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# Re: Blau, Butler, Beckett, and the Politics of Seeming

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*Elin Diamond*

*We want continuity and we deny continuity [...]. The past needs blood donors.*

*The theater is a means of transfusion.*

*Performance [...] is always under suspicion. Seeming is seminal.*

—Herbert Blau (1982:94)

## I. Performativity

### *Citing, Appearing*

In the radical antifoundationalism of postmodern theory with its vertiginous displacement of sign, concept, identity, and history, we find an equally fervent embrace of the “re.” The “re” points most immediately to a doubling or repetition within the sign, a means of displacing its unitary authority. But it has also come to suggest temporality, history, and politics, marking the desire to reconfigure, reinscribe, resignify the law (cultural, social, linguistic), even as we carry out its operations. Judith Butler’s important discourse on performativity is a case in point. Introduced in early texts, including her ground-breaking *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (1990a), and elaborated in *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of “Sex”* (1993), performativity extends the nonreferential sense of J.L. Austin’s (1975) concept of performative utterance (that which enacts what it names) in order to push past the impasses of constructionism. For Butler, gender identity is not only a construction; it exists only in the doing, in a “stylized repetition of acts” (1990b:270–71). But because the word “acts” suggested to her first readers a humanist subject intentionally acting her identity, Butler, in *Bodies That Matter*, has specified that “performativity is not a singular act [but a] reiteration of norms [or] regulatory schemas” (1993:12, 14). This “reiterated acting acquires an act-like status in the present [only because] it conceals or dissimulates the conventions of which it is a repetition” (1993:12). Given her feminist politics, Butler observes that in reiterating or “citing” these conventions we may also resignify (somehow alter or displace) them. Moreover, to the extent that the “law” of gender and sex is

knowable only in its citations, we may understand it not as substance, but as the “appearance of substance” (1990b:270), yet no less coercive for being so.

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Now that this thing, “performativity,” has appeared, what is not “it”? The iterations of gender that seem, as Butler puts it, to be “singular acts” are rather “dissimulated repetitions” of a “regulatory norm” or “ideal.”

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Meditations on appearance, repetition, bodily texts, temporality, history, and the illusory and elusive workings of power have been at the core of Herbert Blau’s theatre theory for at least four decades. In life-long dialogue with modernism, Shakespeare, psychoanalysis, the politics of the left, and, since the 1970s, deconstruction, Blau has probed and troped on the sublimations and displacements of postmodern performance practice, including his own 35 years of theatre-making. Concerned with the “precipitations” and specular boundaries of performance, Blau’s writerly discourse explores and enacts the slippage of seeming into being at the “vanishing point” of spectatorial desire. Blau might wonder about the desire lurking in “performativity” especially when it “materializes” on the street or the stage as performance. For Blau performance promises nothing more (nor less) than a riddling of Horatio’s anxious question concerning Hamlet’s famous ghost: “What, has this thing appeared again tonight?” “If it doesn’t,” Blau comments in his Hamlet-haunted *Take Up the Bodies: Theater at the Vanishing Point*, “the play is obviously in trouble.”

And if it does, can we really believe it? If we ask too many questions the subject is likely to disappear, like the dream of love, into the questions, so that the questioner is left with the dreaming. And the fear that it might be theater. (1982:94)

This “thing” (the real?) that precipitates theatre, that which is not theatre, may turn out, we fear, to be theatre too, “with all [its] indeterminacies of illusion and resistances to illusion, including the illusion of resistance” (Blau 1982:94).

Now that this thing, “performativity,” has appeared, what is not “it”? The iterations of gender that seem, as Butler puts it, to be “singular acts” are rather “dissimulated repetitions” of a “regulatory norm” or “ideal.” Butler’s Foucaultian move is not just, as in logic, to query what ontologically must be given in order for a concept to appear, but rather to argue that a concept performatively produces (and thus fictionalizes) the ontological ground from which it appears to appear. Hence, for example: “[Gender is] an enactment that performatively constitutes the appearance of its own interior fixity” (Butler 1990a:70). Nothing, then, is irreducible or foundational. What appears to be foundational is a discursive effect pretending to be foundational—a pretense that theatre understands well. “Seeming is seminal” says Blau (1982:94), and in worrying the problem of appearances, he takes us closer to understanding how, in what contexts, and with what investments of desire, the “re” of resignifying “happens.”

This essay will argue a point I’ve made briefly elsewhere (see Diamond 1996:1–12), namely that the resignifying of performativity needs a performance, an embodiment. Paraphrasing Blau, we might say that resignification “needs blood donors [and that] the theater is a means of transfusion” (1982:8–9). This

doesn't mean, though, that we escape the derisory horror of seeming. When, as we'll see, Susan Sontag resignifies Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* in Sarajevo in 1993, a site rife with blood donors, we will need to recall Blau's caution—that our desire to see the “re” produces it, whether or not “it” appears.

### *Context, Theatre*

Performance and theatre discourse are shunned by Butler with a fastidiousness worthy of J.L. Austin himself. A staging of the “re” is unthinkable because her audience may mistake such embodiments for an endorsement of representation—that is, humanism and foundationalism by other means:

[P]erformance as bounded “act” is distinguished from performativity insofar as the latter consists in a reiteration of norms which precede, constrain, and exceed the performer and in that sense cannot be taken as the performer's will or “choice”; further what is performed works to conceal, if not to disavow, what remains opaque, unconscious, unperformable. The reduction of performativity to performance would be a mistake. (1993:234)

In other words performance “shows” too much; gender identifications in all their precarious ambivalence, their tracery of unconscious disavowal become ossified in performance as seeable “truth.” The “repudiated identifications”—those not performed—must be present (as the disavowed) in what is performed, and that, Butler believes, exceeds the possibility of performance.

This view of performance is understandable only in the most conventional of terms. It ignores the obsession in performance literature—particularly Renaissance and Jacobean plays—with ghostly power effects traced into the actions of the viewable world. It ignores the hysteria disavowed in Ibsen's perspectival drawing rooms; the fascistic rigors barely disavowed in Genet's scenarios; and the mockery of the performer's will or choice in Beckett's theatre (see Blau 1992:197). In Blau's work, the Hamletic Ghost functions like the Lacanian phallus—“the *image* of a ghost claiming to be the Father [...]” (1982:94–95). This Father phallus/image, like Butler's “regulatory ideal,” works its way into the “infrastructure of theater [and] seems to limit the revelation of its illusory power.” Blau continues:

“I could a tale unfold...” But the tale is still unfolding through the dubious play of words or [...] in the illusions of silence [...]. It is an impossible prospect. (Blau 1982:95)

For Butler the drag performer “exposes” what is “sexually unperformable” in the gender identifications that s/he must perform; in other words, “the impossible within the possible” (1993:236), or, as Blau puts it above (with embedded visual pun), “an impossible prospect.” Except that Blau has little to say about gender and Butler little to say about theatre, they share to an extraordinary degree the sense of a ubiquitous power regime that both dissimulates its effects and “cannot be reworked or recalled by virtue of the kind of resistances that it generates” (Butler 1993:105).

I think Butler's animus toward theatre derives from Derrida's debunking of context in “Signature, Event, Context” (1982), his rich riposte to J.L. Austin, and one of Butler's important intertexts in the theorizing of performativity. Austin's performative utterance, Derrida argues, hemmed in by the speaker's intention (illocutionary force) and by the propriety of context, commits the logocentric fallacy of equating speech with presence. Whereas Austin believes

the “felicitous” speech act is governed by the speaker’s intention and, by extension (in Derrida’s words), a “saturable and constraining context” (1982:320), Derrida insists that the performative, precisely because it is a speech act that relies on conventional forms of utterance, is a citation. Citationality means that any utterance can be “put between quotation marks” and thus lifted from one context to “engender infinitely new contexts in an absolutely nonsaturable fashion” (320). Given the deconstructive impulse here, Derrida’s use of “absolute” is peculiar. While he incorporates what Austin rejects—the “non-serious” citation on the stage, in a poem or a soliloquy—and while he asks that we not set up an “opposition between citational statements and singular statement-events,” he reifies the *mise-en-scène* or context of iteration, and sets up his own binary opposition between the “absolute anchoring” of context and “the essential drifting” of iteration. The event drifts, the context sits. But why not put “context” into play? Why not understand locations, bodies, desires, readings, the sites of citing, as equally allergic to unitary self-identity? Put another way: if, as Derrida argues, every event is characterized by a “structural unconscious” (327), might the event’s unconscious be its context—now itself submitted to *différance* and to the “essential dehiscence” of iteration (326)?

Derrida wants to free the statement-event from Austin’s “exhaustively determinable context” by deriding what he finds Austin relies on: “consciousness, the conscious presence of the intention of the speaking subject for the totality of his locutory act” (322). What Derrida wants is an event (a performative utterance) in which intentionality “will have its place, but from that place it will no longer be able to govern the entire scene” (326).

Butler cites this passage in order to arrive at “dissimulated citationality”—how the subject imagines that she initiates her own discourse (1993:13). Yet, again, except in the most conventional descriptions, performance, like the statement-event, is never “governed” by consciousness “completely present in itself” (Derrida 1982:326). Although Blau may wish for a performance “totaled by thought” (1982:17), although he proposes that consciousness is perhaps a universal of performance, he does not mean the intentionality of the Enlightenment cogito. Given “the dissipation of theater into the theatricalization of everyday life” (1982:12), perception in/of performance is always reflexive, impossibly divided (see Blau 1990:51ff).

Put another way, Derrida’s formula for context—“a set of presences which organize the moment of inscription” (1982:317)—receives a further torquing in Blau, for whom “presence” organizes nothing. In *Take Up the Bodies*, it is painfully participial: “presencing” marks the move from thought to theatre, from thinking to showing, which is always a “mediation,” a shifting of appearances—a drift. For Blau, presence in performance instantiates no first time, no originary event, only “recurrence and reproduction” (1987:171). Derrida thinks that recurrence or citationality breaks up the meaning-making context, destroys presence. Blau thinks citationality is embedded in context; like *différance*, it’s what theatre is already doing before the lights come up, and “presencing” is what shows us that. Moreover, if we think of theatre as the “context” of the performative, Blau’s work shows us that showing is always more than thought, a “more” that has to do with theatre as site of/in history—history’s continuities, implosions, scatterings, and (pace Marx) its stubborn return.

The audience “precipitated” by performance is in Blau’s *The Audience* (1990) a metonymy for the vanishing public sphere: there is no audience “without a history” but history has been theatricalized, “neutralized” (16). This insistent and fecund mingling of theatre and the “real” has impelled Blau’s work from *The Impossible Theater* (1964): “Throughout the book, I shall be using the theater as an image of the Cold War and the Cold War as an im-

age of the theater" (1964:21). However, since the 1980s, it is history's "collaboration with illusion" that unravels in book after book, ideological struggle being nothing more (nor less) than the "future of illusion" whose real effects, from the price of a theatre ticket to the butcheries of ethnic cleansing, are played regularly but never played out. Derrida's theoretical fantasy of citational drift, of infinitely new contexts, seems, in this context, particularly nightmarish: repetition without resistance.

### *Identification, Seeming*

The "re" has to happen in time, but what kind of time? In *Bodies That Matter*, Butler proposes that those "regulatory schemas" that produce the body's morphological possibilities are not "timeless structures," but rather structures that remain in place precisely because we cite them, through identification, repetitively. For that reason these structures are alterable (1993:14). That is to say, cultural regulations are not restructurable by an intending subject, but rather in citing/identifying with the ideal we necessarily fail to reproduce it completely. Butler associates identification less with the destabilizing of identity than with "the relation to a law [...that] compels the shape and direction of sexuality through the instillation of fear" (105). Yet since identifications are never "fully and finally made," they must be "incessantly reconstituted and, as such, are subject to the volatile logic of iterability" (105). It is the subject's failure to identify correctly which constitutes a resistance to the law—while not in any way changing the law or its punishing demands. In *To All Appearances: Ideology and Performance*, Blau finds a similar attrition of effect in the structures of power: "there is no perfect hegemony" but nor is there a "mere incessant displacement of power" (1992:29). Rather, with suspicion of human agency probably far exceeding Butler's, Blau asserts with Adornian pungency: "[w]hat moves the structure is the struggle to sustain it" (30).

Blau has made some interesting remarks on identification, primarily in relation to acting theory and transformation. But in general, identification as "phantasmatic staging" in the imaginary (1992:105) is, in Blau, a subset of the operations of illusion. Arguing with Althusser, who postulates identification as a "false problem" always already subsumed in ideology, Blau insists that the "false problem" is one that "keeps recurring in all its falsehood as something very real" (1992:71)—again a problem most conducive to theatrical thinking, since "some of what you see is what you want to see. That is also there" (Blau 1982:13). If Brecht worked to eliminate all but the most instructive identifications from spectatorial perception, Blau has persistently argued that Alienation-effects are themselves impacted of illusion.

While some illusions may be exposed by devices of Alienation, others are held with such deep force of long conviction that, however they may have been produced, they are now filling other needs or have become [...] necessary fictions. (1990:223)

In this Blau hearkens back to Freud's pessimism in *The Future of an Illusion*, in which illusions of religious salvation—the legacy of both the renunciation of instinct and of human wishes—can never be dispelled by rational principles ([1927] 1961:30ff). Freud, however, in this pre-Nazi text, draws the line at science: "our science is no illusion" (56). It is science that will replace the long-vanished protective tribal father. In Blau the protective father has transmogrified, not of course into "divine Providence," but into the presiding Hamletic Ghost who unfolds a tale of "dazzling paradoxes" in which evidence is appearance and the fullness of identity an illusion that will not "stay."

As I have been suggesting an ineluctable intersection of performativity and performance (Butler and Blau), let me sketch out a fuller scenario. Despite her suspicion of theatre, it is not hard to imagine Butler's notion of "regulatory norms" as an insidious phallic theatre in which the "assumption" (Lacan's term), through identification, of normative gender is compelled, under threat, as the price of admission to what Butler calls "cultural legibility."<sup>1</sup> As with all identifications, this ticket purchase never actually "takes place [...] in the world of events" (Butler 1993:105) but is always an illusion of an event staged in the unconscious, for to "know" about the ticket is already to be in the theatre. If this is so, "the ontological problem," as Blau puts it, has little to do with substance or identity, but rather with "knowing [...] where we are in the topography of illusion" (Blau 1982:95). Butler offers, however, a political token with the ticket we don't remember buying; the reminder that in this normative theatre we are always "citing or miming" (1993:108) the compulsory norm: "And a citation will be at once an interpretation of the norm and an occasion to expose the norm itself as a privileged interpretation" (108). "Miming" and "exposure" are of course theatrical ideas, suggesting that only in the repetitive mutilations of performance (Butler's "occasion") can we gauge the power of performativity. Like Blau, Butler is interested in what "ghosts" the visual: the "spectres" (104) of "repudiat[ed] and abject[ed]" (114) identifications that shore up and sustain "coherent identit[y]"—but this ghosting is performance too, at least as Blau has articulated it. Unlike Blau, however, Butler seeks to build on and extend feminist traditions of critique: in order to form coalitions across the divides of identity politics, the historical pressures of which she fully acknowledges, Butler calls for a "reworking" and a "tracing [of] the ways in which identification is implicated in what it excludes" (118, 119). Her cautiously stated feminist aim is what Blau has long designated as yet another theatrical illusion: "a map of a future community" (1993:119).

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Aims apart, terrains apart, what is striking in both Blau and Butler is that at crucial junctures in their theorizing of regimes of power, there emerges the impossibility of politics and the concomitant necessity of politics. There is a "promise" embedded in every identification (Butler 1993:131) and a "promising appearance" (Blau 1992:30) in every ideological formation. The former ends in "disappointment," concealing or exposing the "impossible idealizations" of the very norms it would contest. The latter dissipates and reconstitutes into other promises in the mirror play of ideology. Politics is always a politics of seeming. If, Blau writes, "at some intersection of history with the eternity of the unconscious, [an ideological promise/formation] may move against impossibility with extraordinary power," it "doesn't mean that it overcomes the impossible, which never changes" (1992:30). Promises and disappointments, an impossible which never changes. "VLADIMIR: The essential doesn't change." The wish for a political sphere of contestation and debate rasps into silence and failure. "ESTRAGON: Nothing to be done" (Beckett 1954:14).

## II. Godot's Impossible Politics

To insert Samuel Beckett into a discourse on identification, power, and politics seems counterintuitive. Beckett is the great 20th-century poet of failure, the apolitical high modernist whose texts transcend the banalities of gender regulation and the specificities of historical crisis. Yet as Blau notes, canonical drama is the “historical textualization of performance” (1992:197), providing in the rhythm of gesture, the repetition of line, a culture’s illusions of continuity and its simultaneous dispersion. In the drama, one “feels the almost unabating intensity with which the theater has always questioned what it fetishizes, distrusting the very appearances from which it is made” (197). There is in *Waiting for Godot* (and in all of Beckett’s drama) a reflexive practice of distrust. For the four near-amnesiacs in bowler hats, in a rapidly diminishing world of tree, road, and “no lack of void,” the regulatory ideal is not normative gender identity but that constantly mocked and always distrusted existential conundrum: the meaning of being. Given Beckett’s absorption of post-WWII existential thought, “being” in *Godot* redounds to “nothing to be done,” the intentionality of nothing, or, modifying Butler’s phrase, a “stylized repetition of [ostentatiously meaningless] acts”—putting on shoes, urinating, eating a carrot, inspecting hats, doing yoga—intercalated with music-hall stichomythia that stutters into repetition, punctuated by silences devoid of comforting subtext.

Anticipating Derrida (as he anticipates so much poststructuralist thought), Beckett gives us a monstrous version of citationality in which “context” is ever slipping away:

ESTRAGON: And all that was yesterday you say?

VLADIMIR: Yes of course it was yesterday.

[...]

ESTRAGON: It’s never the same pus from one moment to the next.  
(1954:39)

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Pushing up through these performances like Gogo’s toes through his boot is the utter futility of meaning-making, of waiting-for-Godot.

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Ontological ground, the support for context, is laughably, tearfully, ungrounded. All that is left is citationality—performance: “We could start all over again perhaps” (41). Pushing up through these performances like Gogo’s toes through his boot is the utter futility of meaning-making, of waiting-for-Godot. There are two jokes here, with the same punch line. The existential joke follows on from futility: the tramps keep their appointment and Godot doesn’t come. The Foucaultian/Butlerian joke is that the tramps produce the ground of their own torture: by showing up, demanding cultural legibility (“You did see us, didn’t you?” [34]) they produce the waiting that oppresses them. They are “tied” to, identified with, the regulatory ideal of meaningful existence—an identification they can only approximate, hence must repeat incessantly because it fails to be “correct.” Godot will never come. The second joke is crueler, closer perhaps to what Blau called the “destructive [spirit...] at the heart of *Godot*” (1964:240). For while Beckett voids the possibility of meaning, he demands the quest—the performance—and saturates it with pun-



ishment (recall the play's many references to beatings, prohibitions, humiliation, and hunger). If the tramps are "inexhaustible"—"We always find something, eh Didi, to give us the impression we exist?" (44)—Blau and others have found that performing *Godot* is "just plain exhausting" (1964:231). Punishment enfolds the tramps. The theatre demands that the tramps play, the audience demands something to be done (even if it's nothing), and the play forces acknowledgment of that demand in the "rustle" of breathing heard during the play's repetitive silences.<sup>2</sup>

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Is it possible that the tramps'—especially Vladimir's—inexhaustible hunger for meaningful context feeds the hunger for meaningful context on the part of those who choose to produce the play? When Blau first directed *Waiting for Godot*, he was "almost convinced that this very European play, written by an expatriate Irishman, was by some miracle of cultural diffusion meant expressly for Americans" (1964:235). If *Godot* is "citational," capable of drifting across continents and contexts, it paradoxically begs for meaningful context. In this sense the play is also a parable on the problematic of identification, for those who produce the play cannot resist assimilating it, submitting it to the regulatory ideal of site-specific meaning. Beckett's *Godot* in performance, then, not only demonstrates performativity—the repetitive citing of the norms of meaning—it demonstrates what those norms dissimulate: the power relations and fantasies inhering in identification. The remainder of this essay will be devoted to a discussion of Susan Sontag's production of *Waiting for Godot*, and, briefly in closing, to a recent Beckett controversy that *Godot* itself seems to anticipate and explain.

In July 1993, Susan Sontag went to Sarajevo to direct *Waiting for Godot*. Under constant threat of shelling she rehearsed her nine actors (Vladimir and Estragon were triple cast) for four weeks by candlelight until the play's matinee opening on 17 August. During the third performance, after the long silence following the messenger's announcement that Mr. Godot wasn't coming today but would surely come tomorrow, the sound of sniper fire filled the theatre. Upon returning to the U.S. Sontag wrote a long article for *The New York Review of Books* (1993) in which, unwittingly echoing Blau, she opined that *Waiting for Godot*, "written over forty years ago, seem[ed to be] written for, and about, Sarajevo" (53). During rehearsals that coincided with some of the worst Serbian shelling, she and her actors made more specific identifications: *Waiting for Godot* seemed to be a clear reference to "waiting for Clinton" (53). Moreover, despite Beckett's suggestions that the play be staged in a quasi-vaudeville fashion, *Godot*, Sontag noted, always seemed to her a "supremely realistic play," although the characters were "representative, even allegorical figures" (54). She closed her article condemning the "absence of political will" of NATO leaders to end the strife in Bosnia. She then made the rather amazing confession that while Sarajevans mourned their formerly beautiful, prosperous, and ethnically tolerant city, and compared their embattled existence to "science fiction" and "living in the Middle Ages," she, Sontag, found Sarajevo "the most real place in the world" (59).

As noted above, *Waiting for Godot*, probably more than any Beckett work, is

most assimilable to the fantasy of a political real. Its American production history is partially responsible. In 1957, five years after it premiered in Paris, *Godot* was staged by Herbert Blau, with members of the San Francisco Actors' Workshop, at San Quentin, northern California's state penitentiary. According to testimonies later summarized by Martin Esslin, inmates identified with the play's bleak references to a shrinking world, its survivor humor, its invocation of paralysis in the face of implacable (state) oppression (1969:1–3; see also Blau 1964:228–43ff). Yet while Beckett encouraged the staging of his work in prisons, he was loathe to associate any facet of his oeuvre with overtly political contexts, even interpretive ones, as in his gracious but firm rejection of his friend Kay Boyle's reading of *Godot* as an allegory about fascism—this rejection despite Beckett's well-known involvement in the French Resistance.

Beckett's rejection of a political interpretation, however, does not mean he wasn't seriously engaged in exploring political behavior. Indeed in *Godot* and in subsequent works he explores relations of power by, precisely, linking politics to identification, and, by extension, linking social negotiation to what Butler calls the “always already imaginary,” hence nonnegotiable stagings of identification (1993:91). We have been stressing the coercive, repetitive features of identification. This is Lacan's emphasis in “The Mirror Stage,” which argues that identification precipitates a split between the fledgling “I” and its mirror reflection that forever “situates” the ego “in a fictional direction” (1977:2). As an infant the subject identifies with its own image in a mirror, an image whose most impressive trait—bodily coherence—it does not share. Thus its identification with that image is both self-fulfilling and self-alienating. Because the mirror image invites idealization, it dooms the infant to an enraged rivalry at which it can only fail. For Lacan (and Butler), the subject's future identifications are a delusional replay of that idealizing and self-alienating narcissistic relation, a relation that results in extreme oscillations of love and hate, which in turn produce the reductiveness of dichotomous social relations—good versus evil, victim versus victimizer. In identification, as Blau puts it, “seeming is seminal.” With their basis in false images, identificatory fantasies elide the reality of the other's difference, turn the other into a semblance of (my)self—even as this self is nothing more than the unstable “cumulative effects of its identifications” (Butler 1993:74).

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What is political in *Godot* is not the real suffering it mirrors but the oppressive effects of identification's mirror relations and the impossibility of a politics that necessarily derives from them.

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Our humanist traditions necessarily suppress these impossible psychic divisions. We imagine (or used to imagine) that politics belongs to a public arena in which differences are negotiated, in which citizens' individual and collective struggles for power are rationally orchestrated. But as the genocidal events of the 20th century have shown, the rational component of the political is what Blau would call a “promising appearance,” easily displaced by another appearance. Fascism in particular feeds on identificatory fantasies with idealized images of national and ethnic purity. An imaginary nonrational psychic process, identification produces, in the political realm, a crude, potentially violent division between those who are like me and those who are “other”; those who are “healthy” and those who sicken the body politic and must be

destroyed. “Politics” operates not in spite of but through the imaginary; it is always a politics of images, of seeming, and no less—arguably more—enraged and vengeful for being so (see Fuss 1994:141–65). Lacan published “The Mirror Phase” in 1949, the same year that Beckett completed *Waiting for Godot*, and just four years after both men, along with the populations of most of the globe, had witnessed the most brutal violations of the civil contract.

Beckett’s rejection of political reference in *Waiting for Godot* and the concomitant ignoring of that rejection by Kay Boyle, Susan Sontag, and countless others, is not, then, about their misunderstanding of his high modernist (supposedly apolitical) intentions. They are reading Beckett right but saying it wrong. What is political in *Godot* is not the real suffering it mirrors but the oppressive effects of identification’s mirror relations and the impossibility of a politics that necessarily derives from them. For Beckett politics is not unaesthetic; it’s impossible. Within the discourse of rights and reason, the foundation of Western politics, Beckett finds and abhors the worst aspects of the identificatory relation: the enraged (because unachievable) assumption of a regulatory ideal and the concomitant misrecognition of the other—my demand that the other be me, be captured in my image, and if not, be cast from me, expelled, annihilated. Identification fuels our most simplistic parsings of good from evil; normal from deviant; inner from outer. In this context, as Genet well knew, politics becomes not a forum but a theatre, in which misrecognitions and the aggressions they breed are dissimulated, smoothed over, and rationalized into false certainties.

Of course Beckett makes comedy out of his tramps’ misrecognitions. By contrast the slave-owning Pozzo rejects any possibility of misrecognition with his bravura opening: “I am Pozzo! (*Silence*) Pozzo!” (1954:15). Soon Pozzo sets up the identificatory relation through which he establishes contact with Beckett’s tramp couple: “POZZO: Yes, gentlemen, I cannot go for long without the society of my likes (*he puts on his glasses and looks at the two likes*), even when the likeness is an imperfect one. (*He takes off his glasses*)” (16). In the English stage directions, Gogo and Didi are not simply “the two” but the “two likes,” reflections of the grand Pozzo, albeit imperfect ones. This likeness to Pozzo and the fact that Pozzo recognizes them as “human beings like [himself]” precipitates the couple’s worst crimes. Assimilated into Pozzo’s version of “human beings,” Gogo and Didi become increasingly rivalrous; they collude in the oppression of Lucky and, in the second act, end up falling into the dirt with Pozzo and his slave. Yet from this identification with “human beings like [Pozzo],” comes the tramps’ only moment of political self-consciousness:

VLADIMIR: Let us not waste our time in idle discourse! (*Pause. Vehemently.*) Let us do something, while we have the chance! [...] Let us represent worthily for once the foul brood to which a cruel fate consigned us [...]. It is true that when with folded arms we weigh the pros and cons we are no less a credit to our species. The tiger bounds to the help of its congeners without the least reflexion, or else he slinks away into the depths of the thickets. But that is not the question. What are we doing here, *that* is the question. (51)

Unlike Hamlet, whose “question” to existence is dictated by what is “nobler in the mind,” Gogo and Didi “weigh the pros and cons” by considering animal behavior: “The tiger bounds to the help of his congeners without the least reflexion”—that is, instinctive action based on species identification, hence an irrational act without “reflexion” or reflection; “or else he slinks away into the depths of the thickets”—that is, withdraws into disillusionment. These for Beckett are the only choices politics makes available, and each is a form of violence and alienation. Hence Didi exchanges politics for metaphysical reflection: “What are we doing here, that is the question. And we are

blessed...to know the answer...we are waiting for Godot to come—" (51). This is Beckett's darkly ironic *Te Deum* to both Hamletic reflection and efficacious politics. In relation to the tiger's bounding or slinking, waiting for Godot is the merely human alternative—and a typically pointless one at that.

However, when not pushed to the point of crisis, Gogo and Didi elaborate a relation to identification that does open up and perform alternatives. Their play, however "tied" to the regulatory ideal of meaning, is also a form of resignification—not of the futility of existence but of the mechanisms of identification. Their duologues are more than the time-passing antics of existential clowns; they are exercises in negotiating power relations without coercive identifications. In other words, the pleasure of this prototypical Beckett couple lies in the fact that their pronounced sameness makes room for difference—differences in smell, foot size, bodily complaints, mental habits, desires—producing a kind of cognitive interstice for the reader/spectator that counteracts the overwhelming impression of repetition and symmetry. Despite the bowler hats and well-rehearsed gags, the couple do not mirror one another; no one is trapped in the other's identificatory fantasy. In response to Estragon's first-line pronouncement, "Nothing to be done," Vladimir demonstrates not the oscillations of self-other relations but the slower movement in what's left of rational thought: "I'm beginning to come round to that opinion" (7). When the clowns "play at Pozzo and Lucky" (47), they resignify master-slave reflection/abjection through their music-hall canters, but this is not to dislodge the law of meaning and being to which they are "tied." Their failure to achieve the norm of meaning constitutes a resistance to that norm. Yet as Butler notes, "the law cannot be reworked or recalled by virtue of the kind of resistances it generates" (1993:105). If the structure moves, Blau reminds us, it is only because of the "struggle to sustain it."

"I can live this life a hundred years" (in Sontag 1993:58) said one of Sontag's Bosnian friends, who seems to be glossing the waiting thematics of Beckett's play. But of course this line comes to us via Sontag, who was not about to wait 100 years to direct her production of *Godot* or to tell the world about it. It is not my purpose to join in the vilification of Sontag for her bowdlerizing of Beckett's text.<sup>3</sup>

Unlike the Beckett estate I think a serious director has every right to alter the text, and given the excruciating difficulty of Sontag's rehearsal and production conditions, the author himself might have granted permission. However, in keeping with the argument of this paper I am interested in underscoring the identificatory fantasy of a lifelong New Yorker who can transform the political and social calamities of a Balkan city into the "most real place in the world." What would the most real place in the world look like? Clearly only Susan Sontag knows. Her real is her fantasy of the real, which reflects well on her efforts and obscures the differences and dissent of others. Yet I wonder whether Sontag's critics aren't given to similar flights of fantasy. I wonder about the gatekeepers of the truth in Beckett studies, those who say they know Beckett's real wishes about the look of his productions or, as in a recent controversy, the fate of his *Eleutheria*. When Beckett's U.S. publisher Barney Rosset claimed that he was, through "an act of faith" (in Oppenheim 1995:16), in possession of Beckett's true intentions,<sup>4</sup> and when both sides in the *Eleutheria* dispute claimed the moral ground for their side, we might recall that, in identification, the "most real" is always intertwined with fantasy, with what Blau calls the "promising appearance" of authorial truth, and Butler the "privileged interpretation." In power struggles, which barely conceal their identificatory investments, moral arguments are an attempt to rise above the political fray. They are demands addressed to a "higher" authority, in this case that ghostly revered image of real meaning and complete truth, Beckett himself. Will he unfold his tale? "Do you think [he] sees

me?” Estragon asks. *Waiting for Godot* supplies the answer: to see you is to misrecognize you: “in this immense confusion [that] one thing alone is clear.”

### Notes

1. Richard Schechner offers the important amendment that “cultural legibility” is temporal and site-specific (Schechner 2000). What counts as “legible” in 2000 may not be the same as in the early 1990s, when Butler wrote *Bodies That Matter*. Still, the Lacanian paradigm, in the way it usefully links the law of normativity with identification, would still be applicable, despite incremental changes to notions of the normative.
2. Commenting on the tramps’ haunting “canter” of Act II (“All the dead voices./ They make a noise like wings./ Like leaves./ Like sand./ Like leaves./ (*Silence.*)/ They all speak at once./ Each one to itself./ (*Silence.*)/ Rather they whisper./ They rustle./ They murmur./ They rustle.”), Blau notes:  
  
Here [...] are [...] two *performers* trying to top each other, while character disappears in the metabolism. [...] And as they sit side-by-side, staring out into the dark auditorium, listening to nothing, who can avoid hearing more of himself, and thus becoming a participant in the drama? (1964:234)
3. See Sontag, “Godot Comes to Sarajevo” (1993). The most notable change was replacing the tramp couple with three couples in different gender configurations, which in turn entailed line changes, and of course, a different understanding of the canters, the gags, as well as the larger questions posed by the play.
4. For one summary of “l’affaire *Eleutheria*,” (Beckett’s first play which he called “*irréremédiablement raté*,” and never permitted to be published—though he granted, then immediately rescinded permission to Rosset in 1986, three years before his death) see Oppenheim (1995). *The Beckett Circle*, the newsletter of the international Samuel Beckett Society, disappointed some by choosing strict neutrality in what the then president of the Beckett Society, Robert Scanlan, called “the pressure games and power politics that accompanied this patch of business among publishers” (in Oppenheim 1995:16).

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