks the primal fear of forever receiving bad feeds from the world, never connecting with a good primary object/mother through early memories of love at the breast. They comment on this feeling:

Vladimir: Nothing you can do about it.
Estragon: No use struggling.
Vladimir: One is what one is.
Estragon: No use wriggling.
Vladimir: The essential doesn’t change.
Estragon: Nothing to be done. (21)

These are the beginnings of a sense that the self is bad, that the situation is unchangeable and deserved. This entrapment, within a broken primary nursing experience, leaves little room for hope since it generates an internal world in which life is a slow, entropic slide into starvation and invisibility.

### The presumption of despair

In *Waiting for Godot*, the projective matrix of Pozzo, the tyrannical landowner, and his slave, Lucky develops an internal mechanics of enmeshment to the extreme. This dyad is more highly polarized, more directly fuelled by severe anxieties about separation and dependency, and suggests a more desperate, raging part of the narrative-self.

Despite his dismissal of Lucky, Pozzo admits his servant’s responsibility for his own knowledge of ‘beautiful things’, something which infuriates the tramps:

Vladimir: And now you turn him away? Such an old and faithful servant?
Estragon: Swine!
Pozzo more and more agitated.
Vladimir: After having sucked all the good out of him you chuck him away like a … banana skin. Really…
Pozzo: […] I can’t bear it … any longer … the way he goes on … you’ve no idea … it’s terrible … he must go […] I’m going mad … (he collapses, his head in his hands) … I can’t bear it … any longer […]
Vladimir: (to Lucky). How dare you! It’s abominable! Such a good master! Crucify him like that! After so many years! Really! (33–4)
This exchange illustrates a rapidly reversing self/other matrix suggestive of an infantile-self that experiences a mother as selfishly absent. Pozzo admits his nurturing by a Lucky/mother who taught him so much, and the tramps exhort their disgust by using imagery that evokes an infantile fantasy of ‘sucking’ Lucky dry. Pozzo then deftly reverses roles, becoming the overburdened, fragmenting victim. He becomes Lucky, forcefully introjecting (and speaking) the very words that reflect the slave’s internal state. The result is confusion – Vladimir and Estragon dissociate, then merely parrot, through merger and introjection, Pozzo’s words: ‘He can’t bear it […] He’s going mad’ (34), demonstrating a breakdown of self/other boundaries, as the good/bad imagos become confused. Indeed, Vladimir’s opinion reverses – he sees Lucky as ungrateful and cruel. This type of confusion causes the child great difficulty in maintaining a strong, secure self, since traumatic behaviour and boundary violations are not experienced as real. The effect is twofold – there is not only the original trauma, but also a more devastating effect, created by the mother’s failure to accept the trauma has happened, or to recognize its effect on the child’s psyche. The worst scenario places the responsibility for the pain within the child:

Pozzo: (sobbing). He used to be so kind … so helpful … and entertaining … my good angel … and now … he’s killing me.
Estragon: (to Vladimir). Does he want to replace him?
Vladimir: What?
Estragon: Does he want someone to take his place or not? […]
Pozzo: (calmer). Gentleman […] Forget all I said […] you may be sure there wasn’t a word of truth in it […] Do I look like a man that can be made to suffer? (34)

These are the same transferential patterns enacted between Mr B. and myself, as Vladimir and Estragon experience the same confusion the patient did when confronted with a mother who suddenly devalues all of his past efforts because he failed to respond to a current need. Lucky becomes all bad, just as Mr B. felt he was all bad following his mother’s diatribes, or as I felt I was a ‘bad’ therapist unable to ‘cure’ him. The tramps accept this projection, and turn on Lucky, forgetting that it is Pozzo who is sadistic and self-centered. Pozzo splits Lucky into an all-good and all-bad child, as Mr B.’s mother would split her perception of him when he failed her. ‘He used to be so kind … and now … he is killing me’ – the child introjects these words, which become part of his anticipatory world, so that he is not only bad, but will have
no life if he leaves the mother. In fact, Lucky represents the dying part of the self, and Mr B. believed he would become a worthless street-person, a logical outcome of moving away from his mother since, having internalized her vision of him as worthless apart from serving her needs, he would be unable to care for himself. This fantasy was also protective, since he could not be further drained if he had nothing more to offer. It is of interest that one of the patient’s two brothers developed a severe addictive disorder and for a time was only kept off the street by the mother’s insistence that he be taken care of in the family home. At the core of Mr B.’s internal world was a belief that he and his mother were locked into a hopelessly dependent, merged state, in which neither could survive alone. This is reminiscent of Hamm’s telling Clov in *Endgame*: ‘Gone from me you’d be dead […] Outside of here is death’ (70). Later, Mr B. felt his mother would die if he left, since she could not survive without him, and that he would die of the guilt. As a separation progressed, his mother became physically ill, something exacerbated by her inability to cope with losing her son as a container of her anxiety. Despite his mother’s actual illness, Mr B. believed there might be hypochondriacal manipulation involved. There is some evidence to suggest that Beckett intended the Pozzo role to be played in such a way that the blindness of the second act would seem feigned. (McMillan and Fehsenfeld, 1988: 63–4). This suggests the possibility that Pozzo unconsciously, or consciously, cannot tolerate Lucky’s loss, but even more, cannot tolerate the *admission* of his need for Lucky, and so develops a hysterical or simply feigned blindness.

This sequence reverses the basic situation, where the mother contains the child’s anxiety, since Pozzo acts as if he were a needy infant deprived of good-enough mothering by Lucky. He demonstrates the most devastating interpersonal exchange between mother and child, *the mother’s denial of an already established internal reality*, and one she forcibly projects into the child. Pozzo makes Lucky a sadistic persecutor who is now no longer ‘kind’ or ‘helpful’ by projecting the greedy, sadistic, and anxious parts of himself into his servant, a broken, disabled creature, full of repressed sadness and rage, afraid of strangers. Pozzo then says ‘Forget all I said […] there wasn’t a word of truth in it […] Do I look like a man that can be made to suffer?’ – this devastating reversal denies the essence of the projective attack, replacing it with a posture of invulnerable indifference. Mr B.’s mother enacted similar scenes, after tirades in which she accused her son of incompetence or insensitivity because of some perceived failure to anticipate her needs perfectly. On
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a number of occasions, she would become calm after such a projective attack and say to third party, in front of him: ‘B, what B? I have no son called B. I have two good sons X and Y, but no son called B.’ Similarly, Lucky is forced, in the first instance, to accept he is the persecutor (not the victim) of selfish demands to curb anxiety, despite all evidence to the contrary.

The confusion the tramps experience about Pozzo’s real intentions for Lucky (i.e. Does he want someone to take Lucky’s place or not?), reflects this contradictory message. It is this ambivalence, and the fact that Pozzo actually cannot tolerate losing Lucky, that makes sense of his final denial. He creates in Lucky a sadism not Lucky’s to own, which further creates a sense of guilty dependency. His words are double edged: they suggest his earlier attacks (e.g. ‘He’s killing me’) were not true, creating the possibility that Pozzo’s ‘suffering’ is also not real, and that Lucky can still be a favoured child/servant. Alternatively, by implying that such as Lucky could not make such a man as him suffer, Pozzo creates an abandonment anxiety that deepens Lucky’s helpless dependency. Lucky will feel, on one hand, that he can presume love is available (Pozzo/mother is not really hurt or angry, I can repair her), but on the other, that he should despair, since he will forever be unloved (Pozzo/mother cannot be hurt by me, and does not love me, and so I am lost). This strategy establishes the premise that Lucky is either bad, but now forgiven, or invisible and unneeded.22 The worst outcome is the child’s feeling it is actually insane, since the mother creates a powerful emotional experience that is then denied, and in order to maintain a good relationship the child must disavow aspects of its internal reality. The Beckettian fascination with the dictum, allegedly from Augustine (Hobson, 1956), ‘Do not despair, one of the thieves was saved. Do not presume, one of the thieves was damned’, elucidates these experiences. Lucky should not despair, for Pozzo/mother has forgotten his ‘badness’, and will love him, need him again, and so he (and she) will not die. However, as the despair lifts, the other side of this constellation comes to the fore. Lucky should not presume (i.e. accept the love as natural and enduring), for the Pozzo/mother cannot be hurt by him (i.e. recognize him as important to her) and he will be abandoned. This emotional entrapment creates a world of endless schizoid despair of alternating hope and anguish.23 Mr B. would become intensely vitalized by the prospect of helping his disabled mother, or any number of girlfriends, since he felt his core value was as a ‘fixer’. However, any satisfaction would soon vanish, as he felt increasingly suspicious he was
being used by someone who, sooner or later, would revert to a selfish, manipulative vampire that would drain and discard him.

The genesis of Pozzo’s primal anxiety is clearly a fear of non-recognition:

Pozzo: (terrifying voice). I am Pozzo! (Silence.) Pozzo! (Silence.) Does that name mean nothing to you? (Silence.) I say does that name mean nothing to you? (22)

Both Mr B.’s mother and Pozzo fear abandonment through non-recognition. Pozzo, for example, must be coddled when he wants to sit down:

Pozzo: I’d like very much to sit down, but I don’t quite know how to go about it.
Estragon: Could I be of any help?
Pozzo: If you asked me perhaps. […]
Estragon: Here we go. Be seated, sir, I beg of you.
Pozzo: No, no. I wouldn’t think of it! (Pause. Aside.) Ask me again.
Estragon: Come, come, take a seat, I beseech you, you’ll get pneumonia.
Pozzo: You really think so.
Estragon: Why it’s absolutely certain.
Pozzo: No doubt you are right. (He sits down.) Done it again! (Pause.) Thank you dear fellow. (36)

Pozzo, like Mr B.’s mother, does not feel an enduring, internal goodness, and omnipotently controls Estragon into playing a loving mother. He directs this scene with asides and leading questions in order to get an invitation, which masquerades as loving concern. Mr B.’s mother would similarly stage-manage relations with her son. It became his duty not only to fulfil her needs, but to anticipate them as well, with the penalty for failure being a withdrawal of love that forced him to become ever more vigilant. This strategy relieves Pozzo’s sense of dependency, re-establishing his omnipotence and, by the end of the exchange, there is confusion about who it is that really wants Pozzo to sit. He develops this reversal, suggesting he has been pressured to stay (‘if you insist’), then feigns that he really wants to leave, immediately consulting his watch after the invitation is extended, saying: ‘But I really am to be getting along’ (36). Dependency is projected into Estragon, who wants Pozzo to stay! For an infant, countless repetitions of such forced projections of a mother’s primitive dependency needs creates confusion, but also a desperate dependency that really belongs to the mother. Pozzo’s real needs are for recognition, and an omnipotently
controlled concern – once these are fulfilled he moves on. Mr B. experienced his mother’s interest in him as waning as soon as her needs were met, something which formed the basis of his persistent attachment to constantly needy figures. Since Pozzo has controlled this entire exchange, there can be no real introjection of a caring mother, since Estragon’s words were actually his own.  

Pozzo embodies a desperate but defiant need for others to see him as important, his dependence, and anxiety about abandonment are clear. He admits: ‘Yes, gentleman, I cannot go for long without the society of my likes […] even when the likeness is an imperfect one’ (24) and that ‘I don’t like talking in a vacuum’ (30). The genesis of his arrogance in early dyadic failure is apparent: Pozzo’s fear of abandonment, which would lead to disintegration anxiety, causes him to devalue those he needs most. This envious attack on inner goodness in others leaves them vulnerable, tied to him, as their sense of autonomy is destroyed, leaving a constant need to gain a tyrant’s approval that they believe is their only salvation from despair. The most vulnerable object of envy is the child’s love of life itself, and Pozzo and Lucky’s envious, merged relationship, which does not allow for autonomy, forms the basis of the Beckettian dictum: ‘Better not to have been born at all.’ Birth is never finished, it leads only to entrapment and anxiety. In the tramps’ persistent wait for the good mother, one sees the embodiment of the infant’s life force, as it struggles to form a loving connection, to be well heard and seen.

**Conclusion**

*Waiting for Godot* privileges us with a glimpse into important aspects of early object relations organized around an experience of absent love. An enclosed system of fluid, shifting representations hovers around a limited set of constellations, which all have enmeshment, dependency, and early separation anxiety at their core:

Pozzo: I must go […]
Estragon: Then adieu.
Pozzo: Adieu.
Vladimir: Adieu.
Pozzo: Adieu.

Silence. No one moves. […]
Pozzo: I don’t seem to be able … (long hesitation) … to depart.
Estragon: Such is life. (47)
This is the ‘essential’ that ‘does not change’, an experience of an early infant–mother dyadic failure, leading to frozen, immutable attachments to primal objects. The complexities of the Godot–mother–infant relationship are inexhaustible, and reflect the powerful confusion the infant experiences in the failing primary relationship. The end of each act, when the tramps declare their intention to go, but do not move, is the culmination of this state of affairs. Godot-as-mother is irreconcilable, shifting between an all-giving saviour who will provide food and shelter, and a withdrawn, devouring tyrant who expects service but does not recognize. The nature of this relationship is contradictory: the tramps desire to leave, but stay, as Godot continuously splits into more than one primary object, alternately felt to be sadistic and withholding, yet also felt to be capable of providing basic nurturing. Godot never arrives as a whole mother who could offer them a sense of completeness and a chance to live, both apart from her and with her, as an enduring, loving internal presence.

The power of the play is also related to its transcendence of this static determinism, as it becomes an exploration of human potential and the nature of psychic change. Towards the play’s end, Vladimir is alone with Pozzo, who is enraged about questions about time:

Pozzo: It’s abominable! [...] one day we were born, one day we shall die, the same day, the same second, is that not enough for you? (Calmer) They give birth astride of the grave, the light gleams an instant, then it’s night once more. (89)25

Soon after, alone while Estragon sleeps, Vladimir delivers his most reflective words, wondering if he can ever genuinely apprehend any truth in their situation. He then says:

Vladimir: Astride of a grave and a difficult birth, lingeringly, the grave-digger puts on the forceps. We have time to grow old. The air is full of our cries. (He listens.) But habit is a great deadener [...] I can’t go on! (Pause) What have I said? (90–1).

Vladimir, like Lucky, is infiltrated by Pozzo, echoing his words (‘Astride a grave’), but there is momentary insight as he moves feverishly off to the side of the stage. Pozzo’s collapse into a dead, condensed world (’one day we are born […] one day we die […] the same day.’) of paranoid emptiness, devoid of any enduring, early experiences of love, seems for a moment not to ‘be enough for him’. There is a hint that Vladimir might leave this encasing system for a more evolving
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relationship with the world, but this collapses, as the Boy arrives as a return of the repressed aspects of the need for primary recognition. The play is one of abject hopelessness, the wait is futile, since Godot has already arrived, present in the characters’ natures and relationships themselves. It is this fact that makes it a play of the greatest hope, for within this realization comes the possibility of change, to live in a new, more integrated, and, perhaps, better world.26

Notes

1 The phrase ‘a strange situation’ refers to the experimental situation devised to study early attachment between mother and infant. The infant is left alone with a stranger, and patterns of primary attachment are evaluated upon the mother’s return (Ainsworth, 1978). The patterns of attachment in Waiting for Godot, engendered by the same sort of primary absence, could be understood in terms of the system devised by Attachment Theory.

2 Of course, triangular and even more complex constellations are not excluded. One could, at times, see Godot as an absent paternal figure, to Vladimir/mother and Estragon/child, or the tramps themselves reflecting a parental couple. This chapter examines early child and primary object pairings, upon which more complex constellations are built. In fact, there is an element of infantilism in Godot, who seems tied to the tramps-as-waiters, much like Knott. Asked who Godot represents, Beckett is quoted as saying that had he known he ‘would have said so’, underlining the character’s elusiveness (Schneider, 1967: 38). He also commented that the tramps represent his wife, Suzanne, and himself at the time of writing, suggesting, perhaps, certain primary transferential elements in the play (Bair, 1978: 254). He is said to have asked actors to emphasize ‘boredom’, highlighting a sense of internal emptiness and disconnection from life. Boredom can also operate as a repressing affect to control feelings of rage and sadness. The tramps attempt to control these feelings by finding substitutes, such as the world games, play, and entrapping dyadic roles.

3 Beckett stressed this core aspect of waiting, while famously refusing to speak about ‘meanings’. Calderwood (1986) discusses various approaches to the waiting experience in the play. MacGowran quotes Beckett as saying ’[Godot] doesn’t mean God at all. The whole play’s about waiting’ (Toscan, 1973: 16). This was again emphasized in his deletion of ‘Wir’ from the German title ‘Warten auf Godot’ (McMillan and Fehsenfeld, 1988: 60). The complementary of waiting is not waiting, or leaving, and this chapter explores this aspect of the experience. Beckett wrote to Alec Reid: ‘In Godot the audience wonders if Godot will ever come, in Endgame it wonders if Clov will ever leave’ (quotation in Reid, 1968: 70). A major question is why the tramps do not leave, beyond notions of duty or pure dependency. One reason is a primary love for a maternal figure.

4 Beckett saw the speech as reflecting the decline of man, and this has been the general critical view (see McMillan and Fehsenfeld, 1988: 67, 74). It is also a deeply felt personal experience of a very specific early relationship. Lucky expresses the rage and depression the infant feels when disconnected from the
mother, represented by Pozzo (and of course Godot). As aspects of the narrative-self, Lucky and Pozzo are powerful early internal imagos inherent in all human experience.

5 Klein originally defined the emotion the infant experiences upon entering the Depressive Position as ‘pining’, but the term did not endure. Beckett captured the ambiguities and ambivalence of the Depressive Position when he stated: ‘Where we have both light and dark we also have the inexplicable’ (Francis, 1965: 259). This is why Godot is beyond understanding, since he is experienced as multiple part-objects (e.g. good/bad).

6 I have collected three other examples of patients who spontaneously brought references to Godot into an analysis. In each case, the references connected to a sense of isolation and disconnection between the patient and the analyst-as-mother. Technical considerations preclude their publication now.

7 McMillan and Fehsenfeld (1988) note the complementary themes and imagery in the two speeches, as both reflect man’s decline. A more intimate, and causal, connection can explain Lucky’s despair as an aspect of early human experience that is implicitly universal.

8 Immediately after his speech, Pozzo solicits praise for its dramatic effect, invalidating his connection to its content. This type of denial, and its effect on the infantile-self is discussed in more detail later in this chapter, and the sense of the ‘actor’ existing only in a role is discussed in Chapter 5.

9 Pozzo may be re-creating the relationship with his own mother, by treating himself (represented by Lucky) in the way he experienced his mother’s treatment of him. It is also possible that Pozzo may be re-enacting another aspect of early experience with his mother, treating his servant in the way his infantile mind experienced his own treatment of his mother (as overly demanding, selfish, and sadistic). If his mother could not contain her anxiety about these intense infantile demands, there would not have been an opportunity for him to develop more sophisticated ways of relating to others.

10 In the Schiller production, Beckett restored, at this point, a brief exchange deleted in the original published English text. Estragon suggests they should leave, and Vladimir gives a reason for their waiting: ‘Tonight we will sleep perhaps with him, warm, dry, our stomachs full, in the straw’ (quotation from McMillan and Fehsenfeld, 1988: 50). These primal feelings of nurturing, warmth, and safety suggest early experiences with the good mother. The removal of these lines creates a more abstract, vague relationship to the Godot figure.

11 Child researchers have found that the ability to present clear and coherent narratives of early experiences correlates to secure early attachment (Holmes, 1993: 111). Beckett commented (Duckworth, 1966: xiv, xivi): ‘The source of the dialogue between the boy and Vladimir is to be found […] in Eleuthria.’ In this dialogue between a boy and his father, less abstract than the Godot exchange, the boy also demonstrates an inability to connect his internal states to words. He seems isolated and does not enjoy the company of others. He denies being happy, but under questioning can describe certain things that make him ‘feel good’, such as the state of lying in bed just before sleep. In this, he echoes Mr C. (and Estragon) who also felt this state was the only time he was calm, as falling asleep reflects a withdrawal into an early, protected state. The boy admits to his father he is hungry, but has to be commanded to eat. In all of this, there is a
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sense of internal confusion and dissociation from his feeling-states, as well as a deference to the father’s need. Finally, when the boy asks his only question of the father, which relates to an internal state (‘Are you still hungry, papa?/No/Why not?/I don’t know, Michael’) the father demonstrates he himself has difficulty with internal reflection (or in revealing it). This must be felt as an absence by the boy who wishes to know him, and can explain the child’s internal state of confusion. It also reflects the attempt by Vladimir to know Godot through the boy, and their shared confusion about their own feelings. (Eleuthria quotation from McMillan and Fehsenfeld, 1988: 49).

12 See McMillan and Fehsenfeld (1988: 104–6) for a detailed description of the boy’s/moon’s movements: ‘The exits present a complex of images connecting the conclusion of each act with the themes of completion and incompletion, unity and separation, presented in the approaches […] the boy’s line leads off to an indeterminate unseen point’. This highlights the loss of an unreachable figure, whose absence becomes present in the visage of the moon. In this production, the boy appears very somnolent, stressing his role as an internal object retreating to the past, or to a hidden part of the self.

13 One can view this gang as terrorizing part of the self (an early superego organization). See entry under ‘Pathological Organizations’ in Hinshelwood (1991). Such an organization, built on terror and intimidation, is seen in What Where. Hugh Kenner, interviewed for John Reilly’s film Waiting for Beckett, comments on this aspect of Waiting for Godot as a whole, relating it to the author’s experiences living in hiding during the War. It also suggests much earlier experience. Within this dyad’s complex enmeshments, there remains the possibility that Estragon fantasizes or fakes the attacks to keep Vladimir close. The attacks also suggest a displaced violence directed towards a weaker, infantile part of the self (i.e. Estragon is indirectly beaten by Vladimir).

14 Hill (1990: 33) points out that Beckett often uses the image of the bowed head to suggest the dead father. Again, it is important to dissect out, as well, more primary maternal connections. The constellations could also reflect parental interactions, or even the infantile-self’s fantasy of the mother’s relationship with her own primary objects, something the mother may unconsciously re-create in her dealings with the child.

15 Building on the work of Abraham (1924), Klein (1988a, Chapter 8; 1988b, Chapter 1) described quite explicitly how young children can experience, in phantasy, the equation of feaces with bad, poisonous persons as parts of the self that need to be expelled.

16 In her discussion of Lucky’s dance, Zinman (1995) points out its isolation: there are minimal stage directions, it was rarely discussed by Beckett or by actors who performed it, and it is rarely mentioned by critics. I agree, of course, with her assertion that the dance is a ‘work of art and as such it is a non-verbal, miniature version of the play itself’ (Zinman, 1995: 311). In a sense, the primal importance of the dance has been re-enacted in its non-discussion, as it mirrors a core sense of non-recognition, of rupture in the primal dance of life between mother and infant.

Zinman further elucidates this in her exploration of the origins of the phrase ‘to dance in a net’ (309–13). Its most primal meaning is ‘to proceed under observation while supposing oneself unobserved’, and it is cited in English
Proverbs: ‘Think not you are undetected. You dance in a nett, and you think no body sees you.’ This is a highly ambiguous reality that touches both poles of the schizoid condition. On one hand Lucky’s dance expresses the pathos of his being unrecognized by a loving other, as he writhes in sadness, and is a pathetic distortion of the notion of being able to play alone in the presence of the mother. But it also does express, and in so doing is self-revelatory; Lucky has not died, and his net becomes representative of an internal repressor/protector. I have had many patients who experience this sort of ‘netting’ as both protective and entrapping, as both self and other.

Zinman connects the dance to the artistic sense of failure, of having not pleased an audience, and I suggest that, as always in Beckett, this is highly ambiguous. Lucky is both child and mother, and his dance represents the failure to give, as well as to receive – Estragon’s comment ‘Is that all?’ at the dance’s conclusion condenses the failure – Lucky, it will be remembered, was at one time a nurturer for Pozzo.

Finally, Zinman points out that the dances Lucky no longer performs – the jig, the fandango, the hornpipe, and so forth – are historically ones that centered on vitality, fertility, and connection, within a world of joyous community. Given this, she disagrees with Homan’s criticism that Lucky’s dance is a ‘primitive theatre perhaps, before or without words’: ‘it seems rather to be after words, an art of civilization’s collapse rather than an art of primitivism’ (311). Again, I suggest the ambiguity and inclusiveness of both positions. Lucky’s dance is art, a most primal one. It suggests a lacuna at the beginning of experience, before words, a lacuna that makes authentic communication a difficult and frightening proposition; in this suggestion one sees how the dance touches upon the inexpressible, the failure of words seen in the ‘incomprehensibility’ of his monologue to the others.

17 Estragon’s calling Lucky ‘mister’ is reminiscent of Murphy with Endon. This respect for a deeply regressed part of the self is immediately undermined by Pozzo, a sadistic, tyrannical part of the self that uses intimidation to control.

18 This splitting of the world into a devouring, grandiose monster/weak, hungry minion forms the core of the Paranoid Schizoid Position. These internal roles are alternately identified with – the analyst becomes one or other in complement to the patient’s self, in the opposite role. Lacan’s elucidation Hegel’s Master-Slave dynamic looks at similar phenomenon. The French translation of Freud’s ‘Über Ich’ (English ‘superego’) is ‘Sur moi’ or ‘above me’, which more clearly captures the sense of an agency experienced as grandiose, withholding, and mockingly arrogant, in addition to a more benign seat of authority.

19 In David Lean’s 1948 film version of Oliver Twist, there is a further parallel to Waiting for Godot. Before electing Oliver to go forward, the children witness their masters at a lavish feast, reminiscent of Estragon’s observation of Pozzo’s ‘picnic’.

20 In Waiting for Godot, the situation is altered, since Lucky represents the abandoned child-self, and Estragon is given the bones. For Estragon, the withholding mother is, of course, displaced onto Godot.

21 The parallel is not exact. The tramps, in a way, are like me, observers of an enactment of early relations (between Pozzo and Lucky), as I was an observer of Mr B. and his mother.
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22 In the therapeutic situation, a variation of this is often at work. At the beginning of each new session, Mr B. felt relieved I was not damaged by his previous attacks (as he had been by his mother’s attacks as a child) and so could survive as a good mother for him. He was also anxious because he could not damage me, there was the threat that I was not controllable and would abandon him. Lucky, of course, could not contain Pozzo’s attacks.

23 Beckett commented that Lucky was ‘lucky’ by virtue of the fact he had ‘given up his expectations’ (Duckworth, 1966: lxiii). This touches upon the core argument of this study, since the one thing the infant has to expect is ‘good enough mothering’. If it gives up this expectation, for whatever reason, it will collapse into a paranoid state, and possibly marasmus and death.

24 I am reminded of the patient who said: ‘When I want your opinion, I’ll give it to you.’

25 In their last meeting, it is Pozzo who enacts the role of sufferer, as he introjects Vladimir’s earlier phrase ‘It’s abominable’, which was used to express disgust at Lucky’s ingratitude. This again demonstrates condensation in the play, and the fluidity of roles.

26 In the first draft of the play, Godot arrives in the person of Pozzo, but the confused tramps do not recognize him (Duckworth, 1966: lxiii). Godot is not represented by any single character, but is the play itself, inextricably bound into identifications and expectations manifested throughout the work, through his absence. When Vladimir asks the boy what Godot does, the answer is ‘He does nothing, sir’ (91). This is literally correct, since Godot is a powerful internal imago. Once this is recognized, he becomes emotionally impotent, since Vladimir could then live wholly in the present. Godot existence depends on the tramps own feelings of inadequacy. This is what Vladimir is on the verge of realizing when he states: ‘What have I said.’ As the core part of the self, he is at a moment of great potential for psychic change.