
Introduction

“Cephalopods of state”: Beckett and Biopolitics

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Beckett studies has changed, and changed utterly, in the last twenty years, extending its preoccupation with humanist philosophies to an engagement with history and politics. In the process, the inscrutable aspect of Beckett’s views on a range of political subjects has diminished. Emilie Morin’s *Beckett Political Imagination* (2017) provides ample evidence of his engagement with politics, while James McNaughton’s *Samuel Beckett and the Politics of Aftermath* (2018) extends the achievement of earlier accounts of his political aesthetic (e.g. Adorno, Boxall, Jones). One area of scholarship that has proved exceptionally fertile, if that is the right phrase, is biopolitics. Foucault’s identification of a new regime of power predicated on the management of populations, as distinct from individuals, is indispensable to an account of Beckett’s political bodies, as this volume confirms.

For Foucault, biopower is different from sovereign power: “It is the power to make live” (247). “Sovereignty took life and let live. And now we have the emergence of a power that ... consists in making live and letting die” (247). It was a stunning insight. And it still resonates today even if, by the end of his analysis, Foucault reaches something of an impasse. Biopolitics is the governance of life, so why does it so often end in death? For reasons that are not entirely clear, Nazi biopolitics morphs into thanatopolitics and, reaching a “paroxysmal point”, is directed against the German people themselves (260). Foucault’s customary lucidity deserts him here. It is not clear if biopolitics requires racism, and is destined to implode, or if Nazism is an exceptional case: an aberration from within biopolitics. He cannot decide if fascism is unique, “the Nazi event”, or is symptomatic of the race function in biopolitics generally (Campbell xxiv). Oddly, something of the same impasse occurs at the culmination of McNaughton’s momentous analysis of famine politics in *Endgame* (135-163). Both Hitler and Stalin resort to “famine genocide” in their efforts to regenerate their people (163), and *Endgame* appears to locate the origins of both in the logic of colonialism, with unsettling implications for the Allied opponents of Hitler. Is Nazism merely the logic of European colonialism turned upon its own people, as Aimé Césaire suggested? For Césaire, famously, colonialism and civilisation are indistinguishable moments in a history of European atrocity, rendering the idea of Europe itself “indefensible” (172). Before Europeans were the victims of colonial logic, they were its “accomplices” (174). Does Beckett discern this? Does *Endgame* use the Irish famine to link Britain, Germany and Russia in a generalised critique of colonial

racism? McNaughton asks, but does not answer this question, framing Clov's motionlessness as symptomatic of Beckett's refusal to decide (163). And here again, there is something dissatisfying about that conclusion. It is as if McNaughton inherits the impasse from Foucault. Is Nazism an aberration from, or merely an intensification of, state racism as the founding logic of colonialism?

For Césaire, the continuities are undeniable. Nazism merely distorts and intensifies colonialism's civilisation/barbarism binary: "It is barbarism, but the supreme barbarism, the crowning barbarism that sums up all the daily barbarism" (174). A decisive shift in logic is provided by "Christian pedantry" (173). What marks both European colonialism and European fascism as twins is the shared conviction that colonialism is a civilising, indeed redemptive, process (173). For the Nazis, redemption in God is displaced by redemption in the perfection of the race, but the message is the same: death will set you free. In the sixteenth century, the Spanish killed for the sake of plunder. There was little pretence of civilising anybody (Césaire 173). Once death is regenerative, however, the passage from biopolitics to thanatopolitics is quasi-inevitable. And Ireland, as Beckett was aware, was one of the first places such rhetoric was used, alongside *laissez-faire* economics, to justify non-intervention for civilising purposes (Kennedy). At the height of the Great Famine, the English *Times* remarked:

For our part, we regard the potato blight as a blessing. When the Celts once cease to be potatophagi they must become carnivorous. With the taste for meats will grow the appetite for them; with the appetite, the readiness to earn them. With this will come steadiness, regularity, and perseverance. (Quoted in Gray 227)

Here is clear evidence of the impulse towards "regularization" that drives biopolitics (Foucault 247), but also of the thread linking Charles Trevelyan's civilising Irish mission to Adolf Hitler's Third Reich: in each case, death is both the object of cure, and its therapeutic instrument (Campbell xxiv-xxv).

This convergence informs how Roberto Esposito explains Nazism. He links the "oscillation" in Foucault to a failure to understand "the immunitary logic associated with modern political thought" (Campbell xiii). At its root, liberal philosophy makes an assertion of community that contains its own immunizing impulse against the obligations incurred in community: "the modern subject who enjoys civil and political rights is itself an attempt to attain immunity from the contagion of the possibility of community" (Campbell xi). Community is an imperative, but one that must be immunised against external influence as well as internal excess. This is how Esposito moves beyond Foucault "to inscribe the most significant elements of the Nazi biopolitical apparatus in the larger project of immunizing life through the production of death" (Campbell xxiv). Esposito also critiques and extends Agamben, for whom the logic of exception comes down to an argument about the form life takes: *bios* is distinguished, not from other forms of life, but from *zoe*, or formless life, which is "merely alive and hence killable" (Campbell xxiii). "It is the shape that matters", as Beckett once observed (Schneider 173), in a very different context. For Agamben, *bios* is "the form or way of life proper to an individual or group" (In Campbell *xxi*). The distinction that organises exceptionalism, then, is between that which is included within the community, and that which is alive, but outside it. For Esposito, by contrast, since the excess of community is internal to the logic of community itself, there is always already an internal threat: a formless menace that diminishes life, that "perpetually gnaws at it", as Foucault sees (244). What Foucault does not see, for Simona Forti, is the significance of morphological racism to all of this (and to biopolitical discourse generally).

To the German soldiers in the trenches, Forti argues, Plato mattered more than Darwin. Or rather, a selective reading of him popularised by H.K.F. Günther:

Plato advocates for his people all kinds of selective tests, because they allow the separation of the healthy from the unworthy. The glance is always directed to totality, to descendants of the future, to the masses of young people who are as yet unborn; thus Plato, unconcerned with individual cases, acquires that imperturbability that we attribute to the necessity of nature. *Similar to nature: so accommodating to the ideal Type and so uncaring of the individual life.* (Quoted in Forti 20)

Nature matters not as object of scientific inquiry but as “a sort of impersonal force that dreams itself according to its types” (15). It is a species of “Nazi pseudometaphysics” in which body and soul, race and individual, fuse in an ongoing process of perfectibility (16). One projects a “dream image” with which one identifies in the aspiration to physical perfection. “The supreme spiritual value for a race is to achieve the perfect form of its somatic features” (15). All that is not “whole” must be sacrificed to regeneration. In this way, the quest for justice becomes identical with the quest for health, and politics the means whereby health is realised and regulated: “True politics is therefore eugenics: matrimonial regulation, the treatment of infants, and the elimination of the abnormal and deformed” (Forti 19). It is a disastrous inversion of Christ’s vision: “All are in the likeness of the Divinity, even the lowest, and especially the lowest” (Horkheimer 35).

Beckett was familiar with this kind of thought, and not just because of his visit to Nazi Germany in 1936. In Ireland, W.B. Yeats appealed to morphological racism in his brief flirtation with republicanism in *Cathleen ni Houlihan* (1904). As Joseph Valente has shown, the transfiguration of Cathleen at the end of that play focuses on her gait and posture, her “ability rather than her desirability” (forthcoming), and her regeneration is made possible only by the blood sacrifice of Michael, who exits the stage in a trance. Plato provides the idea of the political body as a living work of art, to be composed in language, traditions, and customs, but also in blood and soil (Forti 16). In her passage from “strange” old woman to proud, young sovereign (Yeats 50), Cathleen figures the renewal of the Irish body politic in sacrifice: a literal transfiguration of Irish hopes. It was a hugely influential statement of what has recently been termed “ablenationalism” (Mitchell and Snyder), the theme of Siobhán Purcell’s essay here. For Beckett, the Irish civic guard was “a symbol of Ireland with his official Gaelic loutish complacency & pot-walloping *Schreinlichkeit* [chest-ishness]” (*Letters I*, 555). With his chest pushed out, and his sleeves rolled up, he was a fitting symbol of the new regimes of power that policed the borders of the Irish body in the 1930s. Hence Beckett’s representation of the policeman in *Murphy*, says Purcell. Because he operates at the intersection of biopolitics, law, and the state monopoly of violence, he both embodies and regulates ablenationalist norms. Purcell traces how “compulsory able-bodiedness” operated as the “foundational” myth for the Irish Free State, as embodied in the figure of Cuchulain. At the time, Cuchulain was both a republican war-hero and a Victorian Irish ideal, and Beckett critiques both: Lady Gregory’s cult of Victorian masculinity and W.B. Yeats’s *On Baile’s Strand*, but also Pearse’s cult of noble sacrifice. In the process, he “shines a light on the disenfranchising experience of disability”: how “power, surveillance and biopolitics” combine to push people beyond the margins.

Later, of course, Yeats turned away from Irish republicanism to a reactionary politics of Protestant ascendancy (McCormack), but the same morphology of race informed this turn, undergirding Yeats’s career-long interest in eugenics. At the very end of his career, in *Purgatory* (1938), Yeats interweaves justice and health in his depiction of a Big House ruined by dint of miscegenation: “to kill a house/Where great men grew up, married, died/ I here

declare a capital offence” (432). In the ensuing quest for purification, death becomes the means whereby death is both avenged and forestalled. The Old Man seeks to immunise future generations by killing his own dysgenic offspring, sparing his own life on the basis that he is too old to matter.

For Forti, Foucault misses this because he ignores morphological racism in its “mythical and transfiguring force” (14). As well, one might observe that Nazism did not reach its paroxysm when Hitler ordered the destruction of the basis of life of the German people at the end of the war. This had already occurred, at the outset of his project, when he turned on Germany’s internal outcasts: the disabled, the mentally ill, the ‘degenerate’. Nazism was always aimed at its own people, if they embodied a form inimical to perfection. “Never before was humanity in its external appearance and perceptions closer to the ancient world than it is today”, Hitler proclaimed (2), at the opening of the House of German art in 1937. This was a rotating collection of canonized works meant to immunize one against the degenerate artworks also on national display at this time. But before Aryanism could be tested abroad, it had to be purified, inwardly, of an inherent taint. For Esposito, the politicisation of medicine under the Nazis cannot be understood outside of this attempt to immunize Aryanism (115). It was the difference between being menaced by a wild beast and eaten by internal parasites. One demands violence, the other a more forensic process of elimination (Forti 13). But the organicist conception of society this assumed, in which every individual was as a cell in the body politic of National Socialism (Esposito 110-145), set up a self-defeating war against a threat (degeneration) that was both ambient and inescapable, hereditary and contagious, i.e. undefeatable in the terms in which it was being conceived (Valente, “Genealogy” 380). The Old Man’s self-defeating gesture in *Purgatory* enacts the impossibility of regenerative self-sacrifice: “Twice a murderer and all for nothing” (436).

In “Censorship in the Saorstát”, a mainstay of these pages, Beckett himself mimics degeneration theory – and morphological racism indeed – when he refers to Ireland’s governing elites as the “cephalopods of state” (87). Where the legislation itself squirts definitions like “a cuttle squirts ooze from its cod” (84), Ireland’s statesmen are reduced to amorphous blobs. Beckett first makes the comparison, then literalises the simile. In this, I suggest in my own essay, he both lampoons the discourse of degeneration – the logic of its governing assumptions – and mimics its rhetoric: the literary methods it mobilises to make its case. Reading degeneration theory, one is struck by how relentlessly positivist it is. There is a vulgar literalism to it all, as when Max Nordau explains Impressionist painting by “trembling of the eyeball” (46). Hitler, too, thought degenerate artists had something wrong with their eyes (2). It couldn’t be that they saw things differently. Tyrants, as Theodor Hacker observes, always want language that is easily understood (Quoted in Phillips 291). By literalising metaphors, operationalising figurative language, they seek to convert fantasy into reality, with disastrous consequences. McNaughton calls it “the playwright’s prerogative”: “Hitler’s insistence that his words should effect precisely what they say” (15). What McNaughton’s book demonstrates, time and again, is Beckett’s concern with how aesthetics is given to doing the same thing. How it mimics propaganda, instantiates norms of representation, or euphemises atrocity. In *Degeneration*, Max Nordau had fantasised about crushing the degenerate “anti-social vermin” (557). Hitler went ahead and did so, with Nordau’s own people, “the Jews”, a prime target.

When Beckett responded to Irish censorship, he was himself a proscribed writer, as Lloyd (Maedhbh) Houston discusses here, in an electrifying account of Irish anti-Semitism in the Sinclair trial. Drawing on Irish newspapers, Houston brings Senator Oliver St-John Gogarty’s behaviour before us again with fresh eyes, and it is shocking: a clear instance of the immunizing logic Esposito identifies. For Beckett, moreover, there were discernible continuities between “Irish anti-Semitism” and “pro-natal ethno-nationalism”. Houston

proves Beckett understood the biopolitical implications of censorship. His first impulse, when asked to write about it, was to seek a copy of the 1935 Criminal Law Amendment Act. This was the specific legislation that ratified incarceration as Ireland's "preferred" response to sexual immorality (Smith 230). Both Houston and Feargal Whelan examine the "architecture of containment" that resulted, as Ireland displaced anxieties about national purity onto vulnerable women before locking them all up for their own good (Smith). For Whelan, Beckett understood the biopolitics of Ireland's psychiatric regime, but he also felt vulnerable to its scrutiny. As a result, from *More Pricks than Kicks* to *Malone Dies*, he explores how Irish psychiatric power produced its object for the purposes of social regulation in the guise of care/cure. The figure of Swift recurs in Beckett's work in triangulation of same themes, "madness, confinement and sexual transgression", that converged in Ireland's containment culture, but also due to the role he played in abnormalising the 'mad Irish'.

For Parker Evans, Beckett's post-war work is less about Irish biopolitics and more attuned to life after Auschwitz. By embodying the problem of biopolitics in *Molloy*, Beckett offers "a historically situated attempt to grapple with how subjecthood and subjectivity have been themselves disrupted in the wake of the Second World War". Evans argues that *Molloy* "both inhabits and complicates the subject of *homo sacer*", producing an intersectional analysis of ideology and biopolitics. Yael Levin is also interested in historical constructions of subjectivity. For Levin, however, Beckett searches for ways out of the "normative script of biopolitics". In a surveillance culture in which every aspect of existence is measured and quantified, the mere act of paying attention is already co-opted to biopower. Indeed, both attention and distraction "situate the subject". Beckett's stripping of cultural signifieds from their work seeks to strip the state of its power over the individual. In a carefully argued reading of *Proust*, Beckett's satiric essay, "Le Concentrisme", and Jean-Francois Lyotard's *Driftworks*, Levin finds evidence of a poetics of negation in Beckett, one characterized by drift and stupor rather than "resistance" to biopower.

For Evans, as for Byron Heffer, Beckett's anti-reproductive animus suffuses his portrayal of sex, but where Evans sees an ethical project at work, Heffer refuses any such logic. Masterfully explicating the trope of atavism in "Echos Bones", Heffer queries "the emancipatory urge to recuperate" Beckett's work as "ethical response to biopower". Drawing on the anti-relationist strain in queer theory, as well as posthumanist work by Claire Colebrook, Heffer traces Beckett's refusal of any positive valorization of life *per se*. Beckett's interest in decadent literature is symptomatic of this refusal. For Nordau, the decadents were amongst the most despicable of the degenerates: "sniffing with swinish satisfaction into the most horrible filth" (309). This, for Beckett, was what 'mattered' about them, and "he repeatedly links archaic forms of life and nonlife with non-reproductive sex". It is a stunning critique of the recuperative tendency in Beckett studies: what Beckett himself called the "redemptive perversion" of his work (Simpson). Too many scholars, myself included, have sought to redeem Beckett's writings for a positive vision of the world, even as the vistas of the work itself grow bleaker. "I take no sides", Beckett told Alan Schneider in 1958 (173). Heffer takes this seriously. "Fuck life", indeed.

Finally, it is a rare feat when close reading, theoretical rigour, archival research and historical acuity combine in one place, yet all are evident in Dominic Walker's essay on the biscuit scene in *Murphy*. Drawing on marginalist economics, biopolitics, the *Murphy* notebooks, and newspaper accounts of the vandalising of Jacob Epstein's 'Rima' statue, Walker reads Beckett as a proleptic analyst of disciplinary power. He was alive to "power structures" and "formalized them aesthetically before Foucault had fully developed his disciplinary hypothesis". And this prescience extended to biopower, by way of Beckett's "intimation" of the links between "fascism and market rationality". In a brilliant reading of Nelly and the ginger biscuit, Walker shows how biopolitics – as ongoing calculus of

disposability – requires economic rationalism to function at all, a point the out-of-work Beckett was clearly thinking about as he wrote “Lightning Calculation”. For making this collection happen, I am grateful to all these contributors, their supporting crews, and the institutions that support them. Also to the peer-reviewers who did such amazing work. Without you, this wouldn’t exist. I thank José Francisco Fernández for inviting us into the pages of *Estudios Irlandeses*. And all of you who join us here.

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