"how to dance / sitting down"

Aging, Innovation and the Graying of Disability"

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> "What is age anyway? Something you don't understand."
> – Leonora Carrington, *The Hearing Trumpet*

Abstract: *The topic of aging has been somewhat overlooked in disability studies, perhaps owing to the adage that "everyone is disabled if they live long enough." If the life course is simply a state of debility, why create a distinct category for bodily and sensory impairment? Disability in old age, I argue, is not a mark of precarity but of capability. The work of writers and artists who continue to experiment formally while becoming increasingly disabled in later years (Beethoven, Henry James, Merce Cunningham) offers an opportunity to complicate "late style" as developed by Theodor Adorno and Edward Said and account for the role of complex embodiment in the production of new work. Finally, I consider Samuel Beckett, whose characters are often aging and disabled and for whom bodily and sensory decline are central to their ability to "go on."*

Keywords: *disability; debility; aging; Samuel Beckett; "late style"*

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Precarious New World

In the spring of 2020, many of us became old. I don't mean that we became aged by exposure to COVID-19 but that we emerged as a distinct epidemiological category. Where elderly persons in a market-driven society are often invisible or else channeled into the ideology of "successful aging," we are now a statistical category, a vulnerable demographic that must be protected.[2] Our new visibility was registered in special elder hours at markets, meal delivery services, expanded on-line shopping, conversations with grandchildren through nursing home windows, and headlines like those in a *New York Times* article early in the pandemic advising "How to Protect the Elderly. "And an emphasis on the age and health of older political figures increased in light of their vulnerability to the virus. A 2020 cartoon featured the image of the then-living Chief Justice Ruth Bader Ginsberg floating in a bottle of hand sanitizer expressing, perhaps, the fervent hope that she could be protected through the duration and fight on through the next election.[3]

There is a more insidious undercurrent to the outing of aging persons during the pandemic concerning the bioethics of national identity. The paucity of testing equipment, masks, medical supplies, and hospital beds revived eugenics era concerns about who should live or die, who is "at risk" and who is "safe." Correspondingly, the Trump Administration was far more concerned about the economic bottom line than a vulnerable population. At a rally in Ohio Trump offered the comforting opinion that the coronavirus only "affects elderly people, elderly people with heart problems and other problems… But it affects virtually nobody. It's an amazing thing" (Bella: 2020). Notice the quick segue between "elderly

2 On "successful aging" discourses, see Hailee M. Gibbons, "Compulsory Youthfulness."

3 The hope this cartoon expressed could not stave off the inevitable. Ruth Bader Ginsberg died on September 18, 2020. Trump invoked vulnerable elderly persons in a campaign ad that depicted an older woman living at home alone when an attacker breaks in: "She's unable to reach anyone at 911 in Joe Biden's America," the ad read.

people" and "virtually nobody." His cancellation of nursing home oversight and infection-control regulations early in the pandemic, his refusal to receive counsel from epidemiologists and scientists, resulted in the illness and deaths of countless patients and helped to normalize an attitude that the disabled and the elderly were dispensable. Getting old in this climate can also mean getting dead. But there's a silver lining. The Lieutenant Governor of Texas suggested that older people should return to work and risk infection—as their "patriotic duty"—to save the economy for the younger generation (Rodriguez: 2020).

I introduce the contemporary pandemic here to suture the relationship between aging and aesthetic experiment, since those two terms resonate differently when the life course becomes, for good or ill, a site for social innovation and bioethical revision. In the name of progress, we have all become members of what Viet Thanh Nguyen calls "the precariat" (2020: 10). But I want to approach risk as an aesthetic imperative that is not a liability but rather a value, a state of being in "uncertainties, mysteries, doubts without any irritable reaching after facts and reason" as Keats famously said. Taking risks in art is the very requirement for change, even if—perhaps because—it is dangerous. Unlike the brave new world of Huxley's titular novel in which aged persons are sent to "dying hospitals" at age sixty, the precarious new world is one that embraces both the challenges and the capabilities produced by being at risk.[4]

The True Gerontology

Among the many depictions of aging humans in Samuel Beckett's *oeuvre*, perhaps the most moving is that of Nagg and Nell in *Endgame*. Forced by their son, Hamm, to live in trashcans and survive on Spratt's Biscuits, they emerge from time to time to reminisce about lost love and grumble about their lot. "Me pap," shouts Nagg, to which Hamm responds, "Accursed progenitor!…the old folks at home! No decency left! Guzzle, guzzle, that's all they think of" (9). Nagg and Nell in their ash bins reflect a

4 On Huxley's novel and aging, see Maren Linett, *Literary Bioethics* (2020: 61–88).

common belief, implicit in Trump's remarks that persons once past their prime have ceased to be productive. Theodor Adorno calls Hamm's treatment of his parents, the "true gerontology" (1998: 32). We could understand this as a statement about disability in Beckett's oeuvre in general in which aging, disabled, and dependent individuals are faced with the prospect of "going on" despite society's indifference. The "endgame" of *Endgame* is not the end of the game but the evidence of the game's potential repetitions—the life course reduced to an endless cycle of interdependent relationships.

Beckett's work in its entirety is a brief on the ideology of decline, often depicted as a comic attempt to confront what society regards as a tragic loss of power. Vladimir and Estragon in *Waiting for Godot*, Krapp listening to tapes of his past life, Winnie in *Happy Days* laying out her possessions as she is swallowed up by the earth. It is less often said of this narrative that it grows out of disability. In *Endgame* Hamm is blind and lacks the use of his legs; Clov has a stiff leg and is losing his sight; Nagg and Nell have lost their limbs in a bicycling accident. The ideology of decline is countered, in Beckett's work, by forms of abject dependency as characters create uncomfortable alliances with each other while waiting for Godot. "Uncomfortable" because dependency is often regarded as weakness or hated subservience in a society that values independence and autonomy. If we bracket such relations from the social contract, we fatally ignore, as Alasdair Macintyre says, the "virtues that we need, if we are to confront and respond to vulnerability and disability both in ourselves and in others" (1999: 5).[5]

Adorno's remark about "true gerontology" recognizes aging not as a biological but a cultural fact—a set of social meanings imposed on the aging body. When the body is no longer useful in a productivist society, it becomes a problem that needs to be diagnosed, medicalized, or institutionalized. In this respect Adorno anticipates more recent theorists who are challenging the binary of ability/disability by introducing

5 I have discussed Beckett's thematics of dependency in *Invalid Modernism* (2019: 83–101).

the term "debility" as a pervasive human condition of neoliberal society.[6] When personhood is defined by progress, privatization, and profit, the body, as Jasbir Puar says, "is always debilitated in relation to its ever-expanding potentiality" (2017: 13). In the US where universal healthcare is a distant dream, where medical costs are prohibitive, and where "compulsory youthfulness" dominates the media, debility is the unintended consequence of privatization and biopolitics.[7] We live, as Sarah Locklain Jain says, in "prognosis time" that defines life lived in a biomedical future: not quite cured while awaiting the next test, scan, or biopsy. Although Jain is using "prognosis time" to describe the uncertainties of persons living with cancer, the phrase has special relevance for older persons. When I retired from teaching, one of my doctors joked, "aren't you glad that you've retired? Now you'll have more time to spend with us." True enough!

While I welcome the challenge that debility theory offers by specifying the economic implications for and on disability, I worry that it will become a substitute for that term, effacing the long history of activism for disability rights and re-framing disability around frailty and vulnerability. Disability as a rights-bearing category has been a target of debility theory, since a key goal of achieving equal rights imagines an embodied norm to which all aspire. As David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder suggest, "neoliberal inclusionism tends to reify the value of normative modes of being developed with respect to ablebodiedness, rationality, and heteronormativity" (2015: 2). As a general theory of how neoliberalism interpellates bodies around a model of ability, debility generalizes a population on a wide spectrum of capabilities—from the prelingually deaf person whose first language is sign-language and who lives in a vibrant community of culturally Deaf persons to the late-deafened indi-

6 Although he is not associated with debility theory, Tobin Siebers in *Disability Theory* provides an early and important summary of the relationship between the two terms: "For better or worse, disability often comes to stand for the precariousness of the human condition, for the fact that individual human begins are susceptible to change, decline over time, and die" (2008: 5).

7 The phrase "compulsory youthfulness" was coined by Hailee M. Gibbons, "Compulsory Youthfulness: Intersections of Ableism and Ageism in 'Successful Aging' Discourses" (2020).

vidual who lives within hearing culture; from the person born with cerebral palsy to the person who develops a spinal cord injury later in life; from a person who lives with chronic pain to the person who lives with occasional migraines. And where do persons with intellectual or cognitive disabilities fit into the debility paradigm? Those of us who conduct our daily lives with a disability may find "frailty" or "debility" inadequate descriptors for our condition. We are not all living in a diagnostic present, nor are we passive before the neoliberal state of exception. This future targeted temporality, grounded (implicitly) in a medical model, may apply to able-bodied persons who fear the diagnosis of cancer or Alzheimer's disease, but it seems reductive to assume that we all are, to paraphrase Lauren Berlant, "haunted by the disability to come [while] disavowing the debility that is already here" (qtd in Puar 2017: 12).

Given the limitations of a debility-based theory of embodiment, I want to interject the word "disability" between two seemingly opposed terms—aging and aesthetic experiment—to emphasize that the relationship between them is always a matter of being at risk, of making one's bodily vulnerability a site for change and innovation. And this is important in relation to the debate over debility since the term stresses a socio-political rather than a bodily condition, a condition of "living toward" some kind of endlessly thwarted fulfillment rather than living with a form of "complex embodiment."[8] Artists who become disabled later in life not only live with various bodily and psychological impediments but also create new work out of impediments that defy traditional aesthetic standards for a given medium or genre.[9]

Disability studies has not always dealt with the aging body or the specific impairments and social barriers that attend later life, perhaps due to limits in the mantra that "we'll all be disabled if we live long enough."

8 On the debate between disability and debility, see Margaret Shildrick, "living on; not getting better" (2015). On "complex embodiment." see Tobin Siebers, *Disability Theory* (2008: 22–33).

9 On aging and innovation among older writers, see Herring (2015). See also the following: Gallop (2019); Hamraie (2015); Woodward, "Feeling Frail (2015); Gilleard (2016); Straus (2008).

This formulation, however therapeutic, tends to neutralize the differences of embodiment and the meanings that attach to them as we grow older. A broken arm from a skiing accident at age 25 is different than the same impairment due to as fall at age 75. To adapt Simone de Beauvoir, one is not born disabled; one becomes disabled culturally in a society that venerates youth, independence, health, and agility.[10] In the graying of disability studies we first need to interrogate the term "aging," which to most people implies the biological and physical process of getting older. But when does this begin? There's a birthday card that some of us have received whose cover reads, "Happy Birthday. You'll be hearing a lot of comments and wisecracks about the end of your youth, the waning of your powers, the unmistakable signs of advancing age and so on." And the inside of the card reads, "Don't pay any attention. 30 is a Great Age!" (Gullette 1997: 4). And as I can testify, the joke gets funnier with each decade.

What follows are attempts to look at "aging experiments" through the "late style" of older artists and writers and the representation of older figures in Beckett's plays. Both examples treat aging as a matter of recognition, where Subjects are formed through representation and are likewise constituted by those representations. We may all become disabled if we live long enough, but some may embody that recognition differently through an "unaltering wrongness that has style" (Duncan 2014: 57).

10 The cultural construction of aging parallels the "social model" of disability in which the non-traditional bodymind is defined not by medical diagnoses but by social barriers to access and accommodation. For those whose bodies and minds are in pain, whose medical insurance is in peril, whose access to medicines, clean water, and care are vulnerable, there is little comfort and knowing that our disabilities are merely a function of social opprobrium or architectural barriers.

Unaltering Wrongness

> It is toward the old poets
> we go, to their faltering,
> their unaltering wrongness that has style (57)

In his "Poem Beginning with a Line by Pindar," Robert Duncan's celebration of the "old poets" is specifically addressed to Walt Whitman, William Carlos Williams, and H.D., all of whom had strokes in later life that impacted their physical and verbal abilities. Duncan imitates Williams's post-stroke vocal slur by remembering,

> A stroke. These little strokes. A chill.
> The old man, feeble, does not recoil.
> Recall. A phase so minute,
> only a part of the word in-jerrd.
> *The Thundermakers descend*,
> demerging a nuv. A nerb.
> The present dented of the U
> nighted stayd. States. The heavy clod?
> Cloud. Invades the brain. What
> if lilacs last in *this* dooryard bloomd? (57)

Duncan continues with a litany of presidents ("Hoover, Roosevelt, Truman, Eisenhower") whose limited poetic potential contrasts vividly with Whitman's love for Lincoln in his elegy, "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd." But in imitating the aphasic difficulty of speaking, the errors in pronunciation that lead from "nerve" to "nuv" to "nerb," Duncan hears linguistic residues that reveal "recoil" in "recall." The "heavy clod" becomes the mushroom "cloud" that hangs over Cold War America in William's late poem, "Asphodel that Greeny Flower." The word "aphasia" is itself revealed in the phrase "a phase so minute," yet in such substitutions can be heard echolalic resonances of words hidden at the boundaries of sense. The American potential and inclusiveness, memorialized in Whitman's Lincoln elegy, give way to misspellings and misspeakings that embody the inadequacies of subsequent presidents

("Hoover, Coolidge, Harding, Wilson / hear the factories of human misery turning out commodities" [58]) at the same time that they enact possibilities of a new poetics by the then young poet (Duncan was 36 when he wrote these lines).

Reference to poets' strokes generates the patterned rhythmic structure of the poem, stroke upon stroke, a variable meter that occupied Williams's later musings on free verse rhythm. Critics have argued that Williams's speech impediment coincided with his typographical move to the stepped, triadic line in his late work. There is no direct evidence that impairment produces a new line, but it is important to recognize, as Charles Olson says in "Projective Verse," the limits that the body and breath impose on the poem. Poets of Olson and Duncan's generation seized upon precisely such limits as guides to new measures, lineations, and uses of the page. Or as Olson said, "Limits / are what any of us / are inside of" (1983: 21).

Duncan's poem reminds us that in speaking of an artist's late style, we forget that their innovations were often the result of a disability: cancer (Henri Matisse, Audre Lorde) deafness (Ludwig Beethoven, Francisco Goya, Gabriel Fauré) chronic pain (Frida Kahlo), diminished sight (J.M.W. Turner, Claude Monet, Jorge Luis Borges, John Milton), dementia (Willem deKooning, Aaron Copeland, George Oppen) severe arthritis (Merce Cunningham, Pierre-August Renoir, Henry James). It is tempting to place a triumphalist narrative on the late work of such artists and describe how they "overcame" challenges, but this denies the aesthetic gains produced *through* disability. Two examples come to mind.

Beethoven's *Grosse Fuge*, op 133 (1825–6) might be a prime instance of a work whose radical structure almost certainly was influenced by the composer's deafness. Edward Said has written movingly about many artists whose late style was their crowning achievement, but he notes that "artistic lateness" may also be revealed "as intransigence, difficulty, and unresolved contradiction" (2008: 7).[11] Beethoven epitomizes these

11 Said notes that for Adorno, "lateness" is the idea of surviving beyond what is acceptable and normal [and] includes the idea that one cannot really go beyond

features of late style, but Said omits almost entirely the role of deafness in producing that "intransigence." And it is clear, thanks to a recent book by Robin Wallace, that as early as 1801, Beethoven was composing music *not despite* of but *through* hearing loss. The distinction is important. Originally intended as the finale to the String Quartet in B-flat Major, op. 130, *The Grosse Fuge* was written when the composer was almost totally deaf. Its dissonances, sudden shifts of tempo, leaping thematic figure, sudden silences and sheer difficulty are radical, even by today's standards. The work occasioned consternation in the Viennese Press, causing one journalist to remark that "it was incomprehensible, like Chinese" (qtd. in Wallace 2018: 182). But the reviewer understood its potential by acknowledging that "perhaps the time is yet to come when that which at first glance appeared to us dismal and confused will be recognized as clear and pleasing in form" (Wallace: 183). To describe the opus 133 fugue as a triumph over adversity ignores its evolution through hearing loss and equally through the anger and depression Beethoven experienced along the way.

Another case of late style as "disability gain" may be seen in the later work of Henry James, who, in 1897, at the age of 53, developed rheumatism that became so painful that he hired a typist to take dictation.[12] James grew to appreciate a technology that curiously allowed him to "speak" his novels, and since his various amanuenses became a kind of audience, to "perform" them. He continued to write letters in longhand, but with *What Maisie Knew* (1897) and *In the Cage* (1898) began to dictate most of his subsequent fiction. What Leon Edel calls the style of "The Master"—convoluted, long—often very long—sentences, filled with subordinate elements, indirections, pronominal confusions and parentheses—was enhanced by a technological prosthesis. James apparently became reliant on the rhythmic "click" of the keys on his favorite

lateness at all…"(2008: 13). But this could as easily lead to a disability analysis of late style as a critique of normalcy.

12 The phrase "disability gain" is a modification of "deaf gain" as formulated by Dirksen Bauman and Joseph Murray. It refers to the advantages and diversity offered by deafness rather than its limitations in a hearing world.

Remington typewriter—so reliant that once when it broke down and he was forced to use a substitute machine, he was unable to dictate.[13] Apparently, the rhythm of the machine contributed to the rhythm of his speech, as he paced the floor of his office at DeVere Gardens. He was aware that his ability to extemporize verbally had its limits. In a remark to his last typist Theodora Bosanquet, he said "I'm too diffuse when I'm dictating…. It all seems to be so much more effectively and unceasingly *pulled* out of me in speech than in writing." (qtd. in Campbell 2008: 209).[14]

That "diffuse" speech, as we now know, was that of a person with a stutter. Reports of James's speech concur on the fact that his sentences were often drawn out by "hems" and "mmmmm's" and "ah's" and other space-filling sounds characteristic of someone attempting to control a stammer. Although he never stammered in French, when speaking English he tended to elongate his words and sentences, with much repetition and deferral. Edith Wharton commented that,

> His slow way of speech, sometimes mistaken for affectation—or, more quaintly, for an artless form of Anglomania!—was really the partial victory over a stammer which in his boyhood had been thought incurable. The elaborate politeness and the involved phraseology that made off-hand intercourse with him so difficult to casual acquaintances probably sprang from the same defect. (Qtd. in Campbell 2008: 168)

The only record we have of James's speech is provided by his friend Elizabeth Jordan, who asked him whether he thought Savage Landor's *In the Forbidden Land* was a "true account." She transcribed his response:

> "[…] eliminating, ah-h—eliminating nine-tenths—nine-tenths—nine-*tenths* (slowly)—of—of—of (very fast)—of what he claims—what he claims (slowly)—what he claims (very slow)—there is still

13 On James' use of the typewriter see Edel (1969: 168).

14 Apparently, he thought of Bosanquet as more than a typist, inscribing a copy of one of his novels "from my collaborator."

> (fast)—there—is still—there is still (faster)—enough left (pause) enough left (pause) to make—to make—to make (very fast) a re-markable record (slow)—a remarkable record—ah—ah—(slower)—a re-markable re-cord." (Qtd. in Shell 2005: 45)

It is interesting to consider how a lifelong stammer might have contributed to the delays and deferrals in his last novel, *The Golden Bowl* (1904). In the opening pages, Prince Amerigo contemplates the romantic element that his American fiancé, Maggie Verver, brings to his European background. "Oh I'm not afraid of history!" she says; "Call it the bad part, if you like—yours certainly sticks out of you" (31). Against the phallic history that "sticks out" of him, the Prince is submerged, according to Maggie, in a salubrious, if figurative, bubble bath that "sweetened the waters in which he now floated" (32):

> Maggie scattered, on occasion, her exquisite colouring drops. They were the colour—of what on earth of what but the extraordinary American good faith? They were the colour of her innocence, and yet at the same time of her imagination, with which their relation, his and these people's was all suffused. What he had further said on the occasion of which we thus represent him as catching the echoes from his own thought while he loitered—what he had further said came back to him, for it had been the voice itself of his luck, the soothing sound that was always with him. 'You Americans are almost incredibly romantic.' (34)

The elliptical movement of the free indirect style captures the effervescent quality of the trope but knowing that this passage was dictated by a person with a stammer, its repetitions and delays reinforced by the typewriter's sonic properties, makes James's late style as much an elocutionary and technological phenomenon as a purely aesthetic one.

Krapp Sits

I want now to return to Beckett, whose representations of aging occupied him in all of his work, from the blind Mr. Rooney in his early radio play *All that Fall* (1957) and the nonstop "voice" in *Not I* (973) through the octogenarian mother in *Footfalls* (1976) and the aging unnamed woman in her rocking chair in *Rockaby* (1981). Given the attention that Beckett paid to disabled and aged figures, it might seem that they embody the condition of debility described earlier, a socio-economically imposed existential condition of being-toward-death. I see these figures not as signs of failure or frailty, but of capability: how individuals constantly revise the trajectories of "normal" human life to suit the lived condition of bodily and mental change. Winnie in *Happy Days* (1961) provides a tonic riposte to her own limited mobility, buried up to her waist in a mound of dirt, as she addresses her husband Willie's difficulty in returning to his den: "What a curse, mobility!" (1989: 46) The comic routines of Vladimir and Estragon, the formulaic dialogues between Hamm and Clov, Winnie's attempts to engage her husband Willie in conversation all reflect the human condition as an exasperated recognition of interdependent relationships. Beckett never offers a paean to solidarity or mutuality but strips humanist narratives down to their basic components: how to "go on" and by what means? What early critics of Beckett called his "absurdism" we might now call his realism. The palette from which he draws his monochromatic mise en scène is often that of disabled, older persons compensating not for a loss of power but for society's unremitting will to improvement.

It is worth remembering that in many of these works, Beckett experimented with new technologies in rendering voices that struggle to respond to the passage of time. In his radio plays, the idea of creating works for disembodied voices extended an interest already explored in his earlier prose fiction. In his 1957 radio play, *All that Fall*, Beckett uses the radio medium to create an acoustic environment of rural life—farm animals, creaking carts, conversations on the road—to surround the main character's concerns over whether she might disappear. Recording technologies allowed Beckett to penetrate an individual's psyche, using

tape recordings (*Krapp's Last Tape*), radio (*All that Fall, Embers*), television (*Eh Joe, Ghost Trio*) film (*Film* [with Buster Keaton]), and video (*Quad*) as extensions of more primitive stage forms. In his television plays, Beckett experiments with the claustrophobia of the (then small) television screen. In *Eh, Joe* (1966), the titular character is framed—trapped—by the camera's monocular perspective, (and pursued by an unseen accusatory voice). It follows him around his narrow room as he attempts to convince himself that he is alone.

My primary example, *Krapp's Last Tape* (1958), fuses this technology to the problem of aging by using a reel-to-reel tape recorder as one of the play's main characters. Along with *Happy Days* and *Play* (1963) *Krapp's Last Tape* is one of Beckett's "middle period" plays featuring a single voice speaking, unlike the more obviously dialogic *Godot* and *Endgame*. But the voice is never strictly monologic. We hear Krapp's voice on a tape recorder from his earlier life quoting lines from an even earlier tape, thus allowing us access to three stages as he ages. The premise of the play is an allegory of the life course: a man on his 69th birthday listens to a tape recording made when he was 39 describing himself as "Sound as a bell" in earlier life. On that tape he describes listening to yet another birthday tape from ten or twelve years earlier, admitting to his 39-year-old self, "Hard to believe I was ever that young whelp" (58). Listening to his earlier life through two prior stages allows him to assess his current predicament as a person who has failed in his literary career, his magnum opus never gaining him the reputation he desired ("17 copies sold, of which 11 at trade price…" [62]). He has become alcoholic and is hard of hearing, nearsighted, and lives with stomach and mobility ailments. By listening to tapes composed on prior birthdays he recognizes the paucity of his accomplishments. By making a new tape on this birthday, he hopes to summarize the year's key events, based on notes jotted on an envelope. But the earlier tape mocks those attempts. He gives up and throws the tape aside. *Krapp's* last tape, then, becomes the one we are watching.

Although Krapp sits throughout most of the play, he occasionally punctuates his monologues by leaving the table and retiring to a back room behind him. We hear him uncorking a bottle, taking a swig, and see him returning with a ledger that lists the dates and numbers of

his tapes and a dictionary that he uses to assist his failing memory. His monologue is constantly interrupted as he turns the tape back to hear a repetition of a passage, leaves the room, or unlocks a drawer in his table to retrieve a banana. Speaking of the play, Beckett noted that Krapp's "whole life has been an interruption," and indeed the play is very much about life as a series of interruptions, a retrospective rather than progressive life (Qtd. in Lawley 2005: 90). Temporalities become confused; the older Krapp reviews his earlier life via a young man's construction of a future. It is curious that when Beckett wrote the play, he had never seen or heard a tape recorder and so could only imagine the aesthetic uses to which it could be put. Stage direction for the play, "[A] late evening in the future" (1984: 55) refers to the fact that the portable tape recorder did not exist prior to the 1950s and thus could not have been used by the earlier Krapp. The failed writer, marking and storing his various tape boxes, playing and re-playing sequences, becomes an editor of his life.

At times old Krapp and younger Krapp share a laugh together, bringing the two identities together at a single moment, although this gives the source of the laugh a different valence. At 39 he laughs at his resolution to stop drinking ("And the resolutions!"). Hearing that remark at 69, the alcoholic Krapp laughs at the presumption he once had. We hear the aging process in their different voices, one youthful ("*Strong voice, rather pompous*" [1984: 58]), the other weathered. At 39 he is confident "full of fire;" at 69 he has become cynical and depressed. Alcohol has taken its toll on his voice and body; whatever sex life he once had—and it is prominently described on the earlier tapes—has been transformed to the tape recorder as a surrogate body.

We watch his gradual frustration and anger, fueled by his frequent taking of drams in the back room, as he realizes moments of loss. A visionary moment on a pier in which everything seemed possible, now seems a satire of failed hopes. An erotic moment with a young woman in a boat is reenacted as he moves physically to hover over the tape recorder:

> Lie down across her. [Long pause. He suddenly bends over machine, switches off, wrenches off tape, throws it away, puts on the other,

winds it forward to the passage he wants, switches on, listens staring front.] (1984: 63)

Not only is the tape recorder a mnemonic aid for a fading memory, it is also a prosthesis for the other's body, a vehicle of affective relations across time. Like Molloy's sucking stones that provide a sense of order to his otherwise disordered progress towards his mother, these prosthetic devices are emotionally charged. If they extend the decrepit body and mind, they keep the conversation going. The portable tape recorder, marketed for the first time in the early 1950s, is a device for capturing a voice, but that voice, when heard later, becomes a rebuke and scold. Yet it permits Krapp, by a curious inversion of its dark content to "go on," to fill time while sitting in an empty room.

"how to dance / sitting down"

Krapp composes his virtual life while sitting down, a condition mandated by his limited physical mobility and age. His condition resonates with my title, which comes from "Tyrian Business," one of Charles Olson's *Maximus Poems*. Olson is thinking of Martha Graham, and how the primitive violence of her dance embodies a certain American cult of action and energy. Speaking elsewhere of Graham, Olson says, "It is as though we [Americans] thought to slay the Dragon we had to be as violent and thrashing as he is.... They don't even know how to sit down, how to dance sitting down" (1971: 14). For Olson, dance becomes a model for poetry, a "dance of the intellect" as Pound described one aspect of poetry. It is worth thinking of this line in the context of Graham's most famous protégé, Merce Cunningham, who late in his life did dance sitting down.[15] As he aged and became more disabled by arthritis, Cunningham reduced his movements gradually until, by the end of his life, his choreography was restricted to complicated hand gestures. Nevertheless, he remained

15 Olson had been influenced by contact with Cunningham while at Black Mountain College during the 1950s and participated himself in at least one of the school's famous "Happenings," organized by John Cage.

an active director of his company, attending rehearsals daily and appearing in the company's performances. Where he had once been a vigorous and athletic member of the ensemble, he gradually detached himself, as Marcia Siegel says, hovering "in the background like an anxious chaperone" (1977: 252) He would occasionally enter into the ensemble to "tap someone on the shoulder to break up the sequence, or [pace] a difficult metre by clapping out the time" (252).

In *Loops*, which Cunningham choreographed as a solo work in 1971 and performed throughout his later life, the dancer's hands become the dancers. Although it was first designed as a full body dance, he gradually refined his movements to his hands while sitting in a chair.[16] Cunningham's face remained impassive while his hands performed a series of increasingly busy arabesques, loops and fidgets. His gestures might resemble manual sign language, but there was no semantic content to individual gestures. Or rather, the semantic content of these gestures was tied to movements in his long choreographic memory. Olson's trope of dancing while sitting down describes, for Cunningham, a form of choreographic intellection, acted out by hands and fingers and arms. And having watched a number of Cunningham performances throughout the 1970s and 80s, I recognize these gestures as those he introduced into his ensemble pieces, either by himself or other dancers.

The OpenEnded Group, a digital collective, collaborated with Cunningham on a digitized realization of *Loops* that was commissioned by the MIT Digital Lab in 2001.[17] Members of OpenEnded attached reflective markers to Cunningham's hands and had him perform "Loops" in front of infrared cameras, which recorded the markers' positions over

16 A rough cut from a film of Cunningham performing *Loops* can be seen on a You Tube video: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6snBoOfyypo. Accessed 20 November, 2020. I am grateful to Carrie Noland for her advice on Cunningham's late choreography.

17 The OpenEnded Group's film of *Loops* can be seen on YouTube: https://player.vimeo.com/video/25509279?title=0&byline=0&portrait=0. Accessed 20, November, 2020.

time using a form of digitalization called "motion capture." The resulting film fuses Cunningham's hand movements, stringing one hand to the next, so that movement in the left hand blends into the same movement in the right hand. The film resembles a galactic dance of shooting stars, fireworks, cells dividing, webs forming and disappearing, tracers shooting into space, explosions and tentacular linkages between various digits and hand movements. Imposed over the video is Cunningham's voice reading from his early diaries when he was a teenager, as well as selections from the composer John Cage's prepared piano works. It is a work that, although modest in scale, hints at ("loops" over) vast temporal and spatial distances, and whose intimacy recalls his long life with Cage, his now deceased lover and collaborator. Cunningham's late choreography derives from his increasing physical weakness, but out of that precarity emerges a kind of retrospective novelty, dance that builds on a lifetime of experimentation and curiosity about what the body can do and about hands as an expressive element in movement.

I have attempted to redefine the "true gerontology" that Adorno identifies with Beckett's aged characters to speak of the capabilities of old age. Disability and gerontology studies have not always coincided, the former focused around removing barriers and the limits of "compulsory ableism," and the latter focused on the aging process and its institutional meanings.[18] Critical disability studies has introduced an intersectional approach to disability, seeing it as the site through which race, gender, sexuality, and national origin are lived, but it has not had much to say about the intersection of disability and aging. If it did, the "graying" of disability studies might describe disability through one's life course and the various stages in which disability is experienced as one ages. And the graying of disability studies might offer a way of describing "late style" through impairments and limits that not only

18 On the differences between critical gerontology and disability studies, see Hailee Gibbons, "Engaging with Aging."

impacted that style but offered new ways of thinking about capability in general.[19]

I want to conclude on a personal note. My father lived to the age of 102. By the end he was almost blind from macular degeneration, crippled with arthritis, hard-of-hearing, and physically reliant on a wheelchair to get around. Fortunately, his mental faculties were pretty good, and when I told him I was working on disability issues, he wondered why that would be of interest to anyone. I pointed out that lots of people live with a disability, including him, but he rejected the idea, saying "I'm not disabled; I'm just old." I suspect that many people make the same distinction—that being old is a natural end of a continuum but having a disability is a tragic interruption or deviation. For a male of his generation, the necessity of hiring a full-time caregiver presented a disturbing challenge to his sense of masculine agency. He complained mightily about having to pay for such services, and yet he developed personal relationships with his caregiver that were probably as close and intimate as any he had with anyone, including my mother. My father's resistance to being defined as disabled suggests that the distinction between aging and disability is hard wired into our national psyche, at least in the U.S. When disability is seen a state of exception to the "good life," then we are indeed living in a state of perpetual debility.

The arts of disability offer an alternative set of scenarios and ways of thinking—what disability theorists call "cripistemology"—about futurity beyond the biocultural and that imagine other forms of kinship and association beyond the cult of independence and autonomy. Recent disability scholarship has focused on how nontraditional forms of embodiment—crip, cyborg, trans, queer—challenge the Vitruvian image of bodily perfection. What formalists call "experimentation" or "innovation" might be another word for capability—ways of living in the body we have, instead of the body we wish were better. It's hard thinking outside the narrative of ableism, but artists and writers who feature disability in their work show us a partially open side door. That way is to

19 The phrase, "graying of disability studies" is taken from Hailee Gibbons's "Engaging with Aging." I am grateful to her for her advice in writing this essay.

acknowledge our interdependency, our distributed subjectivity. As Clov is about to leave the room in *Endgame*, he and Hamm perform a little ritual of farewell that we know they will never complete. "I'm obliged to you, Clov. For your services," says Hamm, to which Clov responds, "Ah pardon, it's I am obliged to you." Hamm answers "It's we are obliged to each other" (1958: 81). If our worries about isolating aging persons from COVID-19 is any example, such mutuality might signal a truer gerontology.

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