

# Trauma, Body Movement and Mental Health: An Appreciation of Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*

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## Abstract

This article is intended to create an interdisciplinary space to enable productive dialogue about bodily representation of psychological trauma and its meanings in artistic, literary, visual, and health discourses, with reference to Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*. Drawing on Pat Ogden and her colleagues' somatic approach to trauma therapy and on Bessel A. van der Kolk's hypothesis that traumatic experiences of the past manifest in physiological states and actions of the present, the article views postures and body movements of the characters in the play as symptoms of psychological trauma. It shows how the play offers unique insights into the trauma pathology of postwar Europe, which may be valuable to psychiatrists, psychotherapists, rehabilitation workers, victim advocates, and students and interns entering the fields of mental health and trauma treatment.

**Keywords:** chronic abuse, collapse, foetal posture, "robopathology," trauma dance

## 1. Introduction

In recent years, bodily experiences as symptoms of mental illness have become the subject of increasing scholarly, medico-psychological, and political interest. Medical humanities or health humanities has also engaged in a cross-disciplinary dialogue about corporeal representation and its meanings in artistic, literary, visual, and health discourses (DeTora & Hilger, 2020). Discussing a literary text can indeed create a space for reflecting on clinical encounters in a way that is often not possible in a clinical context itself (Crawford, et al., 2015; Klugman & Lamb, 2019; DeTora & Hilger, 2020; Bleakley, 2020). In fact, the arts, such as dance and drama, have been employed as diversional and therapeutic interventions and activities, especially in mental health treatment (Crawford, et al.; Jones, 2010). Given this scenario, Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* that has produced a vast body of literary criticism, including diverse interpretations of non-verbal components in the play, still appears to be a thought-provoking text. The present reading is intended to view postures and body movements of the characters in the play as symptomatic of traumatized psyches. Beckett who had witnessed the three major upheavals in the twentieth century, viz. the First World War, the Bolshevik Revolution and its disintegration, and the Second World War presumably knew how the aftermath of violence found expression in postures and body movements of individuals trapped in a vulnerable position. When patients cannot find words to relate their experience, clinicians and mental health professionals often find clues in their posture, in the ways they move, and even in the limitations to their movement. In an interview, the psychotherapist Pat Ogden (2014) claimed that her approach is to examine "how the body processes information and how movement and gesture reflect and sustain psychological issues" (p. 3).<sup>i</sup> She looks at "habits rather than a specific content" (Ogden, 2014, p. 7). When a

client has a greater range of movement options — or “movement vocabulary” — they will have, she argues (Ogden, n.d.), more options for responding to life’s stresses, which can increase their resilience. Bessel A. van der Kolk has likewise noticed how the body of the traumatized individual keeps the score, and suggested that body-oriented therapies are predicated on the premise that past experiences are manifested in present physiological states and actions. As he writes, “The trauma is reenacted in breath, gestures, sensory perceptions, movement, emotion, and thought” (van der Kolk, 2006, p. xxiv). This article thus seeks to explore postures and body movements of the four major characters (Vladimir, Estragon, Lucky and Pozzo) in *Waiting for Godot*, in terms of the clinical insights of Ogden and her colleagues, and of van der Kolk. It also draws on Judith L. Herman’s (1992) idea of “Complex Post-Traumatic Disorder,” Lenore Terr’s (1991) conception of “Type II trauma,” and Sandra L. Bloom and Michael Reichert’s (1998) observations on the relation between violence and its aftermath. Furthermore, it intends to show how the play can aid and promote medical education and practice. It explores the possibility of employing the play as a therapeutic intervention and activity in the treatment of traumatized individuals.

## 2. Vladimir and Estragon’s Trauma and Body Posture

Traumatized people experience both avoidance symptoms, such as numbness and suicidal tendency, and intrusive symptoms, such as flashbacks and nightmares (Bloom & Reichert, 1998, p. 129; Ogden et al., 2006, pp. 4-5). When hyperaroused, the sensorimotor level of their brain processes information actively and triggers intrusive images, affects, and body sensations. But when hypoaroused, they experience numbness or an absence of emotion and sensation — a sense of deadness or emptiness, passivity, probably paralysis (Ogden et al., 2006, p. 26). In *Waiting for Godot*, the two tramps — Vladimir and Estragon — who presumably wait for Godot are noticeably traumatized individuals. Textual evidence suggests that they are the victims of chronic abuse due to their vulnerability to social and structural violence in the world they live in. They are, for example, almost regularly beaten by landlords as they seek shelter at night. They are also consumed by the fire of poverty: a full meal is a distant dream for them. When Estragon is violently hungry, the only thing Vladimir can provide him is the carrot or turnip that he carries in his pocket. Estragon lusts for even the chicken bones left by Pozzo the aristocrat. Notably, Bloom and Reichert (1998) have identified poverty as one of the “traumatogenic forces” (p. 9).<sup>ii</sup> Vladimir and Estragon’s chronic trauma finds expression especially in their body posture and movements. And Estragon’s foetal posture and Vladimir’s yoga posture have received special attention here. Although the focus of the article is on body movement of the characters in the play, this section does not discount such corollary avoidance symptoms displayed by Vladimir and Estragon as suicidal behaviour and memory problems. In addition to them, Estragon has his “private nightmares” that he wants to share with his old friend Vladimir, although the latter is reluctant to listen to their contents (Beckett, 2010, 1).<sup>iii</sup> Needless to say, nightmares are the key symptom of psychological trauma.

### 2.1 Vladimir and Estragon’s Avoidances Symptoms

In trauma pathology, numbness belongs to a dissociative or an avoidance phase in which unresolved traumatic memories do not return unbidden, but the victim feels “numb and detached, living ‘on the surface of consciousness’” (Ogden et al., 2006, p. 4). Numbness — a sense of unresponsiveness or barrenness, passivity — is the chief marker of the two tramps in *Waiting for Godot*. Like Oblomov in Ivan Goncharov’s novel, they lead “a passive, supine, acquiescent

existence" in a "semi-conscious state" and in which they are hardly aware of themselves (Cuddon, 2010, p. 295). These "hollow men," incapable of action, either good or bad, are condemned to a world where nothing happens twice, and have absolutely lost their faith in God who proverbially never repeats himself.

Many psychologists and clinicians have noticed an association between trauma and suicidality. Bloom and Reichert (1998), for example, write that "fast self-destruction through suicide" can be the extreme form of "avoidance symptoms" in individuals with histories of trauma (p. 129). In the following exchange, Beckett dramatizes how Vladimir and Estragon meditate their suicide:

VLADIMIR It's for the kidneys. [*Silence. ESTRAGON looks attentively at the tree.*]  
What do we do now?

ESTRAGON Wait.

VLADIMIR Yes, but while waiting.

ESTRAGON What about hanging ourselves?

VLADIMIR Hmm. It'd give us an erection!

[. . .]

ESTRAGON Let's hang ourselves immediately!

VLADIMIR From a bough? [*They go towards the tree.*] I wouldn't trust it. (1)

For Vladimir and Estragon suicide is a form of evasion, an escape from the predicament of being born. It would presumably allow them to avoid poverty, physical abuse and humiliation in life. In fact, everyday life in most parts of postwar Europe except the urban cultural centres like London and Paris was overshadowed by shortages and political, economic and social uncertainties (Bryden, 2010, pp. vii-viii). Metaphorically, they seek to evade the *angoisse* that entails their action; their suicidal thought is suggestive of their surrender to the absurdity of the world. For them life itself is sickness unto death. However, they fail to commit suicide and thereby put an end to their suffering. At the end of the play, when their waiting proves futile and redemptive hope dries up, they further revert to the thought of suicide as a means of release. Their failed attempts to commit suicide raise medico-legal, political, religious and ethical issues as well. In Beckett's time, suicide by hanging was still a punishable offence in Britain. Those who attempted suicide but failed could have attracted such severe punishment as imprisonment (Bryden, 2010, pp. xi-xii). It may justifiably be claimed that the play is an early instance of a commentary on the issue of decriminalizing or legalizing suicide and mercy killing or voluntary euthanasia.

Bloom and Reichert (1998) write that stress affects human memory processes in several ways. Victims of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) characteristically experience too much memory in the form of flashbacks, nightmares, or too little memory in the form of amnesia and other memory problems (p. 120). Vladimir and Estragon's attempts at recollection suggest that have very poor or defective memory. The following conversation demonstrates the fragility of their memory:

VLADIMIR Because he wouldn't save them.

ESTRAGON From hell?

VLADIMIR Imbecile! From death.

ESTRAGON I thought you said hell.

VLADIMIR From death, from death. (1)

Their memories associated with Godot also seem to be frail and unreliable. They fail to remember where they are supposed to meet Godot, or whether Godot has promised to meet them at all or not. The following exchange between Vladimir and Estragon may be noted:

VLADIMIR We're waiting for Godot.

ESTRAGON [*Despairingly.*] Ah! [*Pause.*] You're sure it was here?

VLADIMIR What?

ESTRAGON That we were to wait.

VLADIMIR He said by the tree. [*They look at the tree.*] Do you see any others?

ESTRAGON What is it?

VLADIMIR I don't know. A willow.

[. . .]

ESTRAGON A bush.

VLADIMIR A —. What are you insinuating? That we've come to the wrong place?  
(1)

Unable to recall even the happenings of yesterday, they are further confused about the promised day of Godot's arrival (1). Ascribable to the hypoarousal caused by the consequence of their traumatic experiences in this absurd world, their memory problems may be seen as another avoidance symptom displayed by them. Beckett's treatment of memory-related problems in the play thus provides us with valuable wisdom in understanding trauma-induced amnesia.

## 2.2 Estragon's Foetal Posture

Estragon's resumption of his foetal posture—his head between his knees—in Act II of the play implies that he usually sleeps in this position. It is commonly seen as something suggestive of the paradox of human existence — the womb as the tomb, life as death-in-life, the beginning as the ending. In fact, it is a psychobiological phenomenon attributable to the “traumatogenic forces” of the society to which he belonged, or rather, of every society any time. Estragon's body curled on the ground like a frozen foetus may be viewed as another symptom of his trauma—a response to an abusive condition. Sigmund Freud (1920/1955) has traced the origin of embryonic posture to the “death instincts” (p. 50)—the desire to return to the original state of stasis in the physical world when the biological entity is under extreme stress and debilitating threat. Also, there are other psychobiological explanations for such a posture. Psychobiologists like Mark Sutton (2016) have ascribed the foetal posture to the contraction of Psoas muscles which occurs as part of stress response, causing one to curl into a foetal ball or prepare one for flight or fight. Explaining the mechanism behind the foetal posture, he writes that, when we shake in response to a traumatic event, the shaking releases surplus energy produced in the body by the event and allows the brain to return to normalcy. Our brain, however, often overrules this shaking and thereby suppresses the release of the energy. This suppressed energy is stored in the body in the form of contracted

Psoas muscles leading to the foetal posture. Speaking of “emotional release techniques,” Jason Oddi (n.d.) writes how patients sometimes curl up on the therapy floor, “reflective of their pre-birth and pre-verbal foetal position, or do hand screams and feet stomping, pillow screaming or cushion bashing, angry writing or slow and soft sensate focused dance and touch.” When Estragon sleeps in the foetal shape, Vladimir goes over and sits down beside him and begins to sing in a loud voice. Often interpreted as a parody of the mother-child relationship, his lullaby may be viewed as an effort to heal the discord in Estragon’s mind. Evidence suggests that chanting and sound vibration have efficacies to bring back the harmony and flow of life into the patient’s soul (Brennan, n.d.;<sup>iv</sup> van der Kolk, 2015, p. 86). Vladimir’s lullaby presumably functions like verbal hypnosis. Needless to say, Estragon’s foetal posture offers us a deep understanding of body-related trauma responses and possible therapeutic interventions.

### 2.3 Vladimir’s Yoga Posture

Scientific research suggests that yoga (*āsanas*) and breathing practice (*prāṇāyāma*) are useful techniques for reducing stress levels in practitioners (Brisbon & Lowery, 2011; Shearer, 1982). Explaining the mechanism behind the efficacy of breathing practice, van der Kolk (2015) writes that inhalation and exhalation function like the accelerator and brake in our arousal system. When we take a deep breath, the SNS (the sympathetic nervous system) gets activated and the resulting burst of adrenaline increases our heart rate. Slow exhalation, in turn, activates the PNS (the parasympathetic nervous system),<sup>v</sup> which gradually slows down the heart (pp. 76–77). Here, Vladimir and Estragon who are presumably under stress and anxiety take recourse to physical and breathing exercises. The following exchange between them testifies to the fact that their physical efforts are some obvious stress release methods:

ESTRAGON While waiting.

[*Silence.*]

VLADIMIR We could do our exercises.

ESTRAGON Our movements.

VLADIMIR Our elevations.

ESTRAGON Our relaxations.

VLADIMIR Our elongations.

ESTRAGON Our relaxations.

VLADIMIR To warm us up.

ESTRAGON To calm us down. (2)

Vladimir thus hops from one foot to the other and Estragon imitates him. When Estragon gets tired and is out of breath, Vladimir asks him to do a little deep breathing. Then Vladimir does the tree posture, staggering about one leg and Estragon further imitates him. Vladimir’s tree pose has been commented on variously: apparently a game of children; an emblem of crucifixion; an attempt to be witnessed by God; one of the various forms of human suffering; a mode of redemption; and even martyrdom. Beckett himself, however, called it a yoga posture — an emotion release method. Yoga texts often describe *āsanas* or body postures in terms of plant life.

*Vrikshāsana*, or the tree pose, for example, involves standing on one leg with two hands folded in front of the chest and one foot at the root of the thigh. This game of balance releases tension and gives us the spirit of the tree. *Tadāsana*, or the mountain pose, which is basically a neutralising pose, is also very similar to the posture of the “tree goddess” depicted on one of the Indus Valley seals excavated at Mohenjo-daro (Dhyansky, 1987, p. 101). It is good for cultivating stillness, strength and relaxation. Thus, Vladimir and Estragon’s yoga postures are efforts to remove traumatic memory from cellular memory and hence positive responses to their traumatic experience. Derived from the Sanskrit root YUJ, “to join,” the word “yoga” means “union.” Yoga connects the individual with the rest of the existence. Indian mystic and yogi Sadhguru (2019) claims that Hatha Yoga, involving eighty-six *āsanas*, helps one align the human system with the universe. An *āsana* is a physical form of approaching this union between the inner and the outer, the individual and the universal. It is a useful technique to restore the balance between the internal and the external that modern man has lost. Sadhguru (2017) also holds that the spine is “the axis of the universe,” the basis of one’s experience. When the spine is erect, the mind which is parallel to the structure of the universe gets aligned with the universe, at its best. The tree pose that involves the erect spine is thus a powerful means to bring about a union between the individual and the rest of the universe. The traumatized individual is always the insulated one. Yoga postures may help the insulated get connected with the world. Viewed from this perspective, Vladimir’s tree posture is an endeavour to get connected with the world from which he is cut off. In a way the present text, by referring to oriental practices of yoga as methods of stress management, offers an alternative to the Eurocentric models of therapeutic treatment in mental health.

### 3. Lucky’s Trauma and Body Movement

Another chronically traumatized individual, Lucky is perhaps the most interesting character in the play. His case meets the first criterion of Herman’s (1992) concept of “Complex Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder,” that is, “[a] history of subjection to totalitarian control over a prolonged period (months to years)” (p. 121). In fact, Beckett himself was aware of the suffering of the people especially in East Europe under repressive regimes. In Lucky one may also find Terr’s “Type II trauma” symptom — alterations between extreme passivity and outbursts of rage. And his “robopathology,” frantic dance, and tirade as symptoms of psychological trauma have received considerable attention in this section.

#### 3.1 Lucky’s “Robopathology”

Ogden et al. (2006) write that “submissive behaviors” such crouching, ducking the head, avoidance of eye contact, bowing back before the perpetrator are reflective of traumatized psyches (p. 96). Also called “robotization,” or “robopathology,” a version of this condition is characterized by “mechanical behavior and automatic obedience, without question or thought, to the demands of the perpetrators” (Reichert & Bloom, 1998, p. 92). Lucky’s long, unconditional surrender to his master might prompt one to question his passivity and hence complicity in his fate. Estragon repeatedly asks the most puzzling question: “Why doesn’t he put down his bags?” (1). In fact, there is nothing but sand in his bag. Either he is unreasonably burdened by his master, or he voluntarily burdens himself to please his master so that his master does not sack him. This habit of carrying the load on his shoulder may be attributed to what is called “addiction to trauma.” Individuals who are exposed to repeated experiences of protracted stress and hence high

levels of circulating endorphins in blood may become addicted to their trauma or own internal endorphins and feel calm only when they are under stress (van der Kolk et al., 1985; Bloom & Reichert, 1998, pp. 137–138).<sup>vi</sup> Lucky feels safe only when the burden is on his shoulder and thus unconsciously longs for revictimization. Long exploitation by his master Pozzo has rendered him “[a] trifle effeminate” (1); his loss of masculinity meets Herman’s (1992) “Complex Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder” criterion (2) of alterations in affect regulation, which may alternately include compulsive or extremely inhibited sexuality (p. 121). Besides, the loss of his “dudeen” or humanity (1) conforms to “Complex Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder” criterion (4) of alterations in self-perception (Herman, 1992, p. 121). He presumably willingly accepts the “nonhuman identity” to which he has been reduced: a pig; a beast of burden with a running sore on his neck; an animal with “slaver” oozing out of its face (1), an animal with a goitre; a “panting” creature (1); a beast with “[g]oggling” eyes (1); a “puffing” whale (1); a hog. Alluding to van der Kolk (2015, pp. 76–77), it may be said that such little indicators as eye movement and pupil dilation, pitch and speed of the voice, breathing, swallowing and salivation may be significant factors in Lucky’s trauma pathology. Furthermore, Lucky’s “robopathology” suggests that mental health care has to take into account not only psychobiological changes of illness but also socioeconomic and political issues concerning illness.

### 3.2 Lucky’s Trauma Dance

From time immemorial, dance has been used as an expressive form to tell the story of traumatic events such as wars (Panos, n.d.). In Act I, Pozzo appears to be thankful to the tramps for their company and offers to entertain them by making his slave—Lucky—either dance, or sing, or recite, or think. Lucky’s body movement during his dance suggests that it is a form of somatic remembering. A combination of multiple dance forms—the farandole (a lively chain dance of Provencal origin), the fling (a short period of enjoyment, often sexual), the brawl (a violent fight), the jig (a quick lively dance), the fandango (a lively Spanish dance), and even the hornpipe (a fast dance for one person, especially of sailors), his frantic dance is characterized by what Herman (1992) called “compulsive sexuality.” Estragon sees his dance as “The Scapegoat’s Agony” (1)—something which conveys the pain of someone who is unfairly blamed. Vladimir describes it as “The Hard Stool,” suggesting that it conveys the pain of a constipated life (1.42). Pozzo calls it “The Net” (1) — it is expressive of the panic of man caught and entangled in a net and trying to escape it. Besides, Lucky’s dance is reminiscent of Edward Munch’s schizophrenic painting “The Scream,” expressing the anguish and horror of life in a metro. Seen from the perspective of somatic approaches to trauma, it is a reenactment of “the mammalian panic” as opposed to the reptilian unresponsiveness and immobilization, to use the words of van der Kolk (2015, p. 83). Lucky’s dance is thus a unique instance of trauma-induced body movement. Dramatic enactment of Lucky’s trauma dance may have a therapeutic effect on the audience.

### 3.3 Lucky’s Tirade

Lucky, who has formerly been an intellectual or a thinker, is coerced, in unmanly ways, by his master. Acting on the master’s diktat, he thinks aloud, or shouts his text, to further entertain the tramps. His tirade or thought speech is commonly interpreted as a parody of the traditional world-view, the origin of man’s religious thoughts, man’s relation to God and Nature. The present article, however, views it as a form of trauma response, an instance of what Ogden et al. (2006)

call “emotional arousal” (p. 11). Commenting on the nature and intensity of trauma-related emotions, Ogden et al. (2006) write:

Traumatized people characteristically lose the capacity to draw upon emotions as guides for action. [. . .] their emotions may be experienced as urgent and immediate calls to action; the capacity to reflect on an emotion and allow it to be part of the data that guides action is lost and its expression becomes explosive and uncontrolled. Through nonverbal remembering triggered by reminders of the event, traumatized individuals relive the emotional tenor of previous traumatic experiences, finding themselves at the mercy of intense trauma-related emotions. These emotions can lead to impulsive, ineffective, conflicting, and irrational actions, such as lashing out physically or verbally, or feeling helpless, frozen, and numb. Emotional arousal in an individual with unresolved trauma thus often provokes action that is not an adaptive response to the present (nontraumatic) environment, but is more likely a version of an adaptive response to the original trauma. (p. 11)

In fact, this invective is a modality of lashing out at an object. Like his dance, his tirade is a reaction to an abusive situation — a “trauma-organized society”<sup>vii</sup> that prides in its religion, academia, culture, economy, prophetic vision, and poetry. It mocks and disrupts the master narratives of postwar Europe. Interestingly, he cannot be silenced as long as his cap is on his head, and stops only when Vladimir seizes the hat as suggested by Pozzo. Such a behavioural oddity, needless to say, is attributable to some kind of psychological conditioning. In a way Lucky’s unpunctuated and rapid speech, which is apparently meaningless, comprises his disorganized “traumatic memories.”<sup>viii</sup> Further, his repetitive use of the words “Testew” and “Cunard” in the speech (1), which echo “testicles” and “vagina” in both English and French, may be seen as another sign of his compulsive sexuality. Like his dance, his tirade also meets Herman’s “Complex Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder” criterion (2). Such literary instances of trauma-induced emotional outburst may lend psychiatrists and psychotherapists a helping hand with valuable wisdom in tracing the origin of trauma responses.

### **3.4 Lucky’s Dumbness**

In Act II of the play, Lucky can neither sing, nor think, nor recite any more. Reduced to a dumb animal, he cannot even groan (103). His dumbness is commonly interpreted as the symbolic consequence of the slave’s un-protesting obedience to authority. Body-oriented approaches to trauma suggest that mutism is one of the symptoms of psychological trauma. In fact, there are two different memory systems in our brain — one for normal learning and remembering that is based on words and the other that is largely nonverbal. Our verbal memory is vulnerable to high levels of stress. Individuals overwhelmed with fear lose the capacity for speech — they fail to put words to their experiences (Bloom & Reichert, 1998, pp. 114–15). Thus, it may be assumed that Lucky’s chronic exposure to the state of slavery and exploitation makes him lose the capacity for speech. Such examples of mutism in the arts and literature are likely to add to the existing literature concerning trauma-induced trauma responses and relevant therapeutic activities.

### **4. Pozzo’s Physical Collapse**

Pozzo’s harsh and cruel treatment of Lucky in Act I impels the reader to see him as a perpetrator. He is an abusive master, an authoritarian ruler who must always be obeyed. But seen from the

perspective of “perpetrator trauma,”<sup>xix</sup> he is also a victim. He is traumatized by his own crimes perpetrated on his slave. His blindness and consequent sufferings in Act II may be regarded as the befitting punishment for his own treatment of Lucky. Pozzo’s psychosomatic responses—growing agitation and groaning — to Lucky’s tirade has already suggested that he is also capable of suffering. The present article thus does not rule out the possibility of looking upon Pozzo as a victim of “perpetrator trauma.” Pozzo’s blindness is traditionally interpreted as the symbolic consequence of the master’s blind exercise of power. Compared to the trauma he inflicted on Lucky his sufferings are no less. Unable to get up, he cries for help but nobody comes to his support. He writhes in pain, groans, beats the ground with his fists (2). His sagging or physical collapse is another significant form of body movement amenable to psychoanalytic interpretation (2). Notably, when Ogden assists helpless patients having trouble in a relationship, she observes how the body participates in presenting the problem. She usually notices “a collapse in the spine, perhaps an inability to reach out or make eye contact, or it could be mobilization [in the body] that kind of keeps people at a distance” (Ogden, 2014, p. 7). Reflecting on women who are in abusive situations, Bernice Michalecl (n.d.) often finds them to be “very still, unanimated and unable to relax into the chair.” She wonders if this does not amount to some sort of perpetuation of “the ‘walking on eggshells’ condition that is so prevalent in abuse and most especially emotional abuse.” Martha Peterson (n.d.) has regarded the collapse of the body as a startle response generated by “Sensory Motor Amnesia.”<sup>x</sup> Like traumatic amnesia or psychogenic fainting, it may also be another way of coping with overwhelming experience through dissociation. Alluding to the revelations made by Stan’s and Ute’s brain scans, van der Kolk (2006) ascribes the collapse response to the reptilian brain,<sup>xi</sup> which unlike the protective mammalian one is given to shutting down (pp. 82–83). The body of a traumatized individual may function like those of caged snakes and lizards which lie in the corner, unresponsive to the situation. Hence, Pozzo’s helplessness and physical collapse bespeak of his traumatized mind. In health humanities perspective, his suffering raises the medico-legal, or rather, ethical and political question whether a perpetrator deserves psychiatric intervention and rehabilitation. Victim advocates might argue well that it is unfair and unjust to allow the perpetrator to have the ability to move on with their life after committing violent crimes, or to have the chance to acknowledge and work through their past deeds, in a clinical setting. LaCapra (2014) has, however, subscribed to “a viable measure of reconciliation” between a former victim and a former perpetrator for peaceful habitation, arguing that the working through of the trauma of the perpetrator is necessary to put an end to “the cycle of revenge” (215).

## 5. Conclusion

*Waiting for Godot* is a trauma text that argues that violence is the *modus operandi* of human civilization and its aftermath is expressed in postures and body movements of individuals exposed to it. Long-term exposure to social and structural violence accounts for Vladimir and Estragon’s trauma-induced bodily responses. Estragon’s foetal posture or Vladimir’s tree pose is the key to understanding their traumatized selves. Lucky’s mechanical behaviour and automatic obedience to his ruthless master suggest that he is a robopath. His trauma dance conveys the desperation and agony of an individual trapped in an exploitative and dehumanising society. And his tirade is another expressive form to respond to the postwar world and its “traumatogenic forces.” Lastly, textual evidence suggests that Pozzo is both a perpetrator and a victim; his physical collapse and the resultant helplessness demonstrate that even a perpetrator is capable of suffering. The play

suggests that humanities and fine arts perspectives can aid clinicians and medical students in understanding the operations of body and mind in a better way and thereby becoming better healers. It offers unique insights into trauma psychology which may be valuable to psychologists, psychiatrists, psychotherapists, psychiatric nurses, rehabilitation workers, victim advocates, and graduate students and interns entering the fields of mental health and trauma treatment. It also adds to the existing literature of body-oriented psychotherapy. It is an early literary example that anticipates the contemporary debates on such medico-legal, political, religious and (bio)ethical issues as legalization of suicide and mercy killing or voluntary euthanasia and rehabilitation and compassionate treatment of perpetrators. Beckett's references to yoga posture and breathing practice in the play critique, and perhaps offer an alternative to, the Eurocentric models of therapeutic treatment rooted in Freudian vocabulary. Above all, it suggests that traumatic memories of individuals should primarily be resolved outside the clinical setting by bringing about changes in the social, political, and economic spheres.

## Notes

<sup>i</sup> Pat Ogden specializes in somatic-cognitive approaches for the treatment of posttraumatic stress disorder and attachment disturbances. Founder and director of the Sensorimotor Psychotherapy Institute, and a clinician, she has authored *Trauma and the Body: A Sensorimotor Approach to Psychotherapy* (2006) in collaboration. Her second book, *Sensorimotor Psychotherapy: Interventions for Trauma and Attachment* (2015), is a practical guide to integrate Sensorimotor Psychotherapy into the treatment of trauma and attachment issues.

<sup>ii</sup> By "traumatogenic forces" Bloom and Reichert mean the structural forces in society that engender traumatic experiences. They refer to, for example, poverty, child-rearing practices based on violence, sexism, racism, male conditioning to use violence as a means of control, and other social stressors.

<sup>iii</sup> All quotations from the play are from this edition and hereafter referred to by Act only.

<sup>iv</sup> Shirley Brennan is a shiatsu therapist who has found the use of healing touch very useful to reframe abusive touch and to access traumatic body memory. Herself a victim of childhood abuse, she thinks early trauma creates a schism between body and mind, and she uses touch to self-soothe and particularly to regain trust of the wisdom and messages the body has always been sending her.

<sup>v</sup> The word "parasymphathetic" means "against emotions."

<sup>vi</sup> Our exposure to a traumatic event increases the level of endorphins in the brain and helps to numb the emotional and physical pain of the trauma. But the subsequent endorphin withdrawal further triggers the associated emotional distress. Thus, to avoid the distress the individual seeks revictimization and thereby gets addicted to trauma.

<sup>vii</sup> By "trauma-organized society" Bloom and Reichert (1998) mean a society organized around unresolved traumatic experiences (p. 9).

<sup>viii</sup> Alluding to Janet and his colleagues at the Salpêtrière, van der Kolk (2015) writes that normal memory is narrative memory, whereas traumatic memory is fragmented and hence never assembles into a story or autobiography (p. 193).

<sup>ix</sup> Speaking of particularly perpetrators, Dominick LaCapra (2014) argues that "not everyone traumatized by events is a victim." Suggesting the likelihood of traumatic experiences of perpetrators and their moral and social ramifications, he further writes here:

There is the possibility of perpetrator trauma which must itself be acknowledged and in some sense worked through if perpetrators are to distance themselves from an earlier implication in deadly

ideologies and practices. Such trauma does not, however, entail the equation or identification of the perpetrator and the victim. (p. 79)

<sup>x</sup> Martha Peterson teaches at Hanna Somatic Education, an offshoot of the Feldenkrais Method—the method developed by Thomas Hanna, author of the book *Somatics*.

<sup>xi</sup> Alluding to MacLean, Pat Ogden et al. (2006) write that the human brain has got a tripartite structure with three distinct levels of function: sensorimotor, emotional, and cognitive levels. The reptilian brain, first to develop from an evolutionary viewpoint, controls arousal, homeostasis of the organism, and procreative impulses, and is to some extent responsible for the sensorimotor level of information processing, including sensation and programmed movement impulses. The “paleomammalian brain” or “limbic brain,” that encapsulates the reptilian brain, mediates emotion, memory, some social behaviour, and learning. The neocortex, last to develop phylogenetically, is responsible for cognitive information processing, such as self-awareness, conscious thought, meaning making and decision making. In the aftermath of trauma these levels of the brain do not function properly. Thus, emotional states in traumatized individuals often trigger the sensorimotor level of information processing and find expression in terms of bodily sensations (p. 5). As Ogden et al. (2006) further write:

Anger might be visible in the purse of the mouth, clenched fists, narrowed eyes, and general bodily tension. Fear may be communicated in hunched shoulders, held breath, and a pleading look in the eyes or in a bracing or moving away from the frightening stimulus. These bodily stances might be an immediate response to a current situation or a chronic, pervasive emotional state. (p. 12)

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