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Dismantling Descartes' Cogito: Samuel Beckett's Subversion of the Cartesian Subject in *Endgame*

Decartes'ın Cogito'sunu Sökmek: Samuel Beckett'in *Oyun Sonu* Yapıtında Kartezyen Öznenin Altüst Edilişi

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Abstract

This article examines Samuel Beckett's *Endgame* as a profound theatrical subversion of the Cartesian model of subjectivity epitomized by the dictum *cogito ergo sum*. In a post-apocalyptic world where time has stalled, language has decayed, and relational structures have calcified into rituals of dependency, Beckett dismantles the notion of the autonomous, coherent, rational self. Instead, his fragmentary, immobile, and compulsively performative characters assert their existence not through thought but through speech acts, repetition, narrative, and power relations. The Cartesian cogito is refracted into a series of Beckettian counter-formulations: *narro ergo sum*, *regno ergo sum*, and *ago ergo sum*, each of which is a fragile and ironic mode of being within a void stripped of metaphysical assurance. Through close reading and textual analysis, this study explores how language functions not as a vehicle of meaning but as a bulwark against silence, how identity emerges through asymmetrical interdependence, and how memory, performance, and physical gestures serve as existential scaffolding for subjects in ontological crisis. Beckett's drama thus offers a rigorous critique of Cartesian selfhood while staging a theatre of endurance in which the self is not discovered but incessantly fabricated in the face of erasure.

Keywords: Samuel Beckett, *Endgame*, Western metaphysics, Cartesian cogito, Ontological crisis

Öz

Bu makale, Samuel Beckett'in *Oyun Sonu* adlı eserini, *cogito ergo sum* ifadesi ile simgeleşen Kartezyen özne modelinin derin bir teatral altüst edilişi olarak inceler. Zamanın durduğu, dilin bozulduğu ve ilişkisel yapıların bağımlılık ritüellerine dönüşerek katılaştığı bir post-apokaliptik dünyada, Beckett, özerk, tutarlı, rasyonel benlik anlayışını ortadan kaldırır. Bunun yerine, parçalanmış, hareketsiz ve zorunlu olarak performatif olan karakterler varlıklarını düşünceyle değil, söz edimleri, tekrar, anlatı ve iktidar ilişkileri aracılığıyla ortaya koyarlar. Descartes'ın cogito'su, Beckett'in karşı-formülasyonlarıyla kırılır: *narro ergo sum*, *regno ergo sum*, ve *ago ergo sum*; bunların her biri, metafiziksel kesinliğin yitmiş olduğu bir boşluktaki varoluşun kırılgan ve ironik bir yolu olarak karşımıza çıkar. Yakın okuma ve metin çözümlemesi aracılığıyla, bu makale, dilin anlam taşıyan bir araç olarak değil, sessizliğe karşı bir kale olarak nasıl işlediğini; kimliğin, asimetrik karşılıklı bağımlılık aracılığıyla nasıl ortaya çıktığını ve hafıza, performans ve fiziksel jestlerin, ontolojik kriz içindeki bireyler için varoluşsal iskele olarak nasıl hizmet ettiğini irdeler. Beckett'in oyunu, böylece Kartezyen benliğe karşı sert bir eleştiri sunarken, benliğin keşfedilmediği, ancak silinmeye karşı sürekli olarak inşa edildiği bir direniş tiyatrosu sahneler.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Samuel Beckett, *Oyun Sonu*, Batı metafiziği, Kartezyen cogito, Ontolojik kriz

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Introduction

The field of Beckett studies is reanimated in the twenty-first century by historicist and theoretical concerns. This renewed attention to Beckett stems from his "sustained examination of the embodied mind" that chimes with the critical interest in affect and the material body, and the cognitive turn within the humanities (Hulle, 2015, p. xix). Besides, Beckett's oeuvre which draws on philosophical ideas he engaged with invites and responds to later philosophical interpretations; it often reflects key principles of specific philosophical frameworks and frequently carries a distinctly philosophical tone (Fifield, 2015, p. 145). Accordingly, Herman (2011) maintains that Beckett's later modernist or proto postmodernist works enact an "anti-Cartesian model of the mind" (pp. 267-268). Since the advent of modernity, the rational, autonomous, and self-grounded Cartesian subject has served as the foundational paradigm for Western metaphysics, epistemology, and conceptions of human identity. Descartes' dictum *cogito ergo sum* enshrines a model of subjectivity grounded in the primacy of consciousness and the certainty of introspective thought. Descartes envisages a self that is "cut off from all other sensations and reduced to that of which it is certain, an I that thinks" (Uhlmann, 2015, p. 112). Yet, in the wake of two world wars, the dissolution of grand narratives, and the rise of existential and absurdist thought, this Cartesian philosophical edifice began to fracture. Nowhere is this fracture more rigorously, bleakly, and theatrically explored than in the drama of Beckett, for whom "the rupture between subject and object" lies at the core of aesthetic concerns (Nixon, 2015, pp. 73-85). Hence, Beckett's corpus is already deconstructive in its subversion of the Cartesian subject. It is therefore unsurprising that Derrida (1992) articulates a sense of proximity to Beckett as follows: "This is an author to whom I feel very close, or to whom I would like to feel myself very close; but also too close. Precisely because of this proximity, it is too hard for me, too easy and too hard" (p. 60). Accordingly, the title of Derrida's *The Animal That Therefore I Am*, a work concerned with the autobiographical animal, may, at least in one respect, be read as indicative of such a proximity between Beckett and Derrida, hinting at shared concerns regarding subjectivity, embodiment, and the limits of self-presence.

Hence, the post-Cartesian Beckett offers not a dramatization of the *cogito*, but its disintegration in *Endgame*, which is not a play of rational affirmation but of ontological unravelling. Therefore, it is "a theatre of postponements, of frustrated anticipations" rather than a representation of finalisations (Morin, 2015, p. 60). Likewise, Beckett's drama does not "represent a world of actuality" yet offers "images that make us feel, in their generated affect, the movement of existence, its flow, becoming (Gontarski, 2015, p. 132). This process of constant becoming resists representation, as Deleuze (1998) also points out in his essay on Beckettian drama "The Exhausted". Owing to the disintegration of the *cogito*, Beckett's work can be understood as a corpus deeply rooted in the corporeal. Accordingly, Maude (2015) asserts that Beckett's drama is marked by "a striking emphasis on seeing, hearing, smelling, touching, falling, rolling, crawling, limping, ailing and ageing" (p. 170). His persistent focus on the body frequently operates as a critique or rejection of philosophical idealism, privileging material embodiment over abstract cognition. As a result, the foregrounding of the body is also accentuated in this paper as a concrete manifestation of the rebuttal of Cartesian idealism.

Endgame is set in a post-apocalyptic interior (Balkaya, 2024, p. 494; Garrard, 2012, p. 394; Hamilton, 2002, p. 615;; Rabaté, 1996, p. 105). In such a world, where, as Hamm says, "[n]ature has forgotten us" (Beckett, 2009, p. 10), time stagnates, movement dwindles, and communication collapses into repetition and incoherence. Viewed as a "post-theatrical" play (Albright, 2003, p. 61), *Endgame* stages a relentless interrogation of what remains of the subject stripped of reference points when thought no longer guarantees being, and when meaning itself has eroded beyond recovery. Because of this erosion, Hamm, Clov, Nagg, and Nell are not characters in the traditional sense but residues of subjectivity. They are bodies and voices suspended in a liminal state between persistence and extinction, between abstraction and subtraction. Their existence is not affirmed through coherent thought or purposeful action, but through compulsive routines, fragmented memories, strained speech acts, and asymmetrical relations of power and dependence. In Beckett's dramatic world, the Cartesian cogito is not only insufficient, but also absurd.

Therefore, this article contends that *Endgame* constitutes a radical subversion of the Cartesian subject by proposing alternative formulations of being, grounded not in introspective cognition but in performativity, intersubjectivity, and the compulsive repetition of minimal gestures and speech acts. Beckett's characters speak not to communicate but to stave off the silence that threatens annihilation. They command, remember, narrate, and even joke, not to enact agency but to simulate presence. Through these fractured performances of self, Beckett articulates a theatre of existential endurance, where subjectivity is precariously maintained in the absence of transcendental foundations or metaphysical assurance. Drawing upon the play's linguistic structures, spatial metaphors, relational dynamics, and symbolic reversals, this paper traces the dismantling of *cogito ergo sum* and the emergence of Beckettian counter-formulations such as *narro ergo sum*, *regno ergo sum*, and *ago ergo sum*. Each is a desperate attempt to affirm being in a world stripped of meaning, autonomy, and certitude, where the Cartesian self dissolves as Beckett could only imagine a complete self as "a chimera" (Pilling, 2015, p. 4).

In so doing, *Endgame* not only exemplifies the philosophical crises of the twentieth century but offers a rigorously distilled theatrical meditation on the fragility of the human subject, a subject who no longer thinks to be, but who performs, repeats, and remembers in order not to disappear. The Cartesian self is dismantled in a way that resonates with Beckett's understanding of the "perpetual exfoliation of personality" in his essay *Proust* (1965, p. 25). As the Cartesian self is dissected, the limits of identity are ceaselessly displaced. The very movement towards a Cartesian identity leads to "the persistence of disidentity" because the movement towards completion causes cracks to open in the surface of the rational Cartesian self, and this movement leads to a "termination that yields a new beginning" (Boxall, 2015, p. 45). As Beckett says to Alan Schneider in a letter where he reveals the theme of *Endgame*, "[e]nded at its inception, and at every subsequent instant, it continues, ergo can never end" (in Harmon, 1998, viii). After all, the "end is in the beginning," as Hamm says in *Endgame* (Beckett, 2009, p. 41).

Beckettian Variations of the Cartesian Dictum

Situated along a wide interpretive spectrum, ranging from a paradigmatic existentialist (Connor, 2009, pp. 56-76) to a passionate advocate for love (Badiou, 2003), Beckett is a seminal figure who subverts the conventions of realist theatre, eschewing coherent narrative structure, and the illusion of stability traditionally offered to the audience (Gordon, 2010, p. 38). His plays foreground the ontological fragility of human identity, portraying characters whose existence is marked by fragmentation and an absence of resolution. In Beckett's plays, plot is minimal, and characterization is deliberately underdeveloped; instead, the focus lies on disjointed dialogue or interior monologue, often lacking clear direction. Beckett emancipates his theatre by means of "his gradual departure" from its traditional constituents (Lloyd, 2014, p. 38). The lack of narrative progression underscores the existential void at the heart of human experience. Language, far from serving its conventional communicative function, becomes a desperate attempt to ward off silence. Despite the futility that permeates their world, Beckett's characters persist in their repetitive gestures and speech acts, suggesting that the act of speaking, however incoherent, is itself a means of asserting presence. For instance, characters endlessly deliberate on departure, cessation, or death, yet remain locked in a cyclical pattern of complaint and inertia. Their utterances function less as vehicles of meaning than as proof of existence; if thought and speech continue, life, however diminished, persists. Thus, Beckett's theatre dramatizes the paradox of human existence: an interminable struggle to affirm being in a universe devoid of inherent meaning. In *Endgame*, language is reduced to a compulsive, futile gesture. Hassan (1971), describing Beckett as postmodern, asserts that Beckett turns "the malice of language against itself" (p. 210). Beckett's characters speak not to communicate, but merely to affirm their continued existence in the face of ontological void. Becket desires to violate the language through "writing nothingness" and "using language against itself" (Slote, 2015, p. 117). Thus, speech becomes a mechanism for staving off the terror of non-being and is employed not as a means of relation, but as a performative act of survival, perhaps as an antidote to "the 'Nothing' that haunted Western thought from its inception" (Kennedy, 2015, p. 209).

As a play critically engaged with the Western metaphysics, *Endgame* has been analysed through a variety of critical lenses, including humanist, existentialist, Marxist, and postmodern perspectives. In the 1950s and 1960s, *Endgame*'s portrayal of stasis, decay, and desolation was widely seen as reflecting a solipsistic tendency. These early interpretations have left a lasting mark, shaping ongoing views of Beckett's work as deeply pessimistic (Gibson, 2006, p. 252). This perspective portrays Beckett as a humanist thinker and has led to interpretations shaped by liberal humanism. Though early humanist readings influenced by Sartre and Camus have faded in prominence, *Endgame* remains tied to the absurdist dramatic tradition. Besides, Beckett's plays have attracted significant interest from numerous philosophers such as Badiou, Adorno and Deleuze. For philosophers, Beckett's plays posed challenging questions about the ongoing relevance of metaphysical issues central to humanism, which had become somewhat worn. As a result, his works began to serve as a foundation for anti-humanist philosophies, which argue that concepts of the human condition are shaped by historical, cultural, and political forces. Adorno's interpretation challenged the common view of Beckett as the quintessential existentialist, unaffected by historical and political issues. Adorno reinterpreted Beckett's work within an anti-humanist modernist framework, positioning *Endgame* as a response to the Second World War that moved beyond French existentialism and marked the end of realist modes of representation. Hence, for Adorno (1982), *Endgame* portrays a "permanent catastrophe" that reflects a civilization without a stable historical identity, remaining unspeakable and doomed to search for a meaning it has already erased (p. 148).

Endgame is a stark meditation on the human condition, portraying existence as a cyclical and meaningless routine. Set in a bare, post-apocalyptic room, the play features four characters: Hamm, a blind and paralyzed man; Clov, his servant who cannot sit; and Hamm's elderly parents, Nagg and Nell, who reside in ashbins. These characters' dysfunctional bodies represent "the incapacitated Beckettian body" (Weller, 2015, p. 93). Through minimal action, Beckett explores the themes of dependency, futility, and the absurdity of life. Hamm and Clov's interactions form the central dynamic: Hamm barks orders, and tells fragmented stories, while Clov obeys reluctantly, threatening repeatedly to leave but never doing so. While Hamm represents

the figure of the overlord, Clov embodies the servant. This interplay between the two reveals a mutual dependency that neither character can escape. Hamm's power is undermined by his physical helplessness, and Clov, though mobile, is emotionally and existentially trapped. Their stagnant relationship underscores the futility of action in a world stripped of purpose. Nagg and Nell offer a secondary echo of this existential paralysis. Confined to their bins, they occasionally speak of happier times or ask for comfort, but they are largely ignored. Nell's death midway through the play passes without much remark, reinforcing the emotional desensitization of the characters. Nagg's subsequent silence deepens the atmosphere of detachment. The title *Endgame* alludes to the final phase of a chess match, where the outcome is inevitable, and every move feels predetermined. Beckett uses this metaphor to suggest that the characters are nearing the end, not just of life, but of meaning itself. The world outside the room appears to be depleted, the characters inside are going through the motions of living without any clear reason to do so. *Endgame* resists resolution. The final scene leaves Clov standing frozen by the door with a suitcase, poised between leaving and staying. Meanwhile, Hamm delivers a monologue that could be a death speech or simply another ritualized performance, before covering his face with a handkerchief. The ambiguity of this ending mirrors the play's broader refusal to provide closure or comfort.

Through emotionally stunted characters, *Endgame* becomes a powerful embodiment of existential despair. Hamm's incessant verbalizations, comprising unanswered questions and compulsive repetitions only serve to prolong the performance and thus his fragile sense of existence. For instance, during Clov's inspection of the barren world outside, Hamm's barrage of disconnected interrogatives such as "Look at the earth" and "Look at the sea" (Beckett, 2009, pp. 19-21) betrays a desperate desire to sustain the illusion of engagement with an external world, even as that world proves increasingly empty. This compulsive speech act becomes especially apparent when Hamm abruptly interrupts a conversation with the irrelevant command. Such disjunctions illustrate how language in *Endgame* is stripped of its referential and communicative function, reduced instead to an existential placeholder. Hamm's awareness of the symbolic weight of speech is explicit in his narration: "Nearly finished. (Pause). There'll be no more speech" (p. 31). Here, silence marks the threshold of death; the cessation of speech signals the dissolution of being. Toward the play's conclusion, Hamm pleads with Clov to "say something" and to "articulate" (p. 47), underscoring his belief that the act of speaking, no matter how empty, is the final bastion against annihilation.

Hamm embodies yet another distortion of Cartesian logic: not *cogito ergo sum* but rather *regno ergo sum*: I reign, therefore I am. *Endgame* delves into the master-slave relation between Hamm and Clov (Garrard, 2012, p. 391; Pearson, 2001, p. 217; Salisbury, 2012, p. 113). Hamm's assertion of existence is inextricably bound to the dynamics of domination, enacted through a master-slave relationship with Clov. Their very names hint at underlying structures of dominance and oppression: Clov evokes the French word for nail (*clou*) while Hamm recalls the word hammer (Macmillan and Fehsenfeld, 1998, p. 238). Drifting toward an interminable end, they inhabit rigidly codified roles, Hamm as the master, Clov as the servant, yet these roles are not unidirectional in their function. While Hamm appears to wield authority through a constant barrage of imperatives, the power he exercises is deeply contingent on Clov's compliance. As Bloom (2011) points out, Hamm is not "a perfect solipsist" because of his fear of losing Clov (pp. 7-8). Their relationship is marked by a paradoxical interdependence; each requires the other to validate his own existence, not merely through speech but through the enactment of power relations.

As a sadistic being, Hamm derives a perverse sense of identity through the performance of authority, subjecting Clov to his commands and emotional manipulations. He acknowledges this cruelty with detached irony, remarking that he has made Clov "suffer too much" (Beckett, 2009, p. 8), suggesting an awareness of his own sadistic impulse. Clov, in turn, appears to have internalised his subjugation, collapsing the distinction between himself and Hamm's literal and symbolic constructs of inferiority. When Clov remarks, "your dogs are here," referring both to himself and the toy dog (p. 25), he evokes the dehumanising effects of servitude, aligning himself with the mute object at Hamm's feet. In addition, Clov's name, Restivo (2011) asserts, may be associated with the Hebrew word for dog, *kelev* (p. 63). His mechanical obedience reveals a consciousness hollowed out by conditioned submission. His role is not merely performed but inhabited, a grim testament to the psychological violence inherent in the master-slave dialectic. This asymmetrical reciprocity is further exacerbated by Hamm's obsession with centrality, both literal and symbolic. His demand to remain in the centre is not only a spatial fixation but a desperate assertion of existential primacy. His need to occupy the centre of the stage reinforces the illusion of control and continuity. In tormenting Clov, Hamm constructs a fragile edifice of selfhood, sustained through ritualised dominance. Yet this dominance is always on the verge of collapse, dependent upon Clov's reluctant participation. Thus, their dynamic exemplifies Beckett's bleak vision of relational identity: existence not as autonomy but as mutually reinforcing subjection, an endless interplay of power, dependency, and the futile attempt to impose order upon chaos. By means of this "power struggle" between the two, Beckett suggests that "to order the mess is impossible" (Weiss, 2013, p. 28). Hamm's uncertainty regarding his physical position on stage is made manifest through his complaints that he is either too far to the left or too far to the right (Beckett, 2009, p. 19), with Clov adjusting the chair each time, which serves as a powerful metaphor for his deeper ontological

dislocation. His obsession with spatial centrality is not merely a matter of physical comfort, but rather an attempt to stabilize an unstable subjectivity through a symbolic assertion of centrality and control. Hamm's sense of being is tethered to the illusion of mastery; he commands, and Clov obeys; therefore, he exists. His selfhood is predicated on the ability to impose will upon another. Yet, this dynamic proves tenuous, as it is constantly undermined by Clov's resistance, however passive or ironic. When Hamm says he will give him nothing more to eat, Clov merely says that they will die (p. 8), which strips Hamm's threat of its intended coercive power, laying bare the absurdity of their impasse.

Their relationship is structured by a paradox of reciprocal necessity. Both characters, though resentful and fatigued by one another's presence, are existentially bound. Hamm's declaration that "the dialogue" is what keeps Clov from leaving (Beckett, 2009, p. 36) reveals the underlying function of their interaction: speech, however empty, becomes a means of warding off the horror of isolation. Dialogue becomes both a surrogate for genuine relationality and a buffer against the abyss of silence. The exchange between Hamm and Clov is emblematic of a Beckettian ontology in which identity is not autonomous but relational, not foundational but contingent. Hamm asks Clov why he stays with him, and Clov says that there is nowhere else to go; Clov asks Hamm why he keeps him, and Hamm says that there is no one else (p. 8). Their mutual reliance shatters the ideal of the Cartesian, self-sufficient *cogito*; the Beckettian self is always already intersubjective, constructed through and sustained by the presence of the other, however unwanted. This interdependence enacts yet another Beckettian subversion of Descartes's philosophical legacy. The Cartesian subject, supposedly an isolated, thinking being that affirms its existence through rational introspection, is replaced by figures who articulate their being not through thought, but through co-presence, routine, and dialogue. In *Endgame*, *cogito ergo sum* is transformed into a more fragile and haunting proposition: We speak; therefore, we are. Their dialogue, emptied of substance but charged with existential urgency, becomes the final residue of being in a world where meaning and autonomy have collapsed. In a rhythmically interrogative exchange, Hamm repeatedly presses Clov on the question of why he does not kill him. Clov's initial response superficially reduces the question of life and death to a matter of survival logistics: he is unable to do so because he does not know the combination to the food cupboard. This response suggests a pragmatic motivation: that Clov sustains Hamm's life not out of moral restraint, but out of fear of his own starvation, implying that Hamm's continued existence is a precondition for Clov's access to nourishment. Yet this seemingly utilitarian rationale is destabilized moments later when Hamm offers to divulge the combination in exchange for being finished, to which Clov replies, "I couldn't finish you" (p. 24). This confession marks a significant shift from material necessity to existential entanglement. Clov's reluctance to enact Hamm's death is not merely rooted in self-preservation, but in the paradoxical reassurance that Hamm's dependence on him affords. Hamm's need becomes Clov's ontological anchor; in being needed, Clov is affirmed. Hamm's declaration that death reigns over all outside their room (p. 9) underscores the insular logic of their shared space: the shelter is not merely physical but metaphysical because it is a liminal zone in which existence is precariously sustained through mutual entrapment. By positing the external world as synonymous with death, Hamm attempts to delimit Clov's agency and reassert control, casting their enclosure as the only viable site of life. Yet this life is itself devoid of vitality, animated only by the rituals of dependency and the echo of dialogue. The play culminates in Hamm's admission that they are "obliged to each other" (p. 48), a statement that encapsulates the involuntary reciprocity that binds them. Their interdependence is not grounded in affective solidarity but in existential necessity: both function as the other's proof of being.

Hamm, the blind and immobilized master of *Endgame*, who speaks "[w]ith prophetic relish" (Beckett, 2009, p. 23), paradoxically assumes the role of the seer, echoing the archetype of the blind prophet in classical antiquity, like figures such as Tiresias, whose lack of physical sight is compensated by an oracular, metaphysical vision (Fletcher, 2000, p. 94; Gordon, 2011, p. 79; Özsert, 2024, p. 38). In a moment of prophetic utterance, Hamm envisions Clov's future as one of utter desolation: he will be "a speck in the void, in the dark" (Beckett, 2009, pp. 23-24). His vision culminates in a moral pronouncement: he will not have anyone with him as he will not have had pity on anyone and there won't be anyone left to have pity on him (p. 24). In appropriating the language of foresight and retribution, Hamm symbolically reclaims a position of authority that his physical degradation would seem to deny. His prophecy functions as both a curse and a claim to power; in foretelling Clov's fate, Hamm asserts a residual sovereignty grounded not in corporeal dominance but in narrative control. This articulation of power is, however, mirrored by Clov's own modes of assertion. Endowed with sight and mobility, Clov occupies a privileged position in relation to his master. While Hamm's blindness renders him dependent, Clov's visual agency allows him to manipulate reality; for instance, he does so by misinforming Hamm about the toy dog's position, claiming that it is standing when in fact it has fallen. This moment is not merely a comic gesture but a calculated exercise of epistemic power. Clov, in exploiting Hamm's blindness, enacts a reversal of roles: he becomes the arbiter of what is seen and unseen, what is real and illusory. His agency is further underscored by his spatial autonomy. Hamm chastises Clov for standing behind his chair several times: he gives him "the shivers" (pp.19, 21, 40). This reveals the master's anxiety over the unseen movements of the servant, which suggests that Hamm's authority is haunted by the spectre of disempowerment. The dynamic between Hamm and Clov thus unfolds as a complex negotiation of power in which each character seeks to affirm his existence through a specific modality: Hamm through

speech and prophetic pronouncement, Clov through sight and spatial agency. The Cartesian axiom is fractured into competing declarations: I see, therefore I am, and I foresee, therefore I persist. Their interdependence belies the illusion of autonomy, replacing the master-slave binary with a more intricate topology of mutual subjection and resistance. Clov's assertion of selfhood is premised not on emancipation from Hamm, but on his privilege such as sight, movement, and the capacity to deceive. He provides Hamm with the faculties he lacks, namely vision and locomotion, yet this service, rather than confirming subservience, becomes the very site of Clov's self-affirmation. Within this claustrophobic world, identity is not anchored in individual essence but in a precarious economy of lack, compensation, and performative dominance. Hamm's preoccupation with Clov's possession of sight and mobility betrays a deeper anxiety about his ontological inferiority and physical dependence. His repeated inquiries about Clov's eyes and legs function less as genuine expressions of concern than as rhetorical acknowledgements of the asymmetry that defines their relationship. Hamm's physical decrepitude and blindness render him acutely aware of Clov's embodied advantages, yet he attempts to rhetorically delimit Clov's agency by reinscribing it within the boundaries of subjugation. Although Clov retains the power to move and to see, his movements are spatially and symbolically confined: he may come and go, but in "my house" (p. 23). Hamm seeks to reassert dominion not through actual control, but through the reterritorialization of Clov's privileges within a discursive framework of ownership and authority.

In response to his limitations, Hamm turns to imagination as a compensatory mechanism. Projecting his thwarted desire for mobility onto the dog, he constructs a fantasy in which the animal looks at him expectantly, as if pleading to be taken for a walk (Beckett, 2009, p. 26). This projection externalizes Hamm's own yearning for movement and agency. His futile attempt to self-propel his chair using the gaff becomes a tragicomic pantomime of autonomy. Yet even this gesture is undermined by material reality: his failure culminates in the abandonment of the gaff, a symbolic concession to immobility. Likewise, even his wish to oil the castors of the chair is rendered redundant by Clov's interjection (p. 28), which reinforces Hamm's impotence and Clov's epistemic superiority. Beyond the binary of mobility and immobility, Clov's quest for dominance also becomes manifest in his compulsive desire for order. Declaring his dream of "a world where all would be silent and still and each thing in its last place" (p. 35), Clov aligns himself with a metaphysics of stasis disguised as neatness. His vision of order, however, is less about harmony than about terminality, a state in which the world is sealed and thus no longer in flux. Hamm, conversely, resists this closure. When Clov begins to clear the space, Hamm disrupts the effort by demanding that the objects be dropped. Within this microcosmic struggle, the opposition between order and chaos becomes a proxy for the asymmetrical contestation of power and identity. Clov, through his insistence on structure and control, asserts a form of superiority over Hamm, whose alignment with disorder paradoxically reaffirms his subservient position within Clov's schema of regulation.

Ultimately, the tension between Hamm and Clov is not reducible to a simple master-slave dynamic but rather constitutes a shifting interplay of compensatory strategies (Baroghel, 2010, p. 127; Berlin, 2009, p. 407-408; Worton, 1994, p. 71). While Hamm attempts to reassert authority through linguistic dominance and the symbolic re-inscription of territory, Clov exercises control through his privileged access to mobility, vision, and the imposition of order. In defiance of his physical decrepitude and existential futility, Hamm tenaciously clings to the illusion of sovereign authority, fashioning himself as the monarch of a diminished realm. His armchair, suggestive of a parodic throne, and his toque, reminiscent of a crown reduced to farce, underscore the ironic theatricality of his self-stylisation as king. Beckett (2009) alludes to Shakespeare's *Richard III*: "my kingdom for a nightman" (p. 17), which does not merely evoke the desperation of the tragic king but rather renders Hamm's royal pretensions grotesque. Even his name sounds like a truncated version of Hamlet (McDonald, 2006, p. 47). Hamm's compulsive insistence on occupying the centre of the room signifies a neurotic assertion of symbolic centrality, a performative attempt to confirm his status as the gravitational axis of his miniaturised world. The request that Clov take him on "a little turn (…) Right around the world" (Beckett, 2009, p. 18) encapsulates this farcical sovereignty. The circumnavigation of a barren room is a parody of royal procession; it is an affirmation of its theatrical residue in a post-sovereign void. Nevertheless, Hamm persists in asserting the continued existence of himself and his so-called subjects within the confines of their decaying shelter. In this way, Hamm constructs a microcosmic simulacrum of kingship, a self-contained territory of performative power from which to ward off the encroaching nihilism outside. Hamm's obsessive investment in territorial centrality and hierarchical control signals an existential strategy: he reigns; therefore, he is. Through this Cartesian variation, Beckett foregrounds the fragility of identity in the absence of metaphysical assurance. Hamm's sovereign posture is not undergirded by actual power, but by repetition, ritual, and illusion. The shelter becomes a grotesque echo of the body politic, reduced to two co-dependent figures rehearsing the vestiges of authority and obedience in a space devoid of transcendence. Thus, Hamm's kingship is neither tragic nor heroic; it is absurd, yet within its absurdity lies a desperate assertion of being, a refusal to surrender to the nothingness that surrounds him.

The dynamic between Hamm and Clov is also inflected by a pseudo-familial structure through which each seeks ontological validation. Their relationship oscillates between emotional dependency and affective estrangement, forming a dialectic of intimacy and repudiation. Hamm, to anchor his identity in a role imbued with cultural authority, evokes the language of kinship:

he says he loved him once, to which Clov responds tersely, “Once” (Beckett, 2009, p. 8). This exchange encapsulates the erosion of filial affection and the collapse of any emotional bond. Hamm continues his paternal self-fashioning, declaring, he was a father to him, and his house was a home to him, only to be met with Clov’s emotionally detached affirmations: “You were that to me,” and “This was that for me” (p. 25). The repetition of “that” reduces Hamm’s sentimental claims to mere historical facts devoid of affective resonance. Clov's refusal to reciprocate Hamm's invocation of fatherhood underscores a break from the filial script. He recalls a formative moment of emotional neglect: “When there were still bicycles, I wept to have one (…) You told me to go to hell” (p. 9). This scene crystallizes the trauma that underpins his subsequent emotional detachment. In this light, Clov's rejection of Hamm is not merely a gesture of independence but an assertion of subjecthood formed in resistance to paternal domination. Hamm, by contrast, clings to gestures of physical contact; he is asking for a kiss, for his hand to be held, as if touch could reconstitute the vanishing contours of the self (p. 40). Yet Clov’s refusal to engage in these acts of intimacy becomes a renunciation of Hamm’s claim to authority and affection. This asymmetrical relationship stages an interplay of dependence and defiance: Hamm attempts to secure a coherent identity through paternal authority, while Clov, in his refusal of both touch and affiliation, constructs his selfhood through acts of negation. Their dynamic thus destabilizes the ideal of a unidirectional, affectively secure parent-child relationship, revealing instead a mutual entrapment where recognition is withheld, contested, or only partially granted.

The tenuous interdependence between Hamm and Clov is further destabilized by the emergence of the small boy glimpsed at the play’s end; it is regarded as an intrusion that disrupts their closed world and gestures toward a potential, if troubling, future. Clov’s visible agitation upon sighting the boy becomes manifest in his abrupt seizure of Hamm’s gaff and his compulsion to leave the shelter, which signals a profound existential rupture. The boy, rather than offering hope, functions as a harbinger of recurrence; he embodies what Hamm earlier calls the “potential procreator” (Beckett, 2009, p. 46), a figure not of renewal in the redemptive sense but of inexorable perpetuation. The child does not redeem but replicates the suffering endemic to human existence, inaugurating yet another iteration of the cycle of subjugation and dependency. Therefore, Clov’s reaction is charged with ambivalence; on the one hand, he embodies the continuity of a system Clov has come to loathe; on the other, he offers Clov the very position of mastery that has eluded him. The symbolic appropriation of Hamm’s gaff marks a moment of transference, a passing of the mantle from one regime to the next. In this cyclical schema, Clov is poised to occupy the position formerly held by Hamm, while the boy, as his subordinate, becomes the new object of domination. Hence, what emerges is a haunting image of existential inheritance: the roles of master and slave are not transcended but recycled, ensuring the continuity of identity through structures of possession and subjection. Despite his ostensible emotional austerity and often tyrannical disposition, Hamm reveals a profound and recurring yearning for affection; this is an affective need that becomes most visible in moments of relational rupture. His demand for the presence of the toy dog, particularly following the emotional rebuffs from both his father and Clov, emerges as a surrogate for the intimacy and care that remain perpetually withheld from him. In the wake of Nagg’s reproaches and Clov’s looming threat of departure, Hamm seeks solace in the tactile presence of the dog, instructing Clov to place it in his arms (p. 35). This gesture of simulated intimacy while cradling an inanimate, one-eyed, legless toy exposes the tragic futility of his quest for emotional connection. The dog is incapable of warmth; nonetheless, it functions as a placeholder for the affection Hamm is desperate to receive but denied. The poignancy of this moment lies in its juxtaposition of the animate and inanimate, the affective and artificial. Hamm's attempt to compensate for the absence of genuine tenderness through a fabricated object underscores not only the failure of communication and empathy in the play’s interpersonal relationships but also the existential impoverishment of the human condition. In clutching the toy dog, Hamm clings to the semblance of relationality, performing a parody of care. Thus, Hamm’s interaction with the dog gestures toward a deeper ontological need: the affirmation of being through the experience of being held, recognized, and loved. The act constitutes a desperate assertion of subjectivity; it is an invocation of emotional presence in a world defined by absence: I am held; therefore, I am.

Another Beckettian variation of Descartes’ dictum is incarnated through Hamm, who assumes the mantle of narrator, transforming fragments of personal history into performative fiction. He enacts a narrative self-construction that seeks to legitimize his ontological presence. His declaration that it is story time (Beckett, 2009, p. 31) signals a deliberate retreat into narration as a strategy of identity affirmation. He fictionalizes his past: "The man came crawling towards me, on his belly. Pale, wonderfully pale and thin (...) He raised his face to me, black with mingled dirt and tears" (pp. 31-32). Hamm not only reclaims narrative authority but also aestheticizes trauma, transmuting memory into myth. The exaggerated visuality of the scene, laden with melodramatic and grotesque imagery, suggests a theatricalization of suffering, both his own and that of the nameless supplicant, which reinforces Hamm’s self-image as the sovereign arbiter of life and death within his domain. The language of territoriality he uses in this narrative further underscores the fragility of Hamm’s sovereignty. He interrogates the man: “what is the object of this invasion?” (p. 32). This reflects an anxiety about breaches into the symbolic boundaries of his constructed kingdom. This perceived incursion threatens not merely his spatial dominion but his ontological coherence,

destabilizing the illusion of control upon which his identity precariously rests. In offering corn for the man's child and imagining the child's cheeks regaining their colour, Hamm indulges in a redemptive fantasy, recasting himself in the role of a benevolent monarch whose mercy sustains life. However, this act of projected compassion is deeply ambivalent; it veils a latent self-accusation and a suppressed guilt, evident in his bitter reflection on the child's condition and the implicit violence of abandonment embedded in the scene. By reinscribing himself within the narrative as a magnanimous yet embattled protagonist, Hamm engages in a mythopoetic reconstitution of the self, which foregrounds *Endgame*'s own status as a theatrical piece (Levy, 2011, p. 101). Hamm seeks to stabilize the present through the reframing of the past. His storytelling thus becomes an existential rehearsal; it is a theatricalized mode of being through which he negotiates his ontological crisis. Like a "ham" actor, Hamm performs for an imaginary audience and recounts his story in "a theatrical manner, pausing every so often to comment on his own performance" (Fletcher, 2000, p. 110). Hence, in Beckett's dramaturgy, the act of narration emerges not simply as recollection, but as a performative strategy of self-assertion. Hamm narrates; therefore, he is. Hamm performs; therefore, he is

Nagg and Nell also persist in asserting their existence through the fragile yet resilient vestiges of love, tenderness, and memory. They are entombed in ashbins, and their bodies are reduced to symbolic remnants of humanity, yet they resist erasure by performing relational intimacy. When Nagg knocks on Nell's bin and requests a kiss, and she responds by calling him her pet, the moment becomes a tender parody of marital affection. Their heads strain toward one another in a futile attempt at physical connection, only to fall apart once more (Beckett, 2009, p. 12). This failed gesture dramatizes the tragic distance between desire and fulfilment, yet it simultaneously affirms their longing for human contact as a mode of existential resistance. Their desire to touch and to share a half biscuit proffered by Nagg as a substitute for physical intimacy (p. 8) reveals a commitment to relational identity. In this exchange, Nagg reclaims his role as a provider, a traditional husband-figure, asserts his relevance and agency even within the confines of absurd degradation. Their affection becomes an ontological assertion: they care for each other; therefore, they are. The sustenance they offer one another is as much emotional as material. They recognise one another; therefore, they are. Moreover, their invocation of a shared past, most notably their recollection of a rowing excursion on Lake Como the day after their engagement, functions not merely as nostalgic indulgence, but as a strategic act of temporal anchoring. Nell's elegiac tone and Nagg's recollection that she was "in such fits that we capsized," to which she responds, "I felt happy" (pp. 13-16), articulate a yearning to reanimate moments of vitality within the desolate present. In reclaiming these memories, they stage a temporal defiance against the vacuum of the present. The past is not merely remembered, but it is also reinhabited as a means of asserting the self in the face of dissolution. In this sense, memory itself becomes a performative act of being. Hence, they remember; therefore, they are. Moreover, Nagg's use of humour, specifically, his retelling of the tailor anecdote, emerges as a potent strategy for reaffirming both personal identity and relational cohesion. The joke is framed as a classic narrative setup: "An Englishman, needing a pair of striped trousers in a hurry for the New Year festivities, goes to his tailor" (p. 16). This joke serves as more than mere comic relief. It becomes a performative gesture, a small assertion of presence amid the inertia of Beckett's apocalyptic world. Nagg's narration is marked by a dynamic vocal modulation, as he animates the tailor's voice: "Dreadfully sorry, come back in a fortnight"; then he shifts to that of the indignant customer: "six days, God made the world (…) And you are not capable of making me a pair of trousers in three months" (p.16). This ventriloquizing act enacts a miniature theatrical performance, with Nagg assuming multiple roles: the scandalized reaction, the disdainful pause, and the final proud presentation of the trousers. In so doing, Nagg not only assumes the mantle of the raconteur but also reclaims a performative agency. He performs; therefore, he is. Furthermore, his attempt to elicit laughter from Nell is deeply tied to the ontological stakes of the drama. Laughter, within this context, is not merely an emotional response but a vital signifier of aliveness. It reanimates the emotional terrain of their relationship, however tenuous, and temporarily restores the illusion of a shared world. The storytelling moment, then, is not simply a private performance but a reaffirmation of Nagg's selfhood within the dyadic microcosm he shares with Nell. In narrating, Nagg reclaims a precarious but meaningful form of subjectivity. Nell narrates; therefore, he is: *narro, ergo sum*.

As the play approaches its terminus, Beckett's characters become self-aware of their theatricality, invoking metadramatic terms such as exit, aside, and soliloquy. Their dialogues become self-reflexive. This gesture collapses the boundary between fiction and reality, suggesting that their being is contingent upon performance. They are not simply characters within a narrative, but subjects whose existence is predicated upon their staging. In this Beckettian reformulation of Cartesian logic, it is no longer *cogito ergo sum* but *ago, ergo sum*: I act, therefore I am.

Conclusion

Beckett's suitability for philosophical interpretation stems from his works' engagement with the same questions that philosophy seeks to explore. In *Endgame*, Beckett stages a profound interrogation of the Cartesian *cogito*, dismantling the ideal of a coherent, autonomous subject through a dramaturgy of fragmentation, ritual, and recursion. The characters,

suspended in a liminal zone between life and death, meaning and absurdity, thought and silence, reveal that existence is no longer predicated upon rational introspection or volitional agency. Rather, it is enacted through compulsive gestures, strained dialogues, and the stubborn persistence of performance. The Cartesian maxim is refracted through a series of inversions: *narro ergo sum*, *regno ergo sum*, and *ago ergo sum*. Each reflects a desperate effort to affirm being through modes of speech, authority, routine, and relational dependence. What emerges is a constellation of existential strategies: narration becomes a substitute for memory, speech for thought, action for meaning, domination for identity, and love for recognition. Hamm's linguistic compulsion, Clov's mobility, Nagg and Nell's nostalgic tenderness and even the surrogate intimacy of the toy dog underscore the play's ontological proposition: in a world devoid of transcendence, being must be endlessly performed to be sustained. The theatre, in Beckett's hands, becomes both the metaphor and the mechanism of that performance; it turns into a stage where language falters, yet the need to speak persists; where movement ceases, yet characters continue to shuffle in place; where memory fragments, yet the past is obsessively re-enacted.

Endgame does not offer liberation from the absurd, nor transcendence of the void, but rather an unflinching meditation on the irreducible necessity of the other, however degraded, however resented, in the constitution of the self. Beckett's characters are not Cartesian subjects who think in solitude, but interdependent figures who suffer together, perform together, hold one another, and exist through each other. Their presence is provisional, their identities unstable, their language hollowed out, yet still, they speak, they remember, they suffer, they narrate, they rule. *Endgame* dramatizes an impending catastrophe that is impossible to come to an end. As Beckett says, it ends at its inception, hence ergo never ends. Ergo doubts, thinks, speaks, acts, reigns, performs, confronts the void, symbolically dies several times, faces death and nothingness, yet never ends. Ergo negates itself but never ends because, as Blau (2004) argues, *Endgame* "finds grandeur amid the trash, trivia, and excrement of living" (p. 43). Ergo never ends because, as Shields (2010) puts forward, while "one Beckett is a void, the other Beckett is replete with meaningful insights" (p. 301). Ergo never ends although Hamm quotes Prospero in *Endgame*: "our revels now are ended" (Beckett, 2009, p. 35).

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