Chapter 12

*On fatigue and recovery**

Ian Alden Russell

> You must go on, I can't go on, I'll go on.
> – Samuel Beckett (1954, 179), The Unnamable

These are the final lines of Samuel Beckett's The Unnamable, the conclusion of his "trilogy" of novels broadly exploring consciousness and existence.[1] A disjointed, inner monologue by an unnamed protagonist, The Unnamable is a stream of introspection. Throughout the text the protagonist returns to the question of how, amidst the struggles in life, one can go on. There is an overall impression of exhaustion, of being overwhelmed by things.

Penned in France in the decade after the Second World War, we can understand the feeling of depletion and the questioning of whether one can continue. The political and economic structures of modern Europe had once again brought the continent to catastrophe. This was the same decade when philosopher Theodor Adorno (1955, 34) famously declared that it was "impossible to write poetry today."[2] It was a moment of collective introspection – questioning our purpose, practices and, for artists, the value of art in the aftermath of the Holocaust. How could we possibly go on as we had before?

While this is the historical context to Beckett's authorship, the context of the protagonist is ambiguous. The protagonist's struggles do not feel distant or confined to a past era. They feel present, approachable, apprehensible, perhaps familiar. In some ways, their struggles to find a way forward are not dissimilar to the social, political and existential anxiety many are expressing today. We may be able to find

---

[1]The previous two novels in Beckett's "trilogy" are Molloy (1951) and Malone Dies (1951).
[2]The full quotation from Adorno (1955, 34) reads: "The critique of culture is confronted with the last stage in thedialectic of culture and barbarism: to write a poem after Auschwitz is barbaric, and that corrodes also theknowledge which expresses why it has become impossible to write poetry today."

empathy, or even camaraderie, in the search for how to sustain oneself amidst difficult times.

The Politics of Fatigue

Trump, anti-Trump, Brexit, Remain, Alternative für Deutschland, Lega Nord, the Five Star Movement – the stretching of the social fabric to extremes has left the middle, our shared space of collective social and political will, far too thin. Overwhelmed by commentary and critique, individual and social fatigue have become a recurring concern in public conversation. Last year, poet and essayist Elisa Gabbert (2018) questioned whether "compassion fatigue" is "inevitable in an age of 24-hour news?" More recently, CNN news anchor Alisyn Camerota expressed personal exhaustion at covering the Trump administration. (Hains 2019) Similarly, some have posited that recent local election results in the UK are the result of "Brexitfatigue," while across the English Channel the EU Commissioner Jean-Claude Juncker claimed that he personally suffered from "Brexit fatigue."[3]

Before Trump, Brexit or Steve Bannon's championing of the politics of populist division across two continents, some in Turkey described the perpetual hostility, opposition and duality in their politics as "politics of fatigue." One put it simply, saying, "it is so tiring to be Turkish sometimes."[4] The day after the election of Donald Trump to the US presidency, a friend from Istanbul texted, saying, "welcome to the club." The lighthearted jest veiled a stark acknowledgement of the globalization of politics of division and fatigue. The absurd humour of the quip, however, also offered camaraderie and comic relief. It reminds me of another quintessential Beckettian moment from the play *Waiting for Godot* (Beckett 1954, 60R). Gogo says, "I can't go on like this." To which Didi replies, "That's what you think."

Like Didi and Gogo, who are waiting for someone who never arrives, we too are in a sort of purgatory – a liminal politics that is neither truly a pause from the struggle nor progress. While many hope that the promise of change will sustain us in our struggles, it seems the unceasing drama and entertainment of 24-hour news perpetuates our ability to wait. Instead of witty wordplay and absurd repartee, our wait is sustained by tweets and commentary about tweets. Meanwhile our epistemological security erodes amidst a fog of interpretation that clouds facts, shrouding them in opinion and suspicion. In Russia, the situation is overt. Vladimir Putin employs Vladislav Yuryevich Surkov as his personal advisor. Surkov, who studied theatre directing at the Moscow Institute of Culture, devised a uniquely theatrical political strategy.

---

[3] For discussion of "Brexit-fatigue" in the UK see Will Gore (2019). Also see Jason Douglas (2019). For discussion of Jean-Claude Juncker's statements see Paul Dallison and Maïa de la Baume (2019).
[4] For a discussion of Steve Bannon's strategic impact in European politics, see Vivienne Walt (2019). For a discussion of politics and fatigue in Turkey, see Elif Shafak (2015).

Recounted by Peter Pomerantsev (2011) in the *London Review of Books*:

> In contemporary Russia, unlike the old USSR or present-day North Korea, the stage is constantly changing: the country is a dictatorship in the morning, a democracy at lunch, an oligarchy by suppertime, while, backstage, oil companies are expropriated, journalists killed, billions siphoned away. Surkov is at the centre of the show, sponsoring nationalist skinheads one moment, backing human rights groups the next. It's a strategy of power based on keeping any opposition there may be constantly confused, a ceaseless shape-shifting that is unstoppable because it's indefinable.

Under Surkov, the Kremlin funds all sides of an issue – a cause and its opposition – stoking antagonism and conflict. Confusion arises from the public acknowledgement that they are doing this, making it nearly impossible to create consensus on what are authentic political actions and causes.[5] This extends beyond domestic Russian politics. The theatrics of opinion and outrage in Western media markets stoke division and reactivity, driving ratings and advertising revenue while also making trust in media outlets vulnerable to manipulation, with some claiming that Western media is suffering from "truth decay." (Fottrell 2019) Following his playbook, Surkov has stated publicly that "Russia is playing with the West's minds," and "they don't know how to deal with their own changed consciousness." (Carroll 2019)

The Cost of Post - Industrial Labour

Beyond Gabbert's "compassion fatigue," there seems to be insurmountable emotional and intellectual labour to stay engaged, informed and accurately analyze the stream of sensational, absurd, divisive and reactive politics. What keeps us watching – both the news, our phones as well as antidramas like *Waiting for Godot* – is that we are invested, not just in the outcome but in the experience of the process. This investment both sustains our ability to persist and endure, but it also makes us vulnerable to manipulation and exploitation. With one eye glued to the screen, we exhaust our attention, rendering us less and less able to open our other eye to our condition, let alone take action towards meaningful change.

While traditional media outlets established the play, our wanton embrace of social media has made us the players, the channels providing content, information

---

[5] For an exploration of these themes see the documentary film HyperNormalisation by Adam Curtis (2016)

and opinion.[6] We willfully opened ourselves and our self-image to the flow of information and data. Email and mobile telecommunications expand work into what were once private and personal time. As Paul Virilio (2000, 67) questioned, "what are we to say of the enthusiasm of post-industrial companies for the cellphone which enables them to abolish the distinction between working hours and private life for their employees?" "Employee brand advocacy programmes" coerce or require employees to co-opt their personal social-media profiles to post public relations content, packaged as personal life moments(Holmes 2016). The argument is that these innovations allow individuals to connect freely, find and express authenticity in their employment and exercise more choice and flexibility with how and when they work. The outcome is, however, that work, debate and self-exploitation can and does happen anywhere and anytime – interrupting dinners, walks, hugs, conversations and sleep.

Over a decade ago, in 2008, many big technology firms such as Microsoft, Google, IBM and Intel, formed a non-profit group to study digital overload and its negative impact on productivity. (Ritchel 2008) Despite this, in 2019, Summit Learning – a Silicon Valley company developing a personalized web-based learning platform funded by Mark Zuckerberg and Priscilla Chan – rolled out a programme in small-town schools around Wichita, Kansas. The goal was to provide online teachers through web-based, self-directed learning in order to allow in-person teachers to act as mentors instead. Local residents revolted as many parents reported negative health consequences and changes in the behaviour of their children. (Bowles 2019) It is telling that a year prior, in 2018, it became public knowledge that parents in Silicon Valley were raising their children "tech-free" and attending schools that prioritize traditional, in-person learning environments. (Weller 2018)

The Pressure to Perform and the Co-Option of Resistance

In 2001, John Armitage and Phil Graham (2001) synthesized Paul Virilio's (1986) thoughts on speed and politics with Karl Marx's theories of capital. They proposed that we have entered an era of dromoeconomics in which not only the concept of productivity, but also its speed are commodified. This has increased both the professional as well as social pressure to engage, react, produce content and perform for one another. Many regularly describe feeling overwhelmed, as not having enough bandwidth or being exhausted, as shutting down, as if our minds were no longer flesh but fiber optics. The sense of processing as a subjective emotional and psychological need has been eclipsed by the sense of processing akin to computational systems

---

[6] For a discussion of parental concerns over whether or not to assist their children in becoming "YouTubers," see Julie Jargon (2019).

crunching numbers to spit out deterministic results. The ease and speed at which we can share information and connect with one another online gives us an illusion of agency and an expectation for instant gratification.. It masks the subordination of our agency to the systems and algorithms that categorise, divide and separate us. Our friends, likes and social connections are subject to the "terms and conditions" (which many of us never really read) of privately held companies and publicly traded corporations. Instead of agents and citizens, we wittingly and unwittingly perform the roles of users and influencers. Like an addict, we know our behaviours are harmful, exhausting and unsustainable, but we feel powerless to break the cycle of dependency on the information systems that isolate and exhaust us. As Radiohead (2006) put it, we do it to ourselves, and that's what really hurts.

Critic and theorist Jan Verwoert explored the dynamics of productivity, performance and exhaustion in his essay *Exhaustion and Exuberance*. In our so-called post-industrial, or late capitalist, societies the expectation to be productive and contribute to overall growth is taken for granted. Verwoert observed, however, that parallel to the expectation to be productive a more illusory expectation has emerged – the expectation to perform. Read against the contemporary context of pervasive social media performance, Verwoert's (2008, 107) insights are prescient and perhaps offer ways forward. One path looks to the history of countercultural movements – bohemians, hippies, punks, rock and roll, hip hop – and what he terms "the politics of exhaustion".

> …the politics of exhaustion inherent in countercultural rites of excess have always been about deliberately squandering … capital. This philosophy of self-destruction is born out of the realization that the accumulation of capital is tied to the moment when profits are skimmed off and stashed away in the bourgeois private sphere to secure property. The rebellious response of bohemian culture has therefore always lain in the commitment to never accumulate profit but always waste it and get wasted, to consume and be consumed, and refuse to save anything or be saved by anyone.

While laudable in their ideals to resist productivity culture, unfortunately, this strategy and these movements have proven unable to sufficiently resist, overcome or change the broader economic system of performance culture. Instead, the performance of resistance has become a lifestyle brand and experiential commodity itself. Capitalism

has an uncanny ability to co-opt its resistance in service of the market.

An ironic affirmation of this paradoxical symbiosis occurred in 2016 on the 40th anniversary of the release of *Anarchy in the UK* by the Sex Pistols. Joe Corré, the son of Vivienne Westwood and Sex Pistols manager Malcolm McLaren, set fire to £5 million worth of punk memorabilia on a boat on the River Thames. It was billed as a protest against music, and punk, being used as a marketing tool. "Punk has become another marketing tool to sell you something you don't need. The illusion of an alternative choice. Conformity in another uniform." (Press Association 2016) The spectacle included a fireworks performance and burning effigies of politicians. While Corré's intention was to protest the co-option of performance, it can be argued that the public relations and publicity surrounding the protest only deepened the co-option of performed resistance as spectacle. Our energy and emotional labour of resistance is redirected, converted into new brand equities in the marketplace of ideas. The process is accelerated by our dependence on dromoeconomics of information systems and the instant gratification of social media. We perform and share our life and acts of defiance via social media platforms. More often than not, we end up reinforcing the pressures and expectations to perform we wish to resist. We become more dependent on, perhaps even addicted to, the systems from which we wish to be emancipated (Morozov 2013).

The First Steps Towards Recovery

The first step of the Twelve Steps recovery programme is to admit that we are powerless over our dependency and that our lives have become unmanageable.[7] If we are ever to hope to liberate ourselves from the cycles of dependency inherent in technologically-driven performance culture, we must accept that we are sick, tired and need help. As Verwoert (2008, 107) suggested, out of the exhaustion of constant performance may emerge a new form of solidarity, a radical community of convalescence.

> If, living under the pressure to perform, we begin to see that a state of exhaustion is a horizon of collective experience, could we then understand this experience as the point of departure for the formation of a particular form of solidarity? A solidarity that would not lay the foundations for the assertion of a potent operative community, but which would, on the contrary, lead us to acknowledge that the one thing we share—exhaustion—

---

[7] For an in-depth discussion of the twelve-step programme, see Alcoholics Anonymous Alcoholics (1993).

> makes us an inoperative community, an exhausted community, or a community of the exhausted. A community, however, that can still act, not because it is entitled to do so by the institutions of power, but by virtue of an unconditional, exuberant politics of dedication. In short, because, as a community of convalescents, we realise in an empty moment of full awareness, that we care.

This is the conclusion of Verwoert's essay. Picking up where he left off, dedication and care are crucial to the sustainability of creative action. If we take seriously the proposal of a community of convalescence and a politics of dedication and care, we are presented with the challenge of how to sustain our ability to care for one another. Verwoert defaults to a call to look away from institutions of power – an understandable post-structural, deconstructive political step to empower the individual. If taken at face value, we, however, may again end in a situation where individuals feel it necessary to fill the void of these institutions, to self-exploit and perform heroic acts of care. Instead, might there be a way we could let go of the culture of performance and create systems we care for precisely because they free us from the pressure to perform?

Looking Back to Step Forward

Despite the existential anguish that Beckett and his contemporaries felt in the aftermath of the Second World War, the period also provides inspiration for how we may be able to move forward in our struggles. The institutions of power that Verwoert criticized had largely been devastated across the continent, so too the infrastructure for the arts. In the wake of the war, people – exhausted and depleted – were faced with the challenge of imagining a post-national system "to save succeeding generations from the scourge of war." (United Nations 1945) In 1950, French foreign minister Robert Schuman proposed the founding of a European Coal and Steel Community to prevent further war between France and Germany. Its immediate effect freed the states of Europe from the pressures of national industrial competition that beget war. Its long-term effect was the establishment of the European Community and later the European Union.

These treaties and declarations, and others like them, emerged as efforts to create systems we could care for precisely because they could free us from competition over productivity and the negative effects of performances of nationalism. The work undertaken was idealistic, perhaps utopic, but ultimately, practical in execution –

driven by the exhaustion and existential anxiety expressed in Beckett's *The Unnamable* on the one hand, yet ultimately optimistic and sustained by the exuberance of the absurd dynamics and witty exchanges such as between Didi and Gogo. Far from the Sisyphean dystopias envisaged by 19th century thinkers such as Søren Kierkegaard and Friedrich Nietzsche, a new solidarity emerged. It united peoples who were sick of conflict, admitted their dependency on systems that ultimately exploited them and dedicated themselves to establishing systems to free future generations from the pressures of productivity and performance that nearly destroyed a continent and could have extinguished an entire population

The idealism of these post-war efforts in Europe may appear naïve or impractical when we are confronted by the scale of our struggles today and the speed at which things are constantly shifting and changing. However, if we look at the work that was carried out in the years prior to the watershed political decisions, we find incredible stories of care and creativity that defy the odds. Five years prior to the founding of the European Coal and Steel Community, Rudolf Bing, Henry Harvey Wood, Lady Eva Rosebery and Sir John Falconer began work on a new cultural event in the city of Edinburgh. In comparison to elsewhere in Europe, the city had been largely untouched by the war, and the group hoped it might be a refuge for artists from around the world to help establish a new postwar identity.[8]

The Edinburgh International Festival was launched in 1947. Almost immediately, eight arts companies, who appeared uninvited, founded the Fringe Festival as an open access, unjuried arts festival. Both festivals have been in operation ever since and together are the world's largest arts festival. One cannot underestimate the importance of the Edinburgh Festivals to postwar intercultural dialogue. Their impact was not immediate, but the commitment of established institutional figures alongside the sustained call for open access by artists created an ethos and practice of structure and critique that echoes through the social policies and best practices of many European governments. Real sustainable change is never an immediate gratification. Small steps must be taken by groups of people who step outside of the rush of progress and dromoeconomics and seize their ability to pause and enact alternatives. They hold themselves accountable for the outcome of their actions while accepting that they themselves may not enjoy the completion or full realization of their work. This may be the unexpected wisdom found in Beckett's *The Unnamable* and *Waiting for Godot*. The waiting (and how we sustain and care for ourselves through it) may be more than just the necessary condition for change. The waiting may be the most important part.

---

[8] For a brief overview of the history of the Edinburgh Festivals, see the Edinburgh Festival City (2019).

Reference

· Adorno, Theodor. *Prisms*. Boston: MIT Press, 1955.
· Alcoholics Anonymous. "Alcoholics Anonymous: The story of how many thousands of men and women have recovered from alcoholism." Alcoholics Anonymous World Services: New York, 1993.
· Armitage, John and Phil Graham. "Dromoeconomics: Towards a Political Economy of Speed." *parallax*, vol. 7, no. 1 (2001): 111-123.
· Beckett, Samuel. *The Unnamable*. New York: Grove Press, 1954.
· Beckett, Samuel. Waiting for Godot. New York: Grove Press, 1954.
· Bowles, Nellie. "Silicon Valley Came to Kansas Schools. That Started a Rebellion." *New York Times* (21 April 2019). Accessed 10 May 2021.
  https://www.nytimes.com/2019/04/21/technology/silicon-valley-kansas-schools.html.
· Carroll, Oliver. "Russia is 'playing with West's minds' , says Putin advisor." *The Independent* (12 February 2019). Accessed 10 May 2012.
  https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/putin-russia-kremlin-vladislav-surkov-grey-cardinalmoscow-a8773661.html.
· Curtis, Adam. *HyperNormalisation*. London: BBC, 2016.
· Dallison, Paul and Maïa de la Baume. "Juncker: I've got Brexit fatigue." *Politico* (21 February 2019). Accessed 10 May 2021.
  https://www.politico.eu/article/juncker-ivegot-brexit-fatigue-theresa-may-eu-european-commission.
· Douglas, Jason. "Brexit-Fatigued English Voters Punish Main Parties in Local Elections." *Wall Street Journal* (3 May 2019). Accessed 10 May 2021.
  https://www.wsj.com/articles/brexit-fatigued-english-voters-punish-main-parties-in-localelections-11556882844.
· Edinburgh Festival City. "History of the Festivals." *EdinburghFestivalCity.com* (2019). Accessed 10 May 2021. https://www.edinburghfestivalcity.com/the-city/history-of-thefestivals.
· Fottrell, Quentin. "American journalism is suffering from 'truth decay' — the media have become more biased over the last 30 years, RAND study says." *MarketWatch.com* (21 May 2019). Accessed 10 May 2021. https://www.marketwatch.com/story/theres-a-truth-decay-in-american-journalism-study-says-media-has-become-more-biased-over-thelast-30-years-2019-05-15.
· Gabbert, Elisa. "Is compassion fatigue inevitable in an age of 24-hour news?" *The Guardian* (2 August 2018). Accessed 10 May 2021.
  https://www.theguardian.com/news/2018/aug/02/is-compassion-fatigue-inevitable-in-an-age-of-24-hour-news.
· Gore, Will. "Why has Brexit disappeared from the front pages of UK newspapers?" *The Independent* (28 April 2019). Accessed 10 May 2021.
  https://www.independent.co.uk/independentminds/brexit-explained/brexit-eu-second-referendum-fatigue-news-media-front-pages-labour-a8890051.html.
· Hains, Tim. "CNN's Alisyn Camerota: Trump Administration 'Has Broken My Spirit,' Laws Are Broken But Nothing Happens." *Real Clear Politics* (3 May 2019). Accessed 10 May 2021.
  https://www.realclearpolitics.com/video/2019/05/03/cnns_alyson_camerota_trump_administration_has_broken_my_spirit_laws_broken_but_nothing_happens.html.
· Holmes, Ryan. "Inside the Growing Social Media Skills Gap." *Fast Company* (21 January 2016). Accessed 10 May 2021.
  https://www.fastcompany.com/3055665/inside-the-growing-social-media-skills-gap.

· Jargon, Julie. "Your Kid Wants to Be a YouTuber? There's a Camp for That." *Wall Street Journal* (21 May 2019). Accessed 10 May 2021.
https://www.wsj.com/articles/your-kid-wants-to-be-a-youtuber-theres-a-camp-forthat-11558431001.

· Morozov, Evgeny. Why Social Movements Should Ignore Social Media." *The New Republic* (5 February 2013. Accessed 10 May 2021.
https://newrepublic.com/article/112189/social-media-doesnt-always-help-social-movements.

· Pomerantsev, Peter. "Putin's Rasputin." *The London Review of Book*s, vol. 33, no. 20 (October 2011): 3-6. Accessed 10 May 2021. https://www.lrb.co.uk/v33/n20/peter-pomerantsev/putins-rasputin.

· Press Association. "Punk funeral: Joe Corré burns £5m of memorabilia on Thames." *The Guardian* (26 November 2016). Accessed 10 May 2021.
https://www.theguardian.com/music/2016/nov/26/punx-not-dead-joe-corre-burnsmemorabilia-worth-5m-on-thames.

· Radiohead. "Just." Radiohead. *The Bends*. New York: Warner/Chappell Music, Inc., 2006.

· Ritchel, Matt. "Lost in E-Mail, Tech Firms Face Self-Made Beast." *New York Times* (14 June 2008). Accessed 10 May 2021.https://www.nytimes.com/2008/06/14/technology/14email.html.

· Shafak, Elif. "Turkey's Politics of Fatigue." *New York Times* (26 January 2015). Accessed 10 May 2021. https://www.nytimes.com/2015/01/27/opinion/turkeys-politics-of-fatigue.html.

· United Nations. "Preamble." United Nations. *Charter of the United Nations*. New York: United Nations, 1945. Accessed 10 May 2021.
https://www.un.org/en/sections/un-charter/preamble/index.html.

· Verwoert, Jan. "Exhaustion and Exuberance." *Dot Dot Dot*, vol. 15 (2008).

· Virilio, Paul. *Speed* & *Politics: An Essay on Dromology*. New York: Semiotext (e), 1986.

· Virilio, Paul. *The Information Bomb*. London: Verso, 2000.

· Walt, Vivienne. "The Plot Against Europe." *Time* (22 April 2019): 24-31.

· Weller, Chris. "Silicon Valley parents are raising their kids tech-free – and it should be a red flag." *Business Insider* (18 February 2018). Accssed 10 May 2021.
https://www.businessinsider.in/science/silicon-valley-parents-are-raising-their-kids-tech-free-and-it-should-be-a-red-flag/articleshow/62971163