
Beckett's Queer Atavism

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Abstract. Queer readings of Samuel Beckett's antipathy to reproduction have focused on his refusal of futurity. This essay expands on previous studies of anti-futurity in Beckett's work by exploring his fascination with atavism, regression, and decadence. Beckett's anti-vitalist modernism departs from James Joyce's preoccupation with the fruitful potentialities of the degenerate body; from his early story "Echo's Bones" to his final full-length novel *How It Is*, he links atavism to the queer refusal of generative life. By extension, Beckett's "queer atavism" presents a striking alternative to recent neovitalist affirmations of the inhuman in queer theory and modernist studies.

Keywords. Beckett, Biopolitics, Posthumanism, Atavism, Queer.

Resumen. Las lecturas desde la teoría queer acerca de la antipatía de Samuel Beckett hacia la reproducción se han centrado en su rechazo al concepto de futuro. Este artículo amplía los estudios previos sobre el anti-futuro en el trabajo de Beckett a través de la exploración de su fascinación por el atavismo, la regresión y la decadencia. El modernismo antivitalista de Beckett parte de la preocupación de James Joyce por las potencialidades fructíferas del cuerpo degenerado; desde el relato "Echo's Bones" hasta su novela completa *How It Is*, Beckett une el concepto de atavismo con el rechazo queer hacia la vida generativa. Por extensión, el "atavismo queer" de Beckett presenta una alternativa sorprendente a las recientes afirmaciones neovitalistas de lo inhumano en la teoría queer y en estudios modernistas.

Palabras clave. Beckett, biopolítica, post-humanismo, atavismo, queer.

Given that the "turn to life" in the humanities has begun to provoke counterblasts from scholars in fields as diverse as queer theory and ecological studies, Beckett's anti-vitalist modernism may be more relevant than ever. In the introduction to their 2016 collection *Against Life*, Alastair Hunt and Stephanie Youngblood write that "[t]he negative critique of

life” that inspired their volume could be traced back to the “queer-inflected thought” of Leo Bersani and Lee Edelman (19). Their principled revolt against productive life, which has been retroactively associated with the anti-social turn in queer theory, has left an indelible mark in Beckett studies (Kennedy, “First Love” 79-91; Stewart 116). From the standpoint of Edelman’s *No Future* (2004), disclaiming “life” is consistent with a queer resistance to the sacred imperatives of compulsory heterosexuality (4). Life’s value is dependent on its arrival in futurity, yet this arrival will not occur in any present to come, not just because the future never arrives due to its infinite postponement, but because the mandatory deferral of life’s value is the driving force of “reproductive futurism” (Edelman, *No Future* 19). Accordingly, Edelman situates his anti-natalist polemic in opposition to “the conservative politics that compel us to respect life, to preserve it, and perpetuate it” (“Afterword” 271). Insofar as he conceives of sex as anti-vital rather than life-enhancing, Beckett has his creatures embody “the negativity and inhumanity that queer theorists such as Leo Bersani, Lee Edelman and Jonathan Goldberg have so lovingly exhumed from sodomy” (Wilson 22). Drawing on the queer negativity espoused by these thinkers, I will argue that Beckett’s violation of productive life is also a violation of the emancipatory urge to recuperate anti-normative life as part of an ethical resistance to biopower.

I want to suggest, then, that Beckett’s hostility to life is *unacceptable*, at least in the sense given that term by Claire Colebrook in her critique of the recent “turn to life” in the humanities: “We seem to think not only that the prima facie value of life lies in its modes of flourishing, but that something like destruction or annihilation are *other than life and therefore unacceptable*” (*Death of the PostHuman* 203). As Colebrook aptly suggests, “[l]ife – or its moral imaginary – has always been biopolitical” (*Sex After Life* 18). My aim in this essay is to read Beckett’s fascination with the perverse – with Sade, sodomy, child-murderers, flagellation, and so on – as a violation of the mandate to find the source of value in life. Life has at all times been a synonym for *the good*, Colebrook argues, inasmuch as “the concepts we use to define goodness resonate with concepts of life as fruitful, productive, actualizing and expanding, [whereas] our understandings of evil draw upon ... images of corruption, inertia, stagnation and non-realization” (Colebrook, *Milton, Evil and Literary History* 2-3). Beckett was keenly aware of the collusion of morality with the biopolitical commitment to manage life in order to ensure its survival and enrichment (Kennedy, “First Love” 86). Ultimately, though, the point I want to foreground is that Beckett’s resistance to life fails to cohere with the ethical and political imperatives which have fuelled the recent ascendancy of posthumanist studies of modernism.

Seán Kennedy has argued that Beckett’s hostility to “reproductive futurism” demonstrates his political resistance to eugenicist discourse prevalent in Ireland (and the rest of Europe) in the early twentieth century. For Kennedy, Beckett’s story “First Love” “stubbornly refus[es] the logic of any collective future that [the Child] may be held to signify” (“First Love” 80). Contrasting Beckett’s anti-natalism with the ban on contraception in the Irish Free State and eugenicist politics of W.B. Yeats, Kennedy claims that “the Child in Beckett signifies Edelman’s coercive future and is rejected accordingly” (“First Love” 90). For Paul Stewart, Beckett’s “misopaedia” and “horror of reproduction” convey an ethical commitment to the reduction of human suffering: beginning from Schopenhauer’s conflation of suffering and life, Beckett reaches a counter-intuitive ethical standpoint in which the horror of life and birth reinforces an all-embracing compassion towards living beings (*Sex and Aesthetics* 96-97). In lockstep with Edelman’s queer opposition to “reproductive futurism”, this influential current in recent Beckett scholarship insists on what Hunt and Youngblood call “the ethico-political value of resisting life” (20). One of my claims in this essay is that the

alchemical transformation of Beckett's refusal of life and futurity into a fund of "ethico-political value" reaffirms distinctly human commitments and modes of valuing. How might we rethink Beckett's counter-vitalism without making a recuperative, humanising gesture that aligns his work with affirmative ethical or political scripts? How, too, might such a nonredemptive reading of his anti-life stance inspire new queer readings of the inhuman in the Beckett canon?

According to Steven Swarbick, "queer theory's recent embrace of 'life' and 'ecology' as obvious 'Goods' in themselves appears increasingly symptomatic of a pastoral turn in queer theory, driven by our unrelenting commitment to living on, to seeing ourselves as part of the web of life" (265). Hence the time is right for a reading of Beckett as a writer of the queer counter-pastoral. The negative disposition of the queer atavism in Beckett's fiction would be a fruitful resource for queer theorists who want to challenge the association between affirmation and monstrosity in recent work on "queer inhumanism". In "Acts Against Nature", Elizabeth Wilson argues that "the toxicity of the term [inhuman] has been more or less neutralized" in recent conversations about the queer inhuman (20). For Wilson, "too often, it seems, the politics of the queer inhuman are oriented towards affectively defanged, anti-sodomitical ends – clarity, identity, and the transformation-affirmation of the world, law and nature" (27). This is most apparent, Wilson argues, in readings of the queer inhumanism that eschew the queer negativity associated with sodomy, so that the monstrous undoing of the human "seems to cut only one way" (27). But to consider the queerness of the inhuman in certain literary texts is to encounter the disruptive negative force of the monstrous. In Beckett, the connection between the queer, the monstrous, and the inhuman is neither "affectively defanged" nor oriented towards clarity and political affirmation.

In his recent *Think, Pig!: Beckett at the Limits of the Human* (2016), Jean-Michel Rabaté argues that "one cannot simply enlist Beckett in the camp of the posthuman. It would be impossible to state that Beckett sits clearly on one side of the divide between the human and the posthuman in its contemporary sense" (44). It would be a mistake to ignore this apt warning against assimilating Beckett's "critique of anthropomorphism" to contemporary notions of the posthuman (Rabaté 40). But Rabaté's plea for critical restraint need not preclude Beckett scholars from engaging with recent developments in posthumanist theory. Rather than arguing that Beckett's work conforms to dominant conceptions of the posthuman, I want to suggest that rereading Beckett's rejection of "life" can inspire new challenges to posthumanism's affirmative bias. Colebrook has argued that today's affirmative modes of posthumanism rely on a recuperative logic, whereby "redemption from the rigidity of man" restores humanity's original embeddedness in nature and reconnects "us" to the superabundant vitality pervading the material world (*Death of the PostHuman* 20). Beckett's refusal to identify with the vital pulse of life as the final guarantee of meaning and value links with his counter-vitalist aesthetic. After all, the invective against "life" that punctuates his texts joins with his depictions of ailing and exhausted bodies in mutually reinforcing negation of the vitalist ethos. From his letters to Tom McGreevy, we learn that Beckett gave voice to a mordant anti-vitalist rhetoric in his comments on modern art. In a 1934 letter to McGreevy, for instance, Beckett praises Cézanne for his utter repudiation of the "animising mode" in landscape painting (*Letters I* 227). In biographical terms, of course, Beckett's fascination with the counter-vital is traceable to his childhood obsession with collecting stones. According to James Knowlson, "[l]ater in life, he came to rationalise this concern as the manifestation of an early fascination with the mineral, with things dying and decaying, with petrification. He linked this interest with Sigmund Freud's view that human beings have a prebirth nostalgia to return to the mineral state" (29). On this biographical level, Beckett's

refusal of the imperative to affirm life seems to be nothing more than a psychological idiosyncrasy. But the rejection of “life” in Beckett’s fictions goes hand in hand with the insistent anti-normative tone of his writing, endowing his contestation of the historical norms of life with a wilful and unyielding perversity.

Is, then, anti-futurity the sole version of queer time that Beckett musters against the redemptive avowal of life at the heart of biopower? Definitely not. Retrogression is an equally important temporal logic in his negation of the politics of future-facing life. Beckett doesn’t just reject the future; he exposes his creatures to an inhuman past which negates the image of life as a flourishing continuum. To gauge the nonlinear temporalities at play in Beckett’s engagement with ideas of degeneration I will expand the parameters of the debate on “Beckett and biopolitics” by switching our focus from Beckett’s anti-natalist stance to his creative refashioning of the concept of atavism. Atavistic regression is everywhere in his fiction. Time and again, the return or persistence of “superseded” animality misshapes his quasi-human creatures. Belacqua is a “border-creature” who wants to “troglodyse” himself (*Dream of Fair* 123). Molloy winds up “crawling on his belly like a reptile” (*Molloy* 91). The Unnamable assumes the identity of a creature known as Worm and muses about a time when this vermiform being will “be restored, more or less, to that state in which he was before the beginning of his prehistory” (*Unnamable* 72). Moreover, in his final full-length novel, translated in English as *How It Is*, he links evolutionary temporalities to bodies crawling in “primeval mud” (7). My proposal is that Beckett’s fascination with animal life and inorganic matter refers not so much to the posthuman as to the *pre-human*. In this essay I will argue that his retrograde inclination toward the pre-human is *queer* in that he repeatedly links archaic forms of life and nonlife with non-reproductive sex.

In a sense, then, Beckett’s atavism of fatigued life corresponds with a queer refusal of the investment in forwardness at stake in the Biblical injunction to “go forth and multiply”. But this regression, this sense of being *before* the human, is not easily distinguishable from Beckett’s obsession with the impossibly aged, the physically ruined, the petrifying, and the posthumous – in short, with all that comes *after* productive life. For this reason the atavistic returns in Beckett’s fiction often involve what Edelman calls “the disturbance of positionality that is located in and effected by the sodomitical scene” (*Homographesis* 183). If sodomy is “a literalization of the ‘preposterous’ precisely insofar as it is interpreted as the practice of giving precedence to the posterior”, then the same is true of the backwardness or reversion of atavism (Edelman *Homographesis* 183). Indeed, both sodomy and atavism involve what the Unnamable calls “inverting the natural order” (*The Unnamable* 106). In her study *Atavistic Tendencies* (2008), Dana Seitler demonstrates that atavism is a particularly complex idea: it suggests both human-animal hybridity and the relinquishing of human identity all together, both the undoing of linear time and evolutionary throwbacks obstructing the irresistible march of progress. She argues that the idea of atavism “disallows the modern construction of time as a unity that can be distinguished from a stable, archaic past” (137). Insofar as it names a return to the animal in the wake of the human, atavism also corresponds with the sodomitic tropology that Edelman calls “metalepsis, a rhetorical term that denotes the substitution of cause for effect or effect for cause, a substitution that disturbs the relationship of early and late, or before and behind” (*Homographesis* 175). A metaleptic reading of Beckett’s monstrous creatures would therefore focus on the inversions or perversions of ‘natural order’ in his fiction.

The first characteristic of Beckett’s queer atavism is a reversion to a form of indistinct animality. To revert in this sense is to lose one’s certainty of belonging to a discrete, identifiable species. As David Wheatley has shown, many of Beckett’s creatures suffer from a

chronic sense of “species anxiety”, which is to say that their membership within the species *Homo sapiens* is perennially uncertain (59). This fall from humanness is Molloy’s fate when he can no longer maintain “erect motion, that of man” (*Molloy* 90). This brings us to the second characteristic of queer atavism, which is the inclination of Beckett’s creatures to lose their vertical posture (Weller, “Forms of Weakness” 19). Their more or less gradual renunciations of verticality occur in tandem with their performance an array of queer sex acts and an increased focus on matters excremental. Hence the significant phrasing of Molloy’s apology to the reader following his outburst of praise for the anus: “I apologise for having to *revert* to this lewd orifice, ‘tis my muse will have it so” (80; my italics). Molloy thus asserts that his praise of the arsehole is a retrogression; more, this backsliding from civility is the discursive analogue of his prioritisation of the backside in his recollection of the Ruth/Edith affair. Accordingly, Molloy’s is “bent double” when Ruth/Edith first assaults him “from behind” (57). The less upright they become, the more Beckett’s creatures engage in sexual activities in which the possibility of procreation is uncertain, or indeed absent. Again, the ambiguous encounter between Molloy and Ruth/Edith is paradigmatic, as Molloy considers the possibility that she “put [him] in her rectum” (56). Molloy establishes the link between queerness, regression, and animalized violence when, recounting his intercourse with the ambiguously gendered figure(s) Ruth/Edith, he admits that “all I could see was her taut yellow nape which every now and then I set my teeth in, forgetting I had none, such is the power of instinct” (56). In taking his partner from behind, Molloy is in some sense behind the human – a creature at the mercy of destructive instincts.

To appreciate the singularity of Beckett’s animosity towards life, we must first understand the concerted effort among modernists to rethink the life/death binary. In her dazzling study, *The Modernist Corpse: Posthumanism and the Posthumous* (2018), Erin E. Edwards revivifies our understanding of the boundary between life and death in literary modernism by shining the scholar’s lamp on the posthumous agencies of the modernist corpse. According to Edwards, “far from signifying the moral limits of the human, the corpse in modernism functions ‘autopoietically’ as a generative site from which to rewrite the living body and its relation to putatively dead or lifeless things” (3). Edwards’ Frankensteinian anatomy of modernism’s undead populations receives its galvanizing impulse from Rosi Braidotti’s materialist posthumanism:

Braidotti’s call for a vitalist reconceptualization of death reorients [Giorgio] Agamben’s emphasis on the foundational role of ‘bare life’, which inevitably locates the biological continuum of *zoë* ‘on the horizon of death, or the liminal state of non-life’. ... For Braidotti, this conception of bare life precludes other engagements with *zoë* and has generated in recent social and theoretical discourse a ‘forensic turn’ that define the subject solely through the horizon of death – through its finitude rather than its becoming. Braidotti’s reconceptualization of death instead theorizes the posthuman through its embedded relations with *zoë*, shifting political discourse away from an almost singular emphasis on wound and loss (3).

The modernist corpse is an anticipatory figure in that its posthumous vitalities prefigure the breakdown of the dichotomy of life and nonlife in contemporary posthumanist thought. At first glance Beckett’s posthumous creatures, from the reanimated corpse of Belacqua in “Echo’s Bones” to the moribund Molloy (whose life is “over” and yet it “goes on”), seem to epitomise to the afterlife of the modernist corpse (*Molloy* 34). And yet, Beckett’s total absence from Edwards’ study is perfectly justifiable, for her Deleuzean approach to

nonhuman life yields a political vitalism in line with the strain of contemporary theory that Benjamin Noys' calls "affirmationism" (*The Persistence of the Negative*; bk). Alain Badiou's famous claim that Beckett's oeuvre is one long affirmation notwithstanding (41), many would no doubt agree that the pairing of death and negativity is at the core of Beckett's project. In contrast, contemporary posthumanist recalibrations of death insist on unbinding the ties between death and negativity. As Braidotti suggests, "we need to re-think death, the ultimate subtraction, as another phase in the generative process" (82). Such a rethinking of death, then, questions the rhetoric of finitude and affirms a neovitalist concept of impersonal life. Unbounded life exceeds the limited vitality of the individualised body which, for Braidotti, means that the death of monadic individual contributes to the intensification of *zoe*. Before the advent of work in posthumanist literary studies such as *The Modernist Corpse*, critics have acknowledged that canonical modernist texts take a step in this direction. Harry Staten, for example, writes of the "the will to live-die" in James Joyce's *Ulysses*: "the individual life ceases, and yet the process of '(de)composition' goes on (this is Bloom's vision in Hades). The decomposition of the individual body and its incorporation into the transindividual organic cycle mark the limit of what the Western philosophical tradition can understand and assimilate" (381). The vitalist dimension of Joyce's modernist attempt to think beyond death as an unsurpassable limit or negation of life implies what Eugene Thacker calls "metaphysics of generosity, a commitment to a first principle of generation, fecundity, and affirmation" (90).

Reading the affirmative life of modernism *against* biopolitics would entail a muting of the negative, the unfruitful, the inert, and the sterile. At face value, modernist claims about the creativity of decomposition do indeed contradict humanist norms of life and awaken the fecund potentialities of the non-vital body. As Molloy begrudgingly remind us, "To decompose is to live too" (22). What is more, the undoing of the life/death binary in posthumanist thought maps onto a reading of degeneration as a *generative* process, which introduces alterity into forms of life that have become static because of the enforcement of fixed norms. As Roberto Esposito suggests, "degeneration ... isn't only negative ... but rather assumes and valorizes the different, the dissimilar, and the abnormal inasmuch as they are innovative and transformative powers of reality" (123-24). While the decomposition of organic matter fosters the continuation of the life cycle, degeneration is not a sickness unto death but a vital process that generates unforeseen forms. This dual insight runs like a *leitmotif* through the Joycean corpus, in which, as Staten puts it (referring to *Ulysses* in particular), the "degradation of the logos" and the "becoming-feces" of the human body provide "the ground of a profligate generation of new forms" (381). Beckett acknowledges this feature of Joyce's Viconian aesthetic in his essay "Dante...Bruno, Vico.. Joyce": "The maximum of corruption and the minimum of generation are identical: in principle, corruption is generation" ("Dante...Bruno" 1063). Joyce's affirmation of the agency of the decomposing matter parallels his hostility to the eugenicist idea that nonstandard bodies represent immobility, passivity, anti-futurity, or even mortality itself. The degenerate life of the non-normative body, as this was understood in Nazi eugenics, represented "an existence without life" (Esposito 134). As a harbinger of sterility and death, the degenerate body is reduced to formless waste matter that has no future. Joyce inverts this formula: as Marion Quirici has pointed out, "Joyce demonstrates the potential for disability aesthetics to assert the generativity of deviant bodies" (104), Maren Tova Linett echoes and extends this point: "In the 'Shem the Penman' chapter of *Finnegans Wake* (1939), Joyce takes his literary experimentation to a new extreme, revaluing the deformed body as the body of the modernist

text” (145). She explains that in this chapter the “dysgenic body” becomes a source of artistic creation and animating vitality:

In book 1, chapter 7, ‘Shem the Penman’, and to some degree in book 3, chapter 1, ‘Shaun the Post’, Joyce depicts the writer as disabled, degenerate, and dysgenic. But as the writer of *Ulysses* and *Finnegans Wake*, he also functions as a creator, a life-giver. Indeed, ‘Shem the Penman’ ends by asserting the Shem ‘lifts the lifewand and the dumb speak’. In *Finnegans Wake*, therefore, the devaluation of disability is overturned, the strong Aryan body of Shaun is seen as brutish and oppressive, and the radicalized, disabled, dysgenic body of Shem is celebrated as the source of art and life (183).

While Joyce “overturns” the hierarchy of “dysgenic” and “eugenic” bodies, Beckett negates the normative valuation of life that governs this distinction in the first place. Unlike the life-giving and form-giving body of the Shem, Beckett’s degenerates do not contribute to a “celebration of deformity as modernism” that affirms the anti-normative body as an excess or abundance of life (Tova Linett 96). Rather, he focuses on the degenerate body insofar as it signifies the connection between the anti-vital and temporality of backwardness. In so doing, Beckett inherits the anti-vitalist legacy of decadence rather the futural affirmation of “life-death” found in Joyce’s work.

Two recent publications have made much of Beckett’s late modernist reprise of the aesthetics of decadence. In *Modernism and the Reinvention of Decadence* (2016), Vincent Sherry argues that Edelman’s analysis of queerness as a refusal of “the modern ideology of progressive time” aligns queer anti-futurity with “the temporal imaginary of decadence” (25-6). For Sherry, “there is a fundamental connection between queerness, which has been assigned to decadence as its most vivid interest (its most livid identity), and the denial of futurity, that is, with the imaginary circumstance of aftermath” (26). What is more, Sherry invokes “lateness” and the worn-out time of “aftermath” as the *genii loci* of the “temporal imaginary of decadence” – and he includes Beckett among his cast of modernists who write in the key of decadence (285-87). While Sherry’s focus on the queer time of decadence is highly suggestive in the context of Beckett and biopolitics, I also want to emphasise another aspect of decadence that has been explored by S.E. Gontarski: the work of the Marquis de Sade, which Beckett studied intently during the peak years of the Sadean renaissance that spanned the first half of the twentieth century (15-19). One might argue that Beckett had extracted the queer nucleus of Sade’s vision before developing his own protest against “reproductive futurism”. In his study *Sade: Queer Theorist*, William F. Edminston points out that “the relative importance of anal penetration and the quantitative scarcity of vaginal penetration in [Sade’s] vast fictional writings are striking” (196). The comparable fascination with the arsehole in Beckett’s corpus reiterates Sade’s vaunting of anal penetration over vaginal sex (Weller, “Anethics of Desire” 118). From a certain perspective, then, Sade was the midwife of Beckett’s queer anti-natalism.

Echo’s Bones is a phantasmagoric tale of sexual perversion and degeneracy set in the spectral realm of the dead. It recounts the curious afterlife of Belacqua Shuah, who finds himself reanimated in mysterious circumstances and compelled to atone for a life spent in narcissistic insolence. At the outset our “dead and buried” hero finds himself (unhappily) back among the quick (4): the unwelcome fact that he is “restored for a time by a lousy fate ... to the low stature of animation” belying the sense of an ending properly befitting his posthumous condition (6). If anything, the insistent presence of the phrases “back”, “revisit”,

“return”, “reversion”, and “restored” suggest that his death is an echo or sterile re-enactment of his life (3-6). Prefiguring the association between “bent” posture and queerness in *Molloy*, Belacqua begins the tale “bent double on a fence like a casse-poitrine in delicious rêverie” (*Echo’s Bones* 3). As James McNaughton notes, “[t]he phrase *casse-poitrine* is French slang for the supposed position of a man who regularly performs fellatio” (48). A kind of peculiar anti-climax, then, Belacqua’s death and posthumous survival are emblematic of the anachronistic lateness which is the signature temporality of decadence. Beckett knowingly embraces a raft of decadent tropes and themes: the last scion, infertility, prostitution, sadomasochism, narcissism, aristocratic privilege, venereal disease, youthful death, the corrosion of sexual morality, and so on. Underlining this sense of lost time, Belacqua cries out that he is “[t]oo late!” because his “life is over” (*Echo’s Bones* 6).

One might also read this sense of lateness against the backdrop of Beckett’s belated contribution to the micro-tradition of the modernist afterlife narrative: T.S. Eliot’s *The Waste Land* famously presents London as a city of the dead; Ezra Pound begins his *Cantos* with a Homeric journey to the underworld; Wyndham Lewis’s *The Childermass* envisions an afterlife populated by men killed in World War I; and Joyce’s debt to the *Divine Comedy* is a leitmotif running from *Dubliners* to *Finnegans Wake*. According to Colebrook, the modernist impulse to revisit the realm of the dead is in one sense a gesture of “revitalization”: “modernism sought to inject life into a desiccated tradition by giving blood to the voices of the past. Descending into Hades were all the voices of history and becoming has been reduced to so much noise, the modernist artist would once again experience the opening or genesis of culture, retrieving life’s original, animating and fertile voice” (*Death of the Posthuman* 211). “[A]t the same time”, Colebrook continues, “modernism could only take hold *not* by producing more literary life but by deadening the textual corpus” (*Death of the PostHuman* 214). Like this “counter-vital modernism of the dead letter”, Beckett treats the archive as a crypt of lifeless fragments shorn of any trace of an “animating and fertile voice” (*Death of a PostHuman* 211). For Colebrook, this “counter-vital modernism” opposes the arrogation of the feminine in “anti-Cartesian” modernisms which assert a vitalist affirmation of fluidity against “an affectless, lifeless, disembodied Cartesian prison” (*Death of the PostHuman* 214). These anti-Cartesian modernisms would be the aesthetic forerunners of contemporary posthumanist philosophies that valorise the productive futurity of material flows and decentralized agencies. By contrast, Beckett crafts a decadent poetics of exhaustion at odds with the future-directed tendencies of posthumanist life. In exhuming dead tropes and textual treasures, he buries the vitalist rhetoric of the “fruitful earth” once and for all (*Echo’s Bones* 21). Beckett’s Latin punning on the sodomitic zones of the body, including the mouth (“Baron Abore”) and the arse (“Parteposte”), contribute to an entanglement of linguistic deadness, sexual perversion, and inverted corporeality.¹

Kennedy and McNaughton have both contributed valuable essays that examine Beckett’s comic take on the politics of reproduction and degeneracy in “Echo’s Bones” (Kennedy “‘Echo’s Bones’: Samuel Beckett After Yeats”; McNaughton “‘Echo’s Bones’: Politics and Entailment in the Irish Free State”). One might add, though, that the retrogressive time of atavism and decadence informs the text’s concern with reproductive futures. The tropology of decadence and the medical discourse of degeneration combine in the first section of the narrative, where a syphilitic prostitute named Zaborovna Privet interrupts Belacqua’s masturbatory self-absorption. There are numerous allusions to the literature of decadence during their conversation, including to Baudelaire’s poem “Les Deux Bonnes Soeurs” (*Echo’s Bones* 11). When a ramshackle procession of figures pass before Belacqua and Zaborovna, among them are the two “good sisters”, “Debauch and Death”, from Baudelaire’s poem (11).

There is an elective affinity between “Les Deux Bonnes Soeurs” and *Echo’s Bones*: both texts ironically praise the fertility of prostitutes; both associate prostitution with venereal disease and death; and both link sexual corruption to anti-futurity. As Matthew Potolsky notes, “the poem reads like a traditional paradoxical encomium ... prais[ing] what is loathsome and fearful, addressing Debauchery and Death as ‘good sisters’, and lauding their amiability, health, fertility, and charms” (104). In the poem’s final lines, however, “Debauchery and Death” offer an ecstatic demise to the poet as “an alternative to productive life” (104). For proponents of eugenics around the turn of the twentieth century, sexual debauchery was a lethal threat to the health of populations and the future of the nation. As Michel Foucault explains, beginning in the late nineteenth century doctors increasingly perceived that “debauched, perverted sexuality has effects at the level of the population, as anyone who has been sexually debauched is assumed to have a heredity. Their descendent will also be affected for generations...This is a theory of degeneracy; given that sexuality is the source of individual diseases and that it is the nucleus of degeneracy” (252). It is noteworthy that the degenerative threat of venereal disease is not disclosed when Zaborovna enters the story; instead, the narrator offers ironic praise of her fertility: “There was nothing at all of the grave widow or anile virgin about her, nothing in the least barren in her appearance. She would be, if she were not already, the fruitful mother of children of joys” (*Echo’s Bones* 5). One might read this ironic praise of Zaborovna’s fruitfulness as a parody of the modernist appropriation of the feminine by male writers who presented the female body as a vessel for fantasies of renewing the exhausted life of a sterile, decadent, or degenerate modernity. If the quest through a sterile Dublin in Joyce’s *Ulysses* concludes with “an affirmative, fluid, embodied, feminine, and open return to life”, then Belacqua’s journey through the afterlife emphasises the negative, the inert, the spectral, and the unproductive (*Death of the PostHuman* 212). As we have seen, however, Beckett’s opposition to the anti-Cartesian, flux-affirming, vitalist strain of modernism examined by Colebrook aligns him with a different misogynist strain in modern letters: Baudelaire and the decadents. In a further echo of “Les Deux Bonnes Soeurs”, this paradoxical encomium to Zaborovna’s fertility and maternal qualities crystallizes the biological threat that her sexuality poses to familial values and reproductive health. In a reversal of tone reminiscent of Baudelaire’s final apostrophe, Beckett reprises the outworn decadent trope of the “enchantress turned hag” (Spackman 160-68). And once we recognise that Zaborovna’s “Hutchinson fangs” conflate syphilis with canine animality it becomes difficult to deny that her Ovidian transformation is an atavistic regression. As Penelope Deutscher has pointed out, Edelman’s account of the tyranny of “reproductive futurism” needs to be revised and expanded if we are to make sense of the biopolitical scenarios in which reproduction becomes “a principle of death and its protagonists those of antilife” (101). Contra Edelman, Beckett’s tale figures heterosexual reproduction as figuring the negativity of the death drive and the gestation of nonviable life. Indeed, the “fruitful” mother has now become queer antagonist of the “moral managerialism” that, according to Colebrook, supports the ongoing project of securing life’s expansion (*Sex After Life* 18).

Zaborovna’s reversion from human to animal expedites Belacqua’s return to “the lush plush of womby-tomby” (*Echo’s Bones* 14). In Beckett’s “womb-tomb”, the pre-born and the posthumous join in a polytemporal conjunction of earliness and lateness. This confusion of the pre-human and the post-human disturbs the ordered continuum of the living: it makes the embryonic and the exhausted appear indistinct. Beckett’s fascination with temporal disorder appears in his metaleptic confusions of before and after, life and nonlife, one of the most memorable of which is “mummyfoetus” (*Dream of Fair* 79). This “preposterous” phrase amounts to a linguistic disordering of generation and petrification, whereby the preservation

of lifeless remains comes to precede organic genesis. A conventional idea of life would treat germination and posthumous inertia as opposing tendencies or forces. Unlike many contemporary posthumanisms, Beckett effaces this dichotomy without redeeming death as a secret donor to the causes of evolution, becoming, genesis, sustainability, or survival. In Beckett's writing the unidirectional sequence of life and death gives way to polytemporal disorder. We can read Beckett's insistence on the temporal reversibility of human and animal, early and late, as an analogue of his assault on the spatial logic of above and below, the vertical and the horizontal, the buried and the disinterred. In Beckett's queer tale of botched entombment, "diggings" and "excavation[s]" abound (*Echo's Bones* 39; 49). Moreover, if one way to encounter the past in the present is to descend to the bowels of the earth, then Beckett's allusions to "archaeologists" and "diggings so deep" could suggest an queer atavism of the inanimate and nonorganic (47; 39). Staring down at his own buried corpse, Belacqua experiences one of the most haunting confusions of spatial and temporal order imaginable. At once up high and down low, on terra firma and six feet under, he hunches over his own dead body with the groundsman Doyle behind his back: "As [Belacqua] turned and stooped to investigate his remains (if any) it occurred him that was at the mercy of this strange sexton or groundsman or whatever you like to call him, so advantageously placed above and behind" (*Echo's Bones* 49). In posing his creatures in queer positions, Beckett inverts the spatial and temporal ordering of bodies, life, and death.

In conclusion, I want to consider how Beckett's queering of the idea of atavism can help us reframe his hostility to productive life. In *Atavistic Tendencies*, Seitler pursues two different ways on thinking about human regression. The first is the "negative" biopolitical concept of atavism which would see the return of the animal within the human as a threat to life, survival, and futurity. This *fin-de-siecle* take on atavism would posit human regression as a biological threat to the continuance of productive life. It would therefore rely on a linear moral teleology, according to which life moves from a past defined by animal aggression to a future inhabited by ever more pacific human generations. To focus on Beckett's refusal of narratives of historical progress would be to make his work coincide with emancipatory political projects which resist the unilinear thread of chronological time. Such a reading would, then, be compatible with the "affirmative" posthumanism implied by Seitler's second type of atavism: "Opposed to the imaginary sovereignty of the human, atavism, the eternal recurrence of the animal, erupts as a potent flash of natural history that insists on recognition of a more complex kinship web" (30). Insofar as Seitler declares humanity's embeddedness within the extended family of life, her emphasis on the terms "natural history" and "complex kinship web" is symptomatic of the pastoral turn in recent theories of posthumanism. Beckett scholarship has not failed to embrace a sophisticated creaturely strain of this posthuman version of pastoral. In his study *Beckett's Creatures: Art of Failure After the Holocaust* (2016), Joseph Anderton argues that "Beckett's work underlines the contiguous and continuous nature of all living beings" (Anderton 5). At face value, *How It Is* conforms to this organic image of life. The text's opening passage alludes to deep evolutionary time scales that expose the human to an inhuman past beyond the order of historical time ("selection natural order vast tracts of time") (*HII* 3).² These inhuman temporal scales seem to manifest as an ecological awareness of the interconnectedness of life, which makes legible in turn the mutual vulnerability and finitude of human and nonhuman creatures: "failing kindred meat a llama emergency dream an alpaca llama the history I knew my god the natural" (*HII* 9). Beckett repeatedly invokes bounded figures of life, ecology, and the globe. He figures this "life in common" as a "vast imbrication of flesh without breach or fissure" (*HII* 122). This seamless continuum of living flesh is the counterpart of the text's global reach: "what lands all lands

midnight sun midday night all latitudes all longitudes” (*HII* 73). These descriptions bring to mind the global figures of an organic world that Colebrook critiques as symptomatic of redemptive ecological thinking. For Colebrook, “far from being an ecological figure that will save us from the ravages of globalism, subjectivism, and bio-politics, it is the image of the globe that lies at the centre of an anthropocentric imaginary that is intrinsically suicidal” (*Death* 70). But whilst *How It Is* contains numerous global and ecological figures, Beckett crucially erases any clear-cut distinction between the formed and the formless, the ordered and the chaotic.

Beckett’s sodomitic art helps us to conceive of a queer atavism that doesn’t return humanity to an organic world of “well-bounded life” (Colebrook *Death* 71). As Jonathan Goldberg reminds us, sodomy is “nothing short of world-destroying” (5). *How It Is* foregrounds a queer atavism insofar as Beckett imagines the ‘natural order’ as a dominion of sodomy, regression, and the worldlessness of the void – “the incredible tohu-bohu”, in Beckett phrase (*HII* 35). When Beckett writes of a ‘fire in the rectum’, perhaps alluding to the fire and brimstone that lays waste to Sodom and Gomorrah in Genesis 19, he construes the anus as a hellish site of violence and conflagration (*HII* 9). By extension, Beckett’s queer atavism spells the ruin of life’s unfolding as a continuum of vulnerability, becoming, and genesis. Primordial life thus appears alongside the Sadean tropology of anal sex, torture, and coprophagy. As Shane Weller has shown, Sade is an important presence in the text: “[t]he entire encounter with Pim in the second half of the novel takes the form of a victim/torturer relationship in which violence is the principal form of contact and communication with the other, and the anus (privileged far above the vagina by Sade) is a key zone in a realm characterized as excremental” (“Anethics” 118). In Beckett’s excremental vision, shit becomes a form of anti-vital nourishment: all that exits the anus re-enters the mouth in an unending cycle. Again, Sade’s tormentors are the major precedent: “The Sadean libertine is a monster in the sense that his physicality is perverted (his anus ‘vomits’ and his mouth is penetrated), and thus metamorphoses into a beast that speaks shit ... and defecates nourishment” (Maggi 303). Here, one might recall that such a “disturbance of positionality” is the *sine qua non* of the sodomitic scene. Like all “preposterous” acts against nature, coprophagy embodies “the conjunctive antilogic of ‘both...and,’ of *coincidentia oppositorum* rather than the identitarian and sequential logic of ‘either...or’ or ‘first...then’” (Gil Harris 182). For Beckett, the idea of life and death coinciding in a unity of opposites does not elicit a reassuring posthumanist narrative wherein “the human decomposes and becomes part of the larger ecological network of natural and technological forces within which it is embedded” (Edwards 2). Beckett created an art in which life is discontinuous and disjointed, too fractured to combine as an organic continuum, too defined by isolation to be a pastoral home for his creatures. It seems fitting to end, then, with Beckett’s counter-pastoral tribute to Cézanne: “he had the sense of his incommensurability not only with life of such a different order as landscape but even with life of his own order, even with the life ... operative in himself” (*Letters I* 227).

Notes

¹ As Mark Nixon explains in his compendious notes to the text, these “Latin terms for ‘by mouth’ and ‘from behind’ ... denote sexual activities that do not lead to conception” (*Echo’s Bones* 83-84).

² Andy Wimbush analyses “ecological time” in *How It Is* in his “Palaeozoic Profounds: Samuel Beckett and Ecological Time”.

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