

2. Grey Time: Anachromism and Waiting for Beckett

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When the actor Billie Whitelaw was rehearsing the play *Footfalls* in 1976, Samuel Beckett gave her some advice. As she was getting to grips with this play in which a woman paces back and forth, over and over, revolving in her mind a relationship of traumatic attachment to a mother who is now only an insistent voice, Beckett instructed her, over again: ‘Too much colour, Billie, too much colour.’¹ He directed her towards a voice and embodied attitude that

matched the tattered grey dress and ashen oval of stage space upon which he had insisted. When Whitelaw was rehearsing *Rockaby* (1981), Beckett similarly told her that the voice used should be ‘very monotonous’: ‘There’s no colour, or hardly any.’² The colourlessness of grey is everywhere in Beckett’s finished work and firmly associated with his austere and carefully curated personal image.³ But as the example above makes clear, an orientation towards grey was also part of his process, his craft. Beckett’s attempts to dampen down and flatten the ‘drama’ in Whitelaw’s performance, in and through rehearsal time, can clearly be linked to writing strategies designed to strip out or ‘vague[n]’ those obviously ‘colourful’ elements visible in his manuscript drafts;⁴ they also match his famous turn from English to French described as a movement from ‘ex[c]ess to lack of colour’.⁵ Whether in the rehearsal studio, through the drafting process, or by reworking texts through translation, the act of taking time into the texts and insisting they absorb it seems to have been key to the work of realising Beckett’s grey vision.

Alongside marking Beckett’s obvious fascination with what we would now call greyscale images, this chapter will argue that Beckett’s modernist, often minimalist works also materialise an analogous temporal aesthetic: a grey time structured, in particular, by an attention to waiting without the possibility of fulfilment or progression. In a greyscale image, the value of each pixel is a single sample representing only an amount of light; in other words, it carries information only about intensity rather than chromatic difference. I want to argue that grey time might similarly be described as a temporality structured not by a movement through states that are clearly different in kind, but through the modulation of experiences of intensity that emerge while waiting. As contrasting differences that would enable forms of dialectical temporal progression become difficult to detect, Beckett’s commitment to what I will term *anachromism* brings into focus the time of post-World

War II European and US modernity – a time in which a sense of a future into which one could step had sheared away. I will also argue that the concept of *anachromism* enables an exploration of how Beckett’s grey time also seems to reach forwards, proleptically, in ways that illuminate the contours of the contemporary moment – our own waiting times.

Colour: None

The scene begins with three women sat on a bench in dulled shades, with the red, yellow and violet of their coats fading out to grey. The figures Flo, Vi and Ru are ‘as alike as possible’ and as abbreviated as their names.⁶ As one gets up and leaves, the other two discuss her fate (an impending catastrophe, perhaps her death) in faint, muted tones and in a cycle that repeats:

FLO: Ru.

RU: Yes.

FLO: What do you think of Vi?

RU: I see little change. [*Flo moves to the centre seat, whispers in Ru’s ear. [Appalled.] Oh! [They look at each other. Flo puts her finger to her lips.]*]

Does she not realize?

FLO: God grant not.⁷

In this play – *Come and Go* – which was written in 1965 and first performed in German in 1966, action and dialogue are muted, with the scene voided of expressive sound, light or colour. Beckett himself stated that the dialogue should be ‘[c]olourless except for three “ohs” and two lines following’.⁸ ‘One sees little in this light’, Flo notes.⁹ There is, however, evidence to suggest that

Beckett started out with more obviously vivid elements for *Come and Go*. At first, he considered calling the play 'Good Heavens' – a sardonic, rather overdone pun for a play that ostensibly concerns the terminal illness of its three protagonists. The draft of 'Good Heavens' has episodes of dialogue that are strikingly colloquial, while a later version of the play includes a character performing a comically inappropriate reading from what seems to be a bad romantic novel. But all of this is stripped away in favour of the suspension of meaning:

VI: May we not speak of the old days?

(*Silence.*)

Of what came after?

(*Silence.*)¹⁰

Here, there is little possibility of speaking either of the past or an imagined future, for the whispered prognosis around which the play constellates is never heard. Instead, it is as if washes of identifiable colour are being removed, leaving a structural grisaille of shaded, though uncertain, affective intensity underneath. The scene simply repeats and plays itself out while waiting for a denouement that never arrives.

In the television play *Ghost Trio* (1977), we see a similar attempt to place meaning in suspension and to denude the text of easily determinable affect. The working title of the play was moderated from 'Tryst' to the more obviously untimely *Ghost Trio* and, right from the start, we are in a shaded, greyscale environment: 'Mine is a faint voice. Kindly tune accordingly. [*Pause.*] It will not be raised, nor lowered, whatever happens.' There will be '[n]o shadow. Colour: none. All grey. Shades of grey. [*Pause.*] The colour grey if you wish, shades of the colour grey', while the strongest injunction in the play is

to '[k]eep that sound down'.¹¹ The stage space of *Ghost Trio* (chamber, wall, door, window) and props (pallet, pillow, cassette) are similarly stripped of depth and volume but are instead described as 'smooth grey rectangle[s]'.¹² The doors must have no knobs and the window is only an '[o]paque sheet of glass': these blank surfaces must repel a looking that searches for interest or depth within the austere restricted environment. In one shot, without equivalent in Beckett's oeuvre, we are shown, simply, a square of dust. The arrangement of rectangles, in various shades of grey within the surrounding rectangle of the room, eschews depth, refusing the figurative and its ocular illusions of perspective and volume. The grey lighting, described as 'faint, omnipresent. No visible source', also declines the possibility of contrasts or the hollowing out concave and convex spaces.¹³ Instead, the restricted depth of field of the television image was emphasised. Beckett indeed had high hopes that Jim Lewis, the cameraman, could match his vision, writing that 'His lighting will be good & perhaps eliminate all shadows.'¹⁴ But as Beckett insisted in a 1977 letter to Antoni Libera, the demands of grey were not easily met; they could only be achieved with a care and technical precision that would guard against rendering what was present through more obvious modes of contrast: the 'tone is colourless and unvarying from start to finish, "the colour grey if you wish", very hard to keep up'.¹⁵

Beckett's *Ghost Trio* was broadcast on the BBC in 1977 within a longer programme called *Shades*, appearing alongside . . . *but the clouds* . . . and a striking revisioning for television of the play *Not I*. The word 'shades' suggests that we might be in a ghostly, haunted environment, but it also brings into focus the plays' use of monochrome. As Jonathan Bignell has noted, by 1977 audiences were used to watching colour footage, and because *Shades* used colour for its discussion elements the broadcast drew attention to the anachronistic atmosphere of these black and white plays that seemed belated and

ongoing, even as they also clearly positioned themselves as part of a theatrical and televisual *avant garde*.¹⁶ David Cunningham has argued that Beckett's late television plays like *Ghost Trio* and *Quad* also use minimalism to present a contrast to, and laborious negation of, the expectations of the medium, 'the image-bombardment that is the televisual stream'. Within this lurid context, he suggests, Beckett's TV plays materialise an abstraction and 'blankness achieved against the odds'.¹⁷ Indeed, it is as if the lighting of *Ghost Trio*, which is 'faint, omnipresent. No visible source', and its representation of an '[o]paque sheet of glass',¹⁸ reproduces, through precise technical work, the blank-grey screen of the television set on which the play would have been received, but before it had warmed up enough to transmit expected levels of contrast.

Rosalind Krauss has suggested that Beckett can be understood as part of an artistic tradition of 1960s and 1970s minimalism precisely because of his commitment to abstraction and the monochrome. She describes Sol LeWitt's double page spread in *Harper's Bazaar* (April 1969) that marked the occasion of Beckett's publication of *Come and Go* as a 'linear hive'¹⁹ – a matrix or grid of squares, some shaded grey with geometric lines, others encasing Beckett's text – that expressed both artists' shared interest in an 'intellecto-conceptual approach' rather than 'colore – the representation of atmosphere and rich texture'.²⁰ But I would argue that Beckett's commitment to the labour of the monochrome marks his attention to a belated but ongoing temporality that is not without atmosphere. Affect is not simply drained off; instead, in the mid-to-late work Beckett uses an attention to the shading of intensity of atmosphere to measure and articulate grey on grey differences that cannot quite be called differences in kind, but that persist and are shaded within an ongoing duration that may merely have the appearance of indifference.

In 1961, Beckett described his work as inhabiting what we might think of as a grey zone shaded in both darkness and light:

If life and death did not both present themselves to us, there would be no inscrutability. If there were only darkness, all would be clear. It is because there is not only darkness but also light that our situation becomes inexplicable [. . .] The question would also be removed if we believed in the contrary – total salvation. But where we have both light and dark we have also the inexplicable. The key word in my plays is ‘perhaps’.²¹

By Beckett’s own account, this is a greyscale environment denuded of its poles: black, or the total absence of transmitted or reflected light, and white, the total transmission or reflection of light at all visible wavelengths. But there is also a temporality to be teased out of this greyscale. For there is little sense of a progressive movement towards enlightenment or what we might think of as the promise of modernity evoked in Beckett’s account; although neither is there a possibility of the black negation of absolute obliteration or extinction that modernity can produce through its technologies of industry and war. We are, instead, in a ‘perhaps’ that is more like a meantime – a stretched duration of decrepitude that endures in the wake of a former life or disaster in the past, but that also waits in the shadow of a dissolution to come. The grey time of this life limps on chronically, waiting and persisting in stable but slowly worsening conditions, without the hope of either cure or death.²²

It is worth noting that grey is not, strictly speaking, a colour at all: it is, rather, a shade. It is achromatic: composed of black and white in various shades of intensity rather than hues. Grey time, which would also be neither simply black nor white, nor coloured with stable or easily determinable affect,

might then usefully be described as *anachromistic*. In reaching for this neologism, I recognise that there is some crossover between the idea of a temporal ‘colour’, or temporal ‘shade’, produced by an aesthetic object and materialised within a perceiving subject and Ben Anderson’s work on atmosphere. Anderson describes atmospheres as emerging in the interstices and relations between object and subject:

Atmospheres require completion by the subjects that ‘apprehend’ them. They belong to the perceiving subject. On the other hand, atmospheres ‘emanate’ from the ensemble of elements that make up the aesthetic object. They belong to the aesthetic object. Atmospheres are, on this account, always in the process of emerging and transforming.²³

But whereas Anderson pays attention to ‘the intensive spatialities of atmospheres’,²⁴ my wager is that a particular form of intensive temporality – one that both belongs to and transverses the perceiving subject and aesthetic object – might be focalised through an attention to colour or, in this case, shade. I want to argue that in Beckett’s grey we find emerging into perception an intensive temporality that has a kinship with anachronism – a chronological inconsistency that is, at least etymologically, ‘against time’ as it is usually arranged. To speak of grey time as *anachromistic*, then, is to evoke an aesthetic experience that is against clear colour or hue, but, as with anachronism, also produces a slub in the fabric of time as it is usually thought. The double gesture of the term *anachromism* is the attempt to speak to time’s intensity rather than, as is more usual, concentrating on its flow,

movement or progression, while trying to capture an atmosphere where there is an explicit weaving or binding in of blank, uncertain, colourless ‘colour’ and affect into what is felt of time.

From the Blue Hour to an Ashen Sun

How might we describe the intensive qualities of time? It is common to make a distinction between measuring time’s quantity and anatomising its qualities, to note the difference between clock time and the human experience of duration and to use metaphor as a way of feeling towards the felt qualities of time. Clock time is most frequently described in a lightly metaphorised fashion; time is spoken of as being short and long, as if always already measured. Duration tends to be described according to a more heavily metaphorised texture, however: it can be smooth, flowing, jagged, bumpy, frayed, stretched, sticky, stuck, solid, or perhaps even friable. Less commonly, temporality can be described in terms of its intensity: full, empty, saturated, diluted, dispersed. Even more unusually, there are occasions when temporal intensity can seem to take on a colour, a hue.

Various empirical studies of the effect of colour on time perception have shown that long-wavelength colours such as red seem to precipitate feelings of excitement that quicken the sense of time’s passage, while short-wavelength colours such as blue are perceived as more relaxing, seeming to stretch the perception of the length of a stimulus.²⁵ And in terms of Western cultural figurations of time and colour, it is the blues that have come to be associated with extended and extensive experiences of temporality – with longing. Joan Didion has written of the blue hour, the gloaming, ‘*when the twilights turn long and blue*’,²⁶ as a kind of waiting time that contains a promise of what is to come, but that is always already in the penumbra of future losses and

dissolution. In 1912, Jacques Guerlain was inspired by the same suspended moment, composing the perfume *L'heure Bleue* to capture the time in which the sun has set but night has not yet fallen. But *L'heure Bleue* is now viewed as a deeply melancholic scent, evocative of the dying years of what later came to be imagined as the Belle Epoque – that lost time after the end of the Franco-Prussian War in 1871 but before the Great War came to shade so many twentieth-century optimisms. Grey seems much closer to blue than to red hues, and in its suspension, in its waiting, grey time might have something of the double articulation of optimism and a proleptic sense of loss of the blue hour. But it has little of blue's romanticism or seductive, nostalgic melancholy. Instead, the atmosphere of grey time, while not without shades of intensity, is never certain of its qualities. It becomes hard to say that grey time has any essential hue.

Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, written in French in 1948 and linked to Beckett's experiences of living in Occupied France in World War II, describes a grey zone: 'Nothing happens, nobody comes, nobody goes, it's awful!'²⁷ Every possibility on the horizon of the play is blanked out by the refrain: 'we're waiting for Godot'. Neither weak enough to give up, nor strong enough to leave, Vladimir and Estragon stand, or sit, and wait. Pozzo enters and imagines that night will burst as a relief through a sky that is gradually being stripped of colour and vividness, that is 'losing its effulgence'. All begins to 'grow pale [. . .] pale, ever a little paler, a little paler until [. . .] pppfff! finished! It comes to rest.'²⁸ For Vladimir and Estragon, waiting under these conditions, where night or Godot might be imagined to come 'just when we least expect it', is tolerable, at least for a time:

ESTRAGON: So long as one knows.

VLADIMIR: One can bide one's time.

ESTRAGON: One knows what to expect.

VLADIMIR: No further need to worry.

ESTRAGON: Simply wait.²⁹

But later this idea fades out as knowing what to expect dissipates. Waiting starts to shift into something less orchestrated around rhythmic diurnal poles of light and dark. As Vladimir puts it, when he thinks Godot has arrived (though it is actually Pozzo), '[t]ime flows already again. The sun will set, the moon will rise, and we away . . . from here.'³⁰ But this comes as a relief from that waiting into which they have inexorably been shading – a waiting that is no longer endurable because the *for* has dropped out into an ellipsis: 'We are no longer waiting alone, waiting for night, waiting for Godot, waiting for . . . waiting.'³¹

The arrival of Pozzo is, of course, a false dawn (or dusk). Pozzo is not Godot; the waiting is not finished. There is a suggestion that there was once a twilight where one could confidently wait for night to fall, where a decadent 'losing heart' could have been an achievement. But Vladimir states that crepuscular decadence is no longer possible in this century: 'We should have thought of it a million years ago, in the nineties.' For the postwar is no longer the Belle Epoque in which Vladimir and Estragon remember themselves '[h]and in hand from the top of the Eiffel tower [opened 1889], among the first. We were presentable in those days.'³² Instead they are suspended, in a stuttered repetition that cannot progress; they are 'waiting for . . . waiting'. And in this cryptic utterance we see the condition from which night, Godot and the diversions of others have merely been distracting them. The *for* drops away, leaving, simply, waiting 'in the midst of nothingness'.³³ The French title *En attendant Godot* indeed captures rather better than the English the fact that Godot's arrival will never be the main act of this play; instead, attention will be funnelled towards

what might go on *while waiting* for Godot.³⁴ *Attendre*, and the more obvious presence in French of the link to the Latin *tendere*, to stretch, also evokes a sense of an attenuated present pulled thin between the ever-widening poles of an unrecoverable past and ungraspable future, even though the scene is never quite vivid enough to achieve the bluesy certainty of longing.

The waiting time of *Godot*, which might also be marked as a grey time, has often been read in terms of its metaphysics of temporality; but, as more recent criticism and many productions have emphasised, it was also an attempt to explore what it meant to live in a socio-historical moment following World War II that seemed like an abandoned present, denuded of a future that might be seized. Although written following the Allies' victory and in a time of rebuilding, *Godot* was a postwar settlement that anatomised what it meant to live on in the wake of an unnamed, unnameable, unchanging disaster. As Alain Badiou implies, following a reference to *Godot*, this may have been a sensation born of historical circumstances, but it comes to feel total: 'Yes, the century is an ashen sun.'³⁵ *Endgame* (1957) similarly plays out in the grey wake of an unfolding disaster in which, looking both forwards and backwards in time, all the characters become like Hamm's imagined and 'appalled' madman who can only drop his gaze: 'All he had seen was ashes.'³⁶ Clov peers into the outside world with his telescope. To Hamm's surprise it is no longer night or day, it is 'GRREY!': '[I]ight black. From pole to pole.'³⁷ It is clear that '[o]utside of here it's death',³⁸ and the play has variously been read as a displaced account of World War II, an invocation of the Irish Potato Famine of just over a hundred years previously (a hole in historical time into which the lives of a million were swallowed),³⁹ and an anxious anticipation of a global nuclear holocaust that would reach beyond the ruined cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. But the historical specificity of such scenes is declined in the play, as is progress or regress; instead, time gathers as a mix of unclearly

differentiated particles: 'Finished, it's finished, nearly finished, it must be nearly finished. [Pause.] Grain upon gain, one by one, and one day, suddenly, there's a heap, a little heap, the impossible heap.'⁴⁰

These opening lines of *Endgame* show that, from the start, there is a movement from order to disorder, towards shades of undifferentiation. This movement mimes the second law of thermodynamics discovered and articulated in the mid-nineteenth century: the idea that the total entropy of an isolated system always increases over time, with the movement towards a disorganised state and eventually to the stillness of heat death marking the arrow of time and the future as inevitable dissolution. We know from his notebooks that Beckett was influenced by technical discussions of entropy,⁴¹ and the movement from colour to grey explicitly acts as both a marker of the increase in entropy and an arrow of time in one of Beckett's late explorations of a square of dust. *Quad* was written in 1980 but Beckett directed, altered and extended it by adding a second part for the German TV company Süddeutscher Rundfunk in Stuttgart in 1981. *Quadrat I* seems unusually fast, noisy and colourful for a Beckett play; but when Beckett saw the playback on a black and white monitor he perhaps saw an echo of more familiar ground. 'Yes, marvellous', he said: 'it's 100,000 years later'.⁴² The actors were called back for another shoot; this time, though, the footage was printed in black and white. *Quadrat II* thus has 'no colour, all four in identical white gowns, footsteps only sound, slow tempo, series 1 only'.⁴³ There is an implied entropic decline within the repeating series, as if the intrinsic motor energy, or perhaps the atomic energy within these figures, is winding down towards heat death. As a 'quadrat' is a small area of habitat typically of one square metre acting as a sample to ascertain the distribution of plants or animals, the plays suggest mere snapshots from a sequence in which time is not looped but extenuates itself out into geological tracts. One hundred thousand years

is a waiting time beyond historical imagining; nevertheless, the second half of the twentieth century explicitly forced this deep time into consciousness. As John Beck has argued:

While nuclear war promises to end time, radiation lasts a long time, and the dilemma of how to imagine the persistence of contaminated matter surviving intact for thousands of years is barely more manageable than conceiving the devastation of nuclear war itself. The intervention of nuclear energy not only introduces the reality of there being no future, it also delivers an irreversible future of waste.⁴⁴

Stilling, but not stilled, the grey dust of *Quadrat II* is that of a 'half-life': a future that is both cancelled and yet endures, even if only minimally, under the grey light of an ashen sun.⁴⁵

Beckett only experimented with one text where ongoing entropic time is replaced with the theoretical possibility of timeless, endless serialism. This is paradoxically achieved through the idea of the possibly endless repetition of finite elements. In 1969 Beckett wrote *Sans*, translated as *Lessness* in 1970:

Ruins true refuge long last towards which so
many false time out of mind. All sides
endlessness earth sky as one no sound no stir.
Grey face two pale blue little body heart beating
only upright. Blacked out fallen open four walls
over backwards true refuge issueless.

Scattered ruins same grey as the sand ash grey
true refuge. Four square all light sheer white
blank planes gone all from mind. Never was but
grey air timeless no sound figment the passing
light. No sound no stir ash grey sky mirrored
earth mirrored sky. Never this changelessness
dream the passing hour.⁴⁶

The word grey appears more times in this text than any other in Beckett's oeuvre (forty-four times in less than five pages), though that is at least partially because of its particular compositional structure. As Ruby Cohn describes it, the text consists of an arrangement of the sixty sentences and was inspired by John Cage's 'indeterminacy of composition'. Beckett wrote his sixty different sentences in six 'families', each family arising from an image. He then wrote each sentence on a separate piece of paper and twice drew them from a container in random sequence. This became the order of the 120 sentences in *Sans*. Beckett then wrote the number 3 on four separate pieces of paper, the number 4 on six pieces of paper, the number 5 on four pieces, the number 6 on six pieces and the number 7 on four pieces of paper. Again, drawing randomly, he ordered the sentences into paragraphs according to the number drawn.⁴⁷

Although greyness indicates a time left after the white walls that dominated the earlier cylinder pieces like *All Strange Away* (1963–1964) have fallen, the suggestion of fading in *Lessness* is overwritten by the idea of a repeatable series – an endlessness. The published version of *Lessness* is, after all, only one of the approximately 1.9×10^{176} possible versions, which can repeat endlessly. This indeterminacy of performance and the possibility of endlessness is dependent, however, on a repetition of the operations of random generation

external to the textual system. And it is this action that puts back in work and organising energy that acts against the thermodynamic movement towards disorder and heat death. In 2016, the theatre director Jonathan Heron released an online piece called *End/Lessness*; it uses recordings of the actor and Beckett scholar Rosemary Pountney reading out the sections from *Lessness* that are then played out according to computer pseudo-random generation.⁴⁸ The possibility of ghostly endurance is particularly emphasised by the fact that the pieces of text were recorded when Pountney knew her death was imminent.⁴⁹ But the piece is also not quite endless. Computer systems are not energyless or workless, despite an imaginary dominated by matter seemingly becoming immaterial – clouds and the ether. The material server power that underpins *End/Lessness* and our access to it puts back in work and organising energy into the online world and the online text; at least temporarily, it therefore opposes the thermodynamic movement towards disorder and heat death. The losses over time are also real and can be measured through intensity and affect. Rosemary is gone, which pains those who knew her, even as traces of her live on. Despite the repeated term ‘endlessness’, then, both Heron’s and Pountney’s *End/Lessness* and Beckett’s *Lessness* are only theoretically negentropic. The material text as given, as produced, published and read by material bodies, indeed suggests a time that inches forwards rather than repeats endlessly, backwards as forwards, through randomly generated equivalence. Instead, it is the intensity of *lessness* in the shadow of *endlessness* that is evoked: an *anachromistic* grey of modulating intensities. A grey on grey instance of difference is momentarily subtracted from endless grey, endless indifference, and gathered in a textual word heap.⁵⁰

This accumulation and overlaying that has neither the ‘colour’ of progress nor its absolute negation is suggestively illuminated by Rebecca Comay’s reading of Hegel’s famous assertion at the end of the Preface to the

Philosophy of Right that philosophy paints ‘grey on grey’. One of the significant things Comay notes about grey is that it has no dialectical opposite; as a consequence, it inhabits an anomalous position in terms of frameworks of historical time. Although she admits that a mixture of black and white may look like ‘the triumph of the ideal: the convergence of the dusk of sensation with the dawn of inner illumination, physical blindness with spiritual insight’, a far less affirmative reading is both possible and necessary.⁵¹ Comay describes Hegel refusing the fantasies of regeneration that philosophy might inaugurate as it looks back and forwards, flickering: ‘it paints, overpaints, and silently defaces as it mourns its lost futures and future losses’.⁵² Positioning itself in a crepuscular time that lingers, that is already anachronistic, philosophy instead paints ‘gray on gray . . . to mark the exhaustion of the present – a faded landscape in which there is nothing to take over and nothing to pass on’.⁵³ Hegel’s philosophy thus positions itself, Comay argues, like the modernity from which it emerges, as something that can neither end nor begin again. But just as modernity has its own specific temporal logic and historical consciousness, the invocation of painting ‘grey on grey’ also suggests a specific temporal aesthetic – an aesthetic Beckett might be said to inherit. Beckett renders this *anachromistic* temporality of grey time palpable across his texts and their embodied reception by exploring stilling, though never still or completely indifferent, shades of difference in intensity. Rather than chromatic difference or the difference in kind that could enable a sense of contrast, dialectical progress or the passage of time, grey time just accumulates; it gathers in an ‘impossible heap’.

It is worth noting that two twentieth-century philosophers have taken up Beckett’s resistance to dialectical logical operations and a progressive temporality precisely by aligning it with his commitment to grey. Alain Badiou describes Beckett’s work as an articulation of the truth of Being which is

constructed not according to the operations of difference, but through sameness – a Being that is ‘in-separate’, ‘in-distinct’, ‘void’, and figured through ‘grey black’:⁵⁴

It is a black such that no light can be inferred to contrast with it, an ‘uncontrasted’ black. This black is sufficiently grey for there to be no light opposed to it as its other. In an abstract sense, the place of being is fictionalised as a black that is grey enough to be anti-dialectical [. . .] The grey black is a black that must be grasped in its own arrangement and which does not form a pair with anything else.⁵⁵

Grey-black, which has no opposite, has no place in the dialectical progression of historical time; instead, for Badiou, Beckett’s grey-black marks out what inheres as singular and universal. In ‘The Exhausted’, Gilles Deleuze has also described Beckett’s resistance to dialectical operations dependent on differences in kind through his attention to a grey. But instead of Badiou’s sense that grey signals the universal, Deleuze uses grey to represent Beckett’s commitment to the exhaustion of all possibilities. The idea of ‘exclusive disjunctions’, where it could be daytime *or* night-time, one could choose to go out *or* stay in, shades into something different in Beckett’s work. Here, just as there can be no opposing dark with light, there can be no ‘orders of preference’.⁵⁶ And yet, as Deleuze notes, ‘one does not fall into the undifferentiated, or into the famous unity of contradictories, nor is one passive; one remains active, but for nothing’.⁵⁷ The possible is exhausted and yet distinctions persist, although they seem to create only further permutations rather than any kind of progress. Indeed, Deleuze describes the close ups of objects in

Ghost Trio as ‘homogenous, gray, rectangular parts homologous with a single space distinguished solely by nuances of gray . . . These objects in space are strictly identical to the parts of space. It is therefore any-space-whatever.’⁵⁸ Any-space-whatever, and yet I would argue that Beckett’s is a space, a world, in which particular, sometimes barely differentiated, bodies do still persist. They perceive and are perceived as and through shades of intensity. In the exhaustion of possibilities there are still bodies, there is still activity, one might say that there is affect and atmosphere, but it is ‘for nothing’.

Although Badiou and Deleuze are writing about Beckett in an ontological register, we have already seen that there is a way of thinking through the articulation of bodies as sites of intensity that ‘remain active, but for nothing’ in more psychosocial and historical terms. The final part of this chapter will examine grey time and Beckett’s *anachromism* in relation to bodies that subsist with their intensities and affects beyond the immediately postwar moment. In the following section I will explore how experiences and sensations of exhaustion and the uncontrasted come to characterise the contemporary moment of late liberalism in which historical progress appears to have stalled. Stripped of the oppositions from which a feeling of dialectical movement could emerge, but marked but differing gradations of intensity, I want to argue that late liberalism can also be characterised as a grey time that accumulates rather than passes – a grey time to which Beckett’s work still seems to speak.

The Meantime

In her book *Enduring Time*, Lisa Baraitser describes and contributes to a body of work in social theory that pays attention to the temporal contradictions of late capitalism in which clear acceleration plays out alongside a sense of a future that can no longer unfold:⁵⁹ the ‘slow violence’ of climate change and

the irreversible loss of biodiversity in the Anthropocene;⁶⁰ the ‘slow death’ of bodies worn out under the conditions of capital in which agency must be rethought as maintenance rather than making;⁶¹ the ‘new chronic’ in which individual bodies and whole societies are managed in continual states of crisis that perpetuate injustice and exclusion;⁶² and the ongoing effects of violence in the wake of slavery and settler colonialism.⁶³ While the chronic injustices of wage slavery and new forms of transgenerational debt bondage play out at a social level,⁶⁴ ‘deep time’ violence is produced by the ongoing effects of nuclear waste that will endure beyond human timescales.⁶⁵ As social theory articulates it, the sensation of the ‘slow cancellation of the future’ that Franco ‘Bifo’ Berardi describes emerged in the 1970s and 1980s to overwrite Marxist commitments to dialectical progress and bourgeois beliefs in a progressive future of welfare and democracy.⁶⁶ But this sensation has only accelerated since the financial crash, with a paradoxical accumulation of ever-new ways in which the future comes to feel stalled and replaced by heaps of lost futures and future losses, to borrow Comay’s phrase. But the result is not an experience of indifference. Instead, this sense of accumulation might be captured through an idea of the intensification of the affective experiences of ‘cruel optimism’ and ‘slow death’ – the promise of ‘the good life’ upon which late capitalism rests and the reality of brutal forms of exclusion from any future that could come to change the conditions of the present or into which one could step.⁶⁷

The continuing resonance of Beckett’s work in this present, as it echoes beyond its postwar moment, in some ways seems obvious. Alongside the glimpse of the deep time violence of a future of nuclear waste, ‘slow death’ and forms of lateral agency seem fair descriptions of the chronic decline endured by the characters while waiting in *Endgame*. Theirs is, indeed, ‘a meantime with no end’.⁶⁸ ‘Outside of here it’s death’, states Hamm, while Clov, seemingly

indentured to serve Hamm as a child, concurs that this is a 'corpsed' world that lives on in the wake – becoming gradually denuded of life in a future of unceasing environmental degradation and extinction. Hamm's fantasy that '[y]ou can make a raft and the currents will carry us away, far away, to other . . . mammals' is clearly only that.⁶⁹ In *Happy Days* (1961), Winnie persists with her daily routines in the face of the slow violence of being buried up to her waist and then neck in scorched earth. She endures amidst the detritus of a bourgeois life and a heap of grey time that will not pass, and on an earth inching towards extinction. *Footfalls* (1976) also centres on a middle-aged woman, May, but unlike Winnie she is dressed in grey tatters and pacing back on forth on stage. She endures an ongoing demand of care for an aged mother who is now only a voice, but whose chronic condition will never be released in death – there will only be more of the same. Voice (the mother) indeed insists on the endlessness of the demand of care that is both produced by and oddly seems to create the grey time of waiting and reciprocal violence and maintenance in which both women are suspended: 'Will you never have done? [. . .] Will you never have done . . . revolving it all? [. . .] In your poor mind.'⁷⁰

It is certainly true that the temporal measures that mark the timescapes of the natural world and those of industrialised modernity have fallen away in the '[g]rey light' of these plays.⁷¹ But what are the loci of intensity that remain? In a time in which the distinctions between night and day, but also work and leisure or play, are subject to collapse, keeping occupied or passing the time together, as bodies in proximity to one another, marks the quality of this time seemingly without definable qualities. In *Endgame*, Clov tells Hamm there is no more painkiller; indeed, all the things they may have once been waiting for have been exhausted. And yet these figures are not indifferent to one another; they remain, they insist, 'obliged to each other', in both pleasure and pain.⁷² Intensity, alongside modulations of shades of difference,

are gathered up in and as social practices of dialogue, care and, frequently, violence. As John Cash has argued, one might read the waiting time of *Godot* (and indeed *Endgame*) as a specific dramatisation of how significance and relatedness are forged in the social world:

Beckett's characters await, enter, dissolve, await again, and yet again, and enter, again, and yet again, a momentarily achieved sociality that, for that moment, displaces boredom, uncertainty, meaninglessness and the suspended time of waiting with the intensity of sociality, an intensity of caring and cruelty that achieves significance and establishes meanings, before itself dissolving again.⁷³

Continually slipping in and out of social bonds that are understood to be intermittent and incomplete, *Godot* shuttles between the interwoven social intensities that forge such bonds, alternating between violent master/slave relations and relationships of care. These embodied social relations in Beckett's work insistently dramatise the difficulties of interdependence, as they repetitively emerge into presence and fall back into forms of more muted relationality, of uncertainty and indifference, only to intensify again. Indeed, it seems to be Beckett's particular work to draw attention to what Baraitser describes as 'the shared management of vulnerable states',⁷⁴ where violence and tenderness play out as part of the impossible demand and work of relationality and reciprocal maintenance in a context where a future of finally reparative or fully destructive change is unavailable. Instead, in Beckett's grey time of modulating intensities we come to see what takes place *while waiting*,

and the peculiar homologies between the time of torture and of care time that both bracket off, at least temporarily, any different future. Torture telescopes time into a present of pain from which it must be imagined, at least in the moment, that there can never be an escape. But as Maria Puig de la Bellacasa has recently articulated it, care time also ‘suspends the future and distends the present’, although it does so by ‘thickening it with myriad multilateral demands’.⁷⁵ Although in care time this suspension can be pleasurable, Puig de la Bellacasa acknowledges that it is also very tiring, sometimes even tiresome, to be ‘hovering and adjusting to the temporal exigencies of the care for’.⁷⁶ As all carers know, it can also feel like torture, in the moment, to wonder, as May does, if one will ‘never have done . . . revolving it all’.⁷⁷

In *Footfalls*, both torture and care bind daughter May and mother Voice in the ashen oval, with the tatters of May’s colourless dress signalling entropic decline and an arrow of time that cuts across the cycling of her pacing back and forth. For V, care is required/desired but somehow always ‘too soon’ – the same phrase Clov uses to deny Hamm his painkiller after Hamm has insisted on it, that it is ‘[t]ime enough’.⁷⁸ Voice may be in the process of becoming immaterial, but this changes little the demands of care – an injection, a change of position – of hovering and adjusting:

M: Straighten your pillows? [Pause] Change your drawsheet? [Pause]
Pass you the bedpan? [Pause] The warming pan? [Pause] Dress your
sores? [Pause] Sponge you down? [Pause] Moisten your poor lips?
[Pause] Pray with you? [Pause] For you? [Pause] Again.

V: Yes, but it is too soon.⁷⁹

As Puig de la Bellacasa suggests, such care ‘makes time’ of a particular kind that requires bracketing off, even if only as a temporary measure, other

orientations dominated by productivity and futurity, or, as *Footfalls* demonstrates all too clearly, the idea that the need for care could ever fully be met. Whether care is withheld or simply untimely, in the face of a lost future of change it is always ‘too soon’.

Beckett’s work insists on what it means to live and live on in an enduring time that does not unfold towards a future. But, as we have seen, the time that remains is also not free or unfettered; rather, time seems occupied. One remains active, but for nothing, to repeat Deleuze. One way to make sense of the ongoing relevance of the grey time of *Godot* to the contemporary moment is to explore the homologies between how time is occupied in a play that clearly invokes the trials of Occupation in France in World War II, and the new world of occupations that has come to dominate late liberalism. In *Our Aesthetic Categories*, Sianne Ngai describes how the category of the zany represents and critiques contemporary post-Fordist conditions of work and their impact on and use of affective life, by anatomising, through a simulated excess of effort and skilful representation of an almost mechanical movement, ‘a politically ambiguous erosion of the distinction between playing and working’.⁸⁰ Where automation has taken many of the jobs reliant on explicitly mechanical skill, post-Fordist labour conditions demand incessant and persistent adaptability – a flexibility with which the matter and rigidities of human bodies and minds fall very frequently out of sync.⁸¹ Ngai notes that labour conditions that respond to demand rather than scientifically managed temporal efficiency are concerned with the “‘putting to work” of affect and subjectivity for the generation of surplus value’;⁸² they thus reframe much work under traditionally feminised modes of service and care. As responsiveness, availability and forms of affectively intense labour replace clocking on and off, work often begins to mime social and domestic practices, though this also leads to the sensation of capital occupying all areas of human

life – of endless busyness in spaces and times that become uncontrasted, undifferentiated.

Now, perhaps a play like *Waiting for Godot* is not obviously zany, even as Ngai marks Beckett's general obsession with 'laborious and compulsive doing' that is at the heart of zany performance.⁸³ But *Godot* does speak to a place where the distinction between activity and idleness, between work and play, collapses in the face of a future that cannot simply be mobilised. And, when attended to closely, its slowed down vaudeville routines – the physical comedy of hat gags, kicks and falls – are a little zany, although it is zaniness scanned to a slower, profoundly extenuated tempo. They play with their food – their radishes and carrots – and try to put boots on as a way of passing the time, while also somehow being occupied by that time that remains:

VLADIMIR: It'd pass the time [. . .] I assure you, it'd be an occupation.

ESTRAGON: A relaxation.

VLADIMIR: A recreation.

ESTRAGON: A relaxation.

[. . .]

ESTRAGON: We don't manage too badly, eh Didi, between the two of us?

VLADIMIR: Yes, yes. Come on, we'll try the left first.

ESTRAGON: We always find something, eh Didi, to give us the impression we exist?⁸⁴

They wait, bizarrely, in a world of 'exercises' and 'appointments' – in the grey shade of the language of another world – with those modulated affective intensities of care and carping, play and torture. That which goes on *while waiting* becomes the work these characters do.

As Sarah Sharma argues in relation to the time of labour, it is vital to remember that ‘time is worked on and experienced at the intersections of inequity’, as ‘bodies are differently valued temporally and made productive for capital’.⁸⁵ As Sharma outlines, the sped-up lives of twenty-first-century business people who move, greily jet-lagged, through airport hotels at every hour, inhabit a particular temporality serviced by others who wakefully wait and adjust their time and rhythms to attend to them. Taxi drivers in North American cities, who are almost invariably recently immigrated, waiting for citizenship or status, similarly serve travellers and the expectation that ‘certain bodies recalibrate to the time of others as a significant condition of their labor’.⁸⁶ The experience of waiting necessarily plays out differently (and differentially) across raced, sexed, aged and classed bodies. From a social point of view, there is no universal waiting time – no undifferentiated grey. Waiting and living while Black, alongside dying while black, remain significantly different to living and dying while white.⁸⁷ Beckett’s bodies on stage are frequently marked in the play texts by gender, age and even the propos of social class, but race is never articulated. But as Wendell Pierce’s and J. Kyle Manzay’s portrayals of Vladimir and Estragon in Paul Chan’s 2007 post-Hurricane Katrina New Orleans production of *Godot* have demonstrated, specific bodies and sites gather up particular affective intensities.⁸⁸ Everyone waits; maybe it is even possible to say, as Baraitser and Brook have recently done, that this moment of the early twenty-first century can be described as one in which individuals and whole populations are left permanently waiting;⁸⁹ but bodies are also marked differentially, gathering together specific historical and individual experiences. Raced bodies come to experience the reverberations of waiting differently, bringing to the threshold of perception very particular shades of grey.

Everyone waits, then, but there are multiple meantimes. For example, Amy Elias describes the ‘techno-duration’ produced by the universal medium of

digital connectivity and the presentness of information in the blue-grey light of the screen. Past and future are no longer contrasting vectors in relation to historical time; instead, they ‘signal a doubled movement of simultaneous futurity and historicity that provokes an image of “moving stasis” compatible with techno-durational “presentism”’.⁹⁰ ‘Moving stasis’ has a certain kinship with what Ivor Southwood describes as the ‘non-stop inertia’ of neoliberal life and labour under conditions of austerity – being ceaselessly occupied by modes and practices designed to maintain enduring states of poverty that are neither simply working nor its other; instead, they are uncontrasted.⁹¹ And, as Baraitser has shown, in this timescape that feels ‘relentlessly driven and yet refuses to flow’,⁹² there is something significant about the persistence of experiences of enduring and sustaining, in which temporality inheres within relations between self and other that maintain a psychosocial world always on the cusp of dissolution and beginning again, rather than a sense of dwelling securely or progressing through time. This is a time without graspable qualities or hues: it is not a time of contrasts that might produce sensations of dialectical progress. Nevertheless, as Beckett’s work demonstrates, it is a time marked by shifting psychosocial greyscale intensities – intensities felt by bodies across acts and relations of care and of violence seemingly without end – an ‘impossible heap’ that produces an *anachromistic* interruption, a stutter in the purposive passage of time as it is usually accounted for.

It may seem anachronistic to read Beckett’s plays alongside a world of labour and occupations he hardly could have imagined; but it is clear enough that his works have not left us. The ‘Staging Beckett’ Project has mapped 3,715 productions of Beckett’s work in the UK and Ireland alone, with little sign of these performances dwindling in the contemporary moment.⁹³ Instead of reaching for universalist explanations of Beckett’s peculiar endurance, I have wanted to suggest here that the temporality calibrated under greyscale

intensities that characterise our current times has odd but revealing precursors in the interruptions of the historical time of the modern that were filled by Beckett's texts of waiting. In the face of a future only imaginable in terms of the chronic, Beckett's plays force time to gather through a commitment to *anachromism* – an aesthetic that brings together and accumulates the intensities experienced as social and intersubjective bonds are made, broken and remade in the time that remains *while waiting*. And perhaps if we are looking to make sense of what is to be done in our current times, it is vital to understand something of Beckett's grey insistence and his aesthetic that never gives up on the nothing to be done.

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Notes

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3. See, for example, Enoch Brater, 'Beckett's Shades of the Color Gray', *Samuel Beckett Today/Aujourd'hui*, 19, (2009): 103–116.
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 10. Beckett, *Come and Go*, 355.
 11. Beckett, *Ghost Trio*, in *The Complete Dramatic Works*, 408.
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27. Beckett, *Godot*, in *The Complete Dramatic Works*, 41.
28. Beckett, *Godot*, in *The Complete Dramatic Works*, 37.
29. Beckett, *Godot*, in *The Complete Dramatic Works*, 37
30. Beckett, *Godot*, in *The Complete Dramatic Works*, 72.
31. Beckett, *Godot*, in *The Complete Dramatic Works*, 72.
32. Beckett, *Godot*, in *The Complete Dramatic Works*, 12.
33. Beckett, *Godot*, in *The Complete Dramatic Works*, 73.
34. Beckett translates Vladimir and Estragon's repeated lines, '[e]n attendant', as '[w]hile waiting'. Samuel Beckett, *En Attendant Godot* (Paris: Minuit, 1952), 128. Beckett, *Godot*, in *The Complete Dramatic Works*, 71.
35. Alain Badiou, *The Century* (Cambridge: Polity, 2007), 161.
36. Beckett, *Endgame*, in *The Complete Dramatic Works*, 113.
37. Beckett, *Endgame*, 107.
38. Beckett, *Endgame*, 96.
39. Sean Kennedy, 'Edmund Spenser, Famine Memory and the Discontents of Humanism in *Endgame*', *Samuel Beckett Today/Aujourd'hui*, 24, (2012): 105–120.
40. Beckett, *Endgame*, 93. In 1967, the land works artist Robert Smithson described a game in which a child runs first clockwise, in such a way that originally separated black and white sand begins to get mixed up, and then anti-clockwise: 'the result will not be a restoration of the original vision but a greater degree of greyness and an increase of entropy'. 'The Monuments of the Passaic, New Jersey', *Artforum*, (December 1967): 52–57 (56).
41. See Laura Salisbury, 'Art of Noise: Beckett's Language in A Culture of Information', *Samuel Beckett Today/Aujourd'hui*, 22, (2010): 355–371.

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48. <http://www.end-lessness.co.uk>. The use of pseudo-random generation emphasises the importance of running through all permutations without the repetitions that would be the result of pure random generation.
49. The website went live 'on the occasion of Pountney's death'.
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52. Comay, *Mourning Sickness*, 142.

53. Comay, *Mourning Sickness*, 143.
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56. Gilles Deleuze, 'The Exhausted', trans. Anthony Uhlmann, in *Essays Critical and Clinical*, trans. Daniel W. Smith and Michael A. Greco (London: Verso, 1998), 152-174 (153).
57. Deleuze, 'The Exhausted', 153.
58. Deleuze, 'The Exhausted', 165.
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61. Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011), 95-120.
62. See Cazdyn, *The Already Dead*.
63. Christina Sharpe, *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016); Craig Jeffrey, *Time-Pass: Youth, Class and the Politics of Waiting in India* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2010).
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68. Cazdyn, *The Already Dead*, 13.
69. Beckett, *Endgame*, in *The Complete Dramatic Works*, 109.
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