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## The Theme of the Five Biscuits: *Murphy*, Foucault, and Beckett's Critique of Neoliberalism

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**Abstract.** Beckett's *Murphy* grew out of "Lightning Calculation", a short story about biscuits and the tragic incommutability of preference. Beckett likely borrowed this rare Americanism from Thorstein Veblen, who uses it to describe the "neo-classical" economic subject, a "hedonistic ... lightning calculator of pleasures and pains". This essay argues that *Murphy*'s predicament is consistent with Veblen's "neo-classical" subject and, a fortiori, Foucault's neoliberal subject in *The Birth of Biopolitics*. Using Freud's "Theme of the Three Caskets", the essay suggests that, while death might no longer be the prerogative of "sovereign power", it is still felt as the duress of "utility maximisation" with the ultimate "budget constraint" of the human lifespan.

**Key Words.** Samuel Beckett, *Murphy*, Biopolitics, Neoliberalism, Biscuits.

**Resumen.** La novela *Murphy*, de Samuel Beckett, surgió de un relato corto titulado "Lightning Calculation", una historia sobre galletas y la trágica inconmutabilidad de nuestras elecciones. Probablemente, Beckett tomó prestado este raro americanismo de Thorstein Veblen, que lo emplea para describir al sujeto económico "neoclásico", un "hedonista calculador de rayos de placer y dolor". En este artículo se argumenta que el dilema de *Murphy* es consistente con el sujeto "neoclásico" de Veblen y, con mayor razón, con el sujeto neoliberal expuesto por Foucault en *The Birth of Biopolitics*. Partiendo del texto de Freud, "El motivo de la elección del cofre", en este ensayo se sugiere que, si bien la muerte puede que no sea ya la prerrogativa del "poder soberano", aún así se considera como la coacción de "maximización de utilidad" con el "límite de presupuesto" final en el tiempo de la vida humana.

**Palabras clave.** Samuel Beckett, *Murphy*, biopolítica, neoliberalismo, galletas.

“What is my life, but preference for the ginger biscuit?”  
- Samuel Beckett, “Sasha Murphy” (UoR MS 5517/2).

On the 29<sup>th</sup> of January 1935, Samuel Beckett tells Thomas MacGreevy that he has written “a very short & very tenuous story” called “Lightning Calculation”, in which his hungry protagonist laments the helpless vagaries of individual “preference” vis-à-vis a collection of five biscuits (UoR MS 2902; Beckett, *Letters* 243). Begun in earnest on the 28<sup>th</sup> of August 1935, the novel *Murphy* (1938) grew out of this passage, which appears with few significant alterations in the published text. One notable addition is a comparison between the “paltry” opportunities of unfree desire and an act of vandalism on a statue in Hyde Park, Jacob Epstein’s “Rima” (Beckett, *Murphy* 62). Critics have puzzled over the significance of the statue, itself troublingly based on a racially fetishized character in William Henry Hudson’s travel fiction *Green Mansions: A Romance of the Tropical Forest* (1904) (Ackerley, *Demented* 107-8). What does Murphy’s choice of lunchtime confectionary have to do with Epstein’s bas relief, defaced by “The Independent Fascist League” with permanganate of potash twelve days before Beckett redrafted “Lightning Calculation” for *Murphy* (“News in Brief”, 9)? In what sense could Murphy’s tragically ineluctable taste be like “red permanganate on the Rima of variety”, a “violation” that is apparently tantamount to fascist vandalism (Beckett, *Murphy* 62)?

Beckett’s choice of title suggests one line of inquiry. The phrase “lightning calculation” has no OED entry and produces no results in *Google Ngram*, meaning that it does not appear once before 1935 in Google’s immense library of searchable texts (and only a handful of times since) (*Google Ngram*, Web). Its cognate, “lightning calculator”, does have a faint lexical footprint, but, again, apparently not enough to merit a spot in the OED. Hoy D. Orton, an obscure American accountant, seems to have coined the phrase in *Orton’s Lightning Calculator and Accountant’s Assistant* (1856), where it theatrically denotes a novel approach to mental arithmetic. It next appears in William S. Hutchings’ *The Lightning Calculator: A New, Readable and Valuable Book* (1867), where the “lightning calculator” is Hutchings himself and, by extension, anyone who happens to be freakishly good at mental arithmetic; Hutchings was a regular at P. T. Barnum’s American Museum (Blackington 149). Having crossed the Atlantic, the phrase appears in *The Times* on forty occasions from 1873 to 1904, mostly promoting Barnumesque variety shows. It all but vanishes after 1904, with just six further appearances in *The Times* before the composition of “Lightning Calculation” in 1935 (*Times Digital Archive*, Web).

It is doubtful that Beckett chose this rare Americanism as a title without a specific source in mind. We can rule out Hutchings himself, who was not internationally famous; the British and Irish press make no reference to him, and he was not even particularly well-known in America (*British Library Newspapers, 1732-1950*, Web; *Irish News Archives*, Web; *New York Times Archive*, Web). I have only been able to find two plausible published sources: a 1933 article in *The American Journal of Psychology* called “The Visual Imagery of a Lightning Calculator”, and Thorstein Veblen’s *The Place of Science in Modern Civilization* (1917). It is just about possible that Wilfred Bion, with whom Beckett started analysis in December 1933, might have recommended him the article, though its contents have no obvious relevance to Beckett’s story (Knowlson 174). It is more likely that, in the course of Beckett’s gregarious scientific reading in the 1930s, he happened to encounter this decidedly *Murphy*-like passage from Veblen’s book (Nixon and Van Hulle 200-213):

The hedonistic conception of man is that of lightning calculator of pleasures and pains, who oscillates like a homogeneous globule of desire of happiness under the impulse of stimuli that shift about the area, but leave him intact. ... He is an isolated,

definitive human datum, in stable equilibrium except for the buffets of the impinging forces that displace him in one direction or another. ... When the force of the impact is spent, he comes to rest, a self-contained globule of desire as before. (Veblen 73-4)

Critics have noted Beckett's fascination with behaviourism and the mechanics of equilibrium in the 1930s (Gang 2013; Nixon, *Diaries* 37). Veblen draws on both discourses to present a "hedonistic conception of man" that is virtually identical to Beckett's philosophical pessimism in *Murphy* and elsewhere, particularly his monograph on *Proust* (1930) (Beckett, *Murphy* 38). One of *Murphy's* characters "greatly fears", for instance, that human behaviour might only consist of mechanical reflexes to the vicissitudes of pains and pleasures in a "closed system" of "wantum" (38-9). Humans oscillate blindly between desire and satisfaction, Wylie says, in a state of dynamic equilibrium that he pictures as "a well with two buckets", "one going down to be filled, the other coming up to be emptied" (38). But where Beckett is drawing on Schopenhauer's pessimistic subject in *The World as Will and Idea* (1818), Veblen is describing the emergence of a new economic subject, the *homo oeconomicus* of "Austrian" economics (Ackerley, *Demented* 171; Veblen 73). Founded in the 1870s, the Austrian school forms the bedrock of modern mainstream economics and, through Friedrich Hayek among others, provides the theoretical basis of contemporary neoliberalism. It is based on a subjective theory of value known as "Marginalism", which proposes that people choose things because the final or "marginal" unit of option X becomes less valuable to them than the first or "marginal" unit of option Y (Jevons 19). For Michel Foucault, this makes the neoliberal subject "a subject who is not so much defined by his freedom, or by the opposition of soul and body, ... but who appears in the form of a subject of individual choices which are both irreducible and non-transferable [i.e. incommensurably subjective]" (Foucault, *Birth* 271-2). Like *Murphy* and his biscuits, Foucault's neoliberal subject must be forever calculating hierarchies of preference within given "budget constraints", ultimately that of time, meaning that every choice, however mundane, is made in the light of death.

This essay will suggest that *Murphy's* biscuit scene draws a playfully histrionic parallel between fascist intolerance of "variety" and the deadly curse of irreducible preference (Beckett, *Murphy* 62; Foucault, *Birth* 272). It will understand preference in the contexts of *Murphy's* pointed reluctance to conform to "economism" and Foucault's genealogy of the neoliberal subject, the subject of choice who apparently emerges when death ceases to be a part of the dominant technology of power (Gibson 70). Setting out with some background on Foucauldian readings of Beckett and a summary of *Murphy's* economic content, the essay will develop Foucault's neoliberal revision of the biopolitical hypothesis at a truncated moment in his analysis, showing how *Murphy's* philosophical pessimism conforms unerringly to Marginalism, the paradigmatic neoliberal theory of value. Using Freud's insights about death and preference in "The Theme of the Three Caskets" (1913), it will re-find death at the heart of Foucault's idea of neoliberal choice, and witness that revised idea borne out with no more than a prophylactic dose of bathos in *Murphy's* "radiant" biscuit scene (Beckett, *Murphy* 62). The essay will conclude that Epstein's vandalized statue is a charged but ambiguated historical referent, standing less for fascism specifically than for power's mobilisation of death in general.

Power in Beckett is not, for the most part, the sort centralized, *laissez faire* economic regulation that Foucault comes to see as "paradigmatic" of biopower (Behrent 558). When power is obvious in Beckett's writing, it tends rather to be the power of shady institutions and (mostly) non-violent, coercive control – in other words, it tends to be disciplinary power. In "Beckett and Foucault: Some Affinities" (1996), Michael Guest identifies two headline examples of discipline in Beckett's work: the preponderance of "practices and structures of surveillance" and of "disciplines imposed upon the body", which he sees respectively in *Film*

(1963) and *Catastrophe* (1982), and “Imagination Dead Imagine” (1965), *The Lost Ones* (1972) and “All Strange Away” (1976) (Guest, 56). For Guest, Foucault helps to draw out the latent political content of Beckett’s work, since that content has to be latent so as not to become an “instrument of power” itself (67). In *Beckett and Poststructuralism* (1999), Anthony Uhlmann argues that “indiscipline, ignorance and failure” help Molloy and Moran to resist “surveillance and power”, which he likens to protests against the Vichy regime by *les zazous* (53). Approaching Beckett through Foucault allows Uhlmann to educe power structures and link them to historical context, rather than looking for referents to orientate the work historically and politically. In Guest’s terms, this means that Uhlmann is able to respect the work’s political latency while at the same time indirectly reconstructing its politics. Taking a more theoretical tack, Victoria Swanson’s “Confining, Incapacitating, and Partitioning the Body” (2011) argues that Beckett’s thematization of carcerality and surveillance constitute a rebuff to Sartrean ontology. Where Sartre believed that absurdism was an opportunity for the existential subject to will his own essence, Beckett “embraces the impossibility of meaning as liberation from the confinement inherent with predicaments of subjectivity, power, and the limitations of language” (Swanson 5). Since the plays in question – *Endgame* (1957), *Happy Days* (1961) and *Play* (1963) – long predate most of Foucault’s relevant work on discipline, Swanson’s anachronistic reading suggests one of two things: that Beckett was attracted on purely aesthetic grounds to philosophical ideas that had yet to be formalized; or that he was alive to the power structures behind them and formalized them aesthetically before Foucault fully developed his disciplinary hypothesis.

Nevertheless, *Murphy* conforms to Foucault’s disciplinary hypothesis in three unmistakable ways. First, Wylie and Neary view the human body as a mechanical device to be optimized, much as disciplinary power does (though they are not as hopeful about its potential). Second, Murphy takes a job at the Magdalen Mental Mercyseat, an asylum whose inmates represent for him a protest against the norms of behaviour that it has been charged to uphold. And third, Murphy thinks of his own mind in carceral terms, positing it as a zone of freedom precisely because it is confined from the external world of power and norms. Yet power in *Murphy* does not generally feel like disciplinary power, as it does in *Endgame* or *Catastrophe*, for instance. From the slum clearances that set the novel in motion, to the clinical appraisal of Celia’s body, to the palpable but unfocused pressure on Murphy to find work, power in the novel is “massifying” and diffuse in a distinctly biopolitical way (Foucault, *Society* 243). Unlike discipline, it fails to individualize and it generally lacks institutional direction, even at the MMM, which is too lackadaisical and disorganized to be properly disciplinary.

*Murphy* is also seized with economic rationality, which, according to Michael Behrent, Foucault comes to regard as the “paradigmatic” form of biopower (558). The plot is triggered when Murphy’s “mews” – a homophone, surely, for aesthetic inspiration – is ‘condemned’ and redeveloped, a fine example of the market working in step with biopolitical government intervention (Beckett *Murphy*, 3). This obliges Murphy to look for a job, because his new landlady declines to perpetuate a fraud on his uncle, establishing a pattern in which characters are related to Murphy only by financial needs and obligations (Ticklepenny; Bim and Bom; increasingly Celia). The need for work is heightened when Celia, whose occupation as a sex-worker is emphasised above all else, goes on sex-strike to incentivize him, using artificial scarcity to improve her bargaining power. Indeed, economic rationality seems to co-opt sexual desire wherever it springs up in the novel. Neary “scratches himself out of one itch and into another”, using people up as if their value vanished at the instant of exchange (123). Wylie, an academic turned illegal bookmaker, has a fleeting transactional relationship with Miss Counihan, which he understands in economic terms: if desire is a “closed system” with fixed quantities, it must be displaced from one object onto the next in an endless series of

indifferent exchanges (38). For Murphy himself, the capital-M “Market” is explicitly to blame if people are no longer regarded as ends in themselves; it is the “frenzied justification of life as an end to means”, of biopolitical preservation, which destroys “life’s goods” while leaving life itself intact (44). In Foucault’s terms – his developed, more economic terms – *Murphy* is a biopolitical novel.

There has been some debate over how Foucault understands the relationship between biopower and neoliberal economics. In the final chapter of *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction* (1976), where the term first appears, Foucault describes biopower as an offshoot of discipline, appearing at the end of a historical trajectory towards “gentler” but “more effective” technologies of power (Foucault, *Discipline* 104, 102). The trajectory starts with sovereign power, which Foucault defines as “essentially a right of seizure: of things, time, bodies, and ultimately life itself” (Foucault, *History* 136). Sovereignty is embodied by an individual whose power is exercised through these “deductions”, whether in the form of material appropriation or the deterrence of torture and execution. Since life is the ultimate deduction available to sovereign power, Foucault says that sovereign power is founded on the “right of death” (136).

Sovereign power starts to make way for disciplinary power in the mid-18<sup>th</sup> century. Prompted by the needs of capitalists and facilitated by developments in the human sciences, its goal was and is to “optimize” the individual body, to “extort ... its forces”, and to “increase ... its usefulness and docility” (139). Discipline is imposed by institutions such as prisons, hospitals, schools, asylums and workplaces, which are able to “normalize” individual behaviour through “observation” and self-policing rather than force (Foucault, *Discipline* 170). In *Discipline and Punish* (1975), Foucault represents discipline as the paradigmatic modern form of power.

Biopower modifies discipline without replacing it. Like discipline, it “endeavours to administer, optimize” and “subject” through “precise controls and comprehensive regulations”; but where discipline is concerned with the individual body, biopower is concerned with populations (“birth-rate, longevity, public health” and so on) (Foucault, *History* 137, 140). In *The History of Sexuality*, Foucault says that biopower appears sometime after disciplinary power, but he also confusingly redefines disciplinary power as a subset of biopower. In this formulation, biopower (sometimes “biopolitics”) has “two poles”: one that concerns the individual body (“discipline”) and one that concerns the “species body” (“regulation”) (139). While discipline and regulation are “clearly separate in the 18<sup>th</sup> century”, they eventually coalesce “in the form of concrete arrangements that would go to make up the great technology of power of the nineteenth century”, such as the discourse on sexuality (140).

Foucault seems to change his mind in his 1975-76 Collège de France lectures, published as *Society Must be Defended* (1992). While biopower’s influence on society remains relatively small compared to that of discipline, Foucault is quite clear now that biopower is to be regarded as “something new” and “nondisciplinary”, putting more conceptual distance between the two technologies of power (Foucault, *Society* 242). Michael C. Behrent argues that this is the beginning of a substantive revision of Foucault’s “disciplinary hypothesis”, significantly curtailing the role of discipline in contemporary society. In Foucault’s 1978-79 lectures, published as *The Birth of Biopolitics* (2004), biopower does even more than “envelop” and “integrate” discipline; it replaces it as ‘the paradigmatic form of modern power’ (Behrent, 567). This opens up space for a new understanding of power in relation economics, especially neoliberalism, which he understands as “the paradigmatic form of biopower” (558).

Neoliberalism is the latest – if not last – stop on Foucault’s historical trajectory of “gentler” but “more effective” technologies of power. The state no longer has to wield the

sovereign “right of death” or even, for the most part, deploy non-violent disciplinary technologies in order to regulate the population. It is enough to govern indirectly as another market actor, looking to optimize outcomes with discreet anti-interventionist interventions, safe in the knowledge that government reflects the rationality of the governed. This would seem to constitute a tacit endorsement of neoliberal governmentality, at least over its predecessors, since it does not entail violence or “internal subjugation” (Foucault, *Birth* 260). Foucault does also note that, however, that the neoliberal subject is “eminently governable”, unlike his *laissez faire* predecessor (270).

Foucault sees British empiricism as the origin of the neoliberal subject. Where its philosophical ancestors were defined by freedom (Aristotle), dualism (Descartes) or postlapsarian “concupiscence” (Leibniz/Spinoza), the subject of empiricism is the subject who chooses (271). Choice has a specific meaning in this context, as I noted at the beginning. First, it is “irreducible”, in the sense that it may not be questioned, since it “does not refer to any [objective] judgement, reasoning, or calculation” (272). Foucault gives an example from Hume. The choice to be healthy can be reduced to the choice not to be in pain, but the choice not to be in pain is irreducible. One wants not to be in pain because pain is painful. Second, it is “non-transferrable”, where this seems to mean it is subjective (272). If I chose to be ill so that someone else could be healthy, Foucault explains, the basis for that choice would be my own pain at causing someone to be ill rather than the pain of their illness. In other words, I cannot make a choice on any basis other than my own “preference” (272).

Like the subject of empiricism, *homo oeconomicus* is the subject who chooses in accordance with irreducible preferences. Foucault dates the emergence of *homo oeconomicus* to the “neo-classical economists” of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, a slightly misleading categorisation as that term has come to refer to the totality of 20<sup>th</sup> century mainstream economics (271). Foucault specifies two first- and second-generation Marginalist economists, Léon Walras and Vilfredo Pareto, though he veers off before he gives them any detailed consideration. I am going to fill in the gap using William Stanley Jevons, their English compatriot, because his style is more approachable.

According to Jevons, the “first proposition” of Marginalism is that “the satisfaction of every lower want in the scale creates a desire of a higher character” (Jevons 50). When a need or wish is fulfilled, another one pops up somewhere else, like a game of Whack-a-Mole. Desire can only ever be displaced in this Newtonian, mechanical system, because the sum of satisfactions is a constant in a closed system. Here is how Jevons’s puts it, quoting Alexander Bain, in his *Theory of Political Economy* (1871):

Now the mind of an individual is the balance which makes its own comparisons, and is the final judge of quantities of feeling. As Mr. Bain says, “It is only an identical proposition to affirm that the greatest of two pleasures, or what appears such, sways the resulting action; for it is this resulting action that alone determines which is the greater”. (Jevons 19)

Jevons takes as his model an individual consumer with “two pleasures” to choose between. The greater pleasure will have been the one that was chosen, providing an empirical point of reference. Whenever a new choice is made, it will have been because one pleasure was preferred over another. This model can be plotted on a graph called an “indifference curve”:

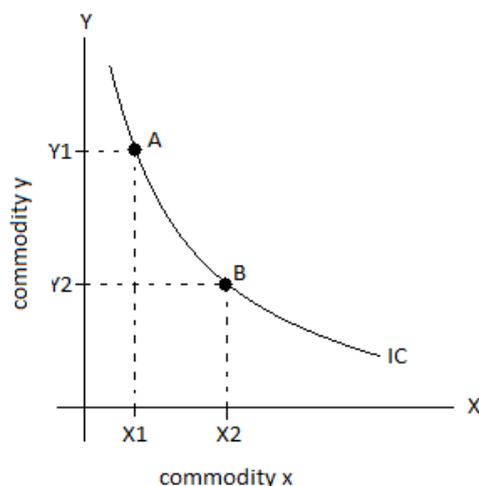


Fig. 1. Indifference curve.

The first indifference curve appears in *Mathematical Psychics* (1881) by Francis Ysidro Edgeworth (Edgeworth 36). It is known as an “indifference curve” because it describes the points at which a consumer is (or strictly speaking, has been) “indifferent” to the substitution of one commodity for another. This dualism allowed Jevons to develop his ‘calculus’ of subjective value without reference to units. If there are only two elements to consider, he observes, there is no need to give them a numerical value:

I have granted that we can hardly form the conception of a unit of pleasure or pain, so that the numerical expression of quantities of feeling seems to be out of the question. But we only employ units of measurement in other things to facilitate the comparison of quantities; and if we can compare the quantities directly, we do not need the units. (Jevons 18-9)

This solution gives rise to the concept of marginal utility. It combines utilitarianism’s subjective theory of value with David Ricardo’s theory of rent, where the least productive (“marginal”) operative resource sets the profit rate across the economy of the whole. For Marginalists, all exchange takes place at the final or “marginal” unit, when the subjective value of one thing has declined to the point that another thing would be preferred. For example, the consumer would exchange commodity Y for commodity X at point “A” on the graph above, where “B” could be another consumer, or another point at which the first consumer would consent to the exchange. No reference to a “unit of pleasure or pain” is necessary, because the theory does not seek to provide a rationale for the exchange. It only describes the ratio between X and Y, this much of one for that much of the other, at the moment that the exchange takes place.

As I mentioned at the beginning, Marginalism is formally very similar to Arthur Schopenhauer’s philosophy of the will. In Volume 1 of *The World as Will and Idea*, Schopenhauer describes the will as an imperishable motive force that is objectified in all phenomenal things. The will is infinite and goes on “forever”, but it is also what animates individual organisms through the “*principium individuationis*” (153). This is supposedly why desire is “endless” and “satisfaction” is not satisfying (253). “No attained object of desire can give lasting satisfaction, but merely a fleeting gratification”, Schopenhauer sulks; it is “like alms that keep the beggar living for today, so that tomorrow he may again go hungry” (253).

Wylie's conclusions about the "closed system" of desire might be less stropky and bleak, but they come down to the same thing, namely that "every satisfied wish at once makes room for a new one" (253). They are both Marginalist because they regard desire and value as fleeting, subjective, and dualistic: one "bucket" rises as the other bucket falls, but the "quantum of wantum does not vary" (Beckett, *Murphy* 38-9). Or as Jevons puts it, "human wants are more or less quickly satiated", and "the greatest of two pleasures, or what appears such, sways the resulting action" (Jevons 24, 19).

While it is improbable that Beckett encountered any Marginalist economics besides in Veblen's summary, his dedication to Schopenhauer helps to explain how he arrived at something very like its theory of value (e.g. Beckett, *Letters* 33, 550). Indeed, Beckett was not the only one to extrapolate "economic" principles from Schopenhauerian pessimism. Sigmund Freud, another of Schopenhauer's followers, understood the psyche as a kind of "economy", in which losses and gains are calculated and decisions are made under the imperative of efficiency (Birken 311-2). What's more, psychoanalysis emerged at the same time that Marginalism became a part of mainstream economics, and it responds to many of the same concerns. In "The Theme of the Three Caskets", for example, Freud makes some striking observations about the nature of choice. There are, Freud notices, a preponderance of stories and myths in which protagonists are obliged to choose between three people or objects standing for people, with the humblest choice being rewarded and the greedy choice being punished. Bassanio wins Portia's hand in *The Merchant of Venice* (1600) because he chooses a lead casket over the gold and silver ones, the humble choice supposedly indicating that he values deeper, soberer qualities instead of meretricious things like commodities with high exchange-value (Freud 290). King Lear chooses to turn his kingdom over to Goneril and Regan because Cordelia refuses to match their fawning platitudes, and this vain choice is punished by their tyrannical ingratitude and Cordelia's death (291-2). Moving through a number of sources from myth and folklore, Freud notes that the humble option is often characterised by pallor or muteness, which he associates with death. He concludes that these stories are "wishful reversal[s]" in which "[c]hoice stands in the place of necessity, destiny", i.e. death (298). For Freud, choice is a way of mastering death by voluntarily encountering it in homeopathic doses. "A choice is made where in reality there is obedience to a compulsion; and what is chosen is not a figure of terror, but the fairest and most desirable of women" (298). Or, in Murphy's case, biscuits:

He took the biscuits carefully out of the packet and laid them face upward on the grass, in order as he felt of edibility. They were the same as always, a Ginger, an Osborne, a Digestive, a Petit Beurre and one anonymous. He always ate the first-named last, because he liked it the best, and the anonymous first, because he thought it very likely the least palatable. The order in which he ate the remaining three was indifferent to him and varied irregularly from day to day. (Beckett, *Murphy* 62)

Murphy already has his biscuits, and he will eat them all, interruptions notwithstanding. He does not have to choose to *not* have any of them, as he would if his "budget constraint" were biscuits, or the money to buy them. He has accepted that this is his lot. The market has cleared, the time for exchange-value is over. It is just Murphy alone with his use-values now. What he chooses to do with them is both familiar and deeply weird. He artificially creates a situation in which he has to choose between the five. (Five, perhaps not coincidentally, is the number of people who Murphy is "needed by" at the climax of the novel. (126)) This is not the same as saying that he does not, in some prior sense, "prefer" the ginger biscuit. He can prefer the ginger biscuit and eat it whenever he wants, because, qua biscuits, he is not constrained by finite time or money. He already has the biscuits and, he assumes, enough life

left to eat them in. But he chooses to create a predicament in which preference must be asserted. He does this by setting out a limited period of time in which to eat them. He is creating artificial scarcity, the budget constraint of time, so that he can play out a situation where he will have to take decisions in accordance with the principle of marginal utility. He has ranked his desiderata in order of preference, as if he was standing in a shop with a fixed amount of money, mulling over which thing to choose instead of the others.

Having made a little model of life's market, where there are this many things and a finite time to use them, Murphy should rationally eat his favourite biscuit first, lest he die having only sampled the middling ones. Why would he risk any other order? Because, of course, the chances of him expiring in the next five minutes are relatively slender. Life is an *unknowable* finite budget constraint, and lunch is generally not. This allows Murphy to play around with life and death, or biscuits, in a safely virtual environment. He can engage in brinkmanship with his mortality, saving the best till last, safe in the knowledge that the principle of marginal utility need not apply (but playfully does, in reverse order). But Murphy's little model of life's market did not allow for a sausage dog called Nelly:

Murphy had been too absorbed in this touching little argonautic, and above all in the ecstatic demeanour of the sheep, to pay any attention to Nelly. He now discovered that she had eaten all the biscuits with the exception of the Ginger... (64)

Nelly eats nearly all of Murphy's death-defying lunch, sparing only the ginger biscuit. This would be a moment of deliriously inane preterition, a backwards "god" leaving Murphy and his "life" intact, his "preference for the ginger biscuit", equated in the caption of a doodle in the second "Sasha Murphy" notebook (UoL MS 5517/2). But Murphy does not prefer it anymore. The reason given for this is precise: Nelly's "appetite" did not "extend" to it, and Murphy does not want to eat "a rutting cur's rejectamenta" (Beckett, *Murphy* 65). Nelly has eaten the biscuits in the order that she prefers them, ranking her preferences in accordance with the principle of marginal utility, until she reaches the point of satiety, or (in neoclassical parlance) "bliss point", where continuing to eat would make her less satisfied. Her desire to eat the least desired biscuit has reached equilibrium with her desire to not eat the least desired biscuit. This might well put Murphy off his lunch. Nelly is death in this scenario, in that she represents the unknowable finite quantity of time that means Murphy has to choose between things, or to playfully invert the order of his choices to cope with the anxiety of preference under normal conditions. She has broken the spell of the game where he gets to decide not to die, or to die right on time, by making his resources predictably scarce. But she is also phantasmatically Murphy himself, since the order in which she ranks her preferences is the one that Murphy would have chosen if he wasn't playing at being immortal. Is there a vanishingly subtle joke, here, about biscuits, *bis-cuits*, "twice cooked", and Murphy's demise? Like his biscuits, Murphy is himself "cooked" twice at the end of his book, being incinerated in a gas explosion and subsequently cremated (158). Nelly, "knell-y", is in this silly respect Murphy's deathly doppelganger, a spooky prolepsis at the level of narrative structure, the return of the repressed in his lunchtime frolics with immortality.

Strictly speaking, however, Murphy is not playing at being immortal. He is playing at knowing the precise hour of his death, since he wouldn't have to choose things at all if he were immortal, though he might sometimes choose to choose things for fun. It is a sudden intimation of this that detains him from his lunch, allowing fate to waddle in and deprive him of even his mortal allowance:

On his knees now before the five it struck him for the first time that these prepossessions reduced to a paltry six the number of ways in which he could make

this meal. But this was to violate the very essence of assortment, this was red permanganate on the Rima of variety. Even if he conquered his prejudice against the anonymous, still there would be only twenty-four ways in which the biscuits could be eaten. But were he to take the final step and overcome his infatuation with the ginger, then the assortment would spring to life before him, dancing the radiant measure of its total permutability, edible in a hundred and twenty ways! (62)

On his knees as though in supplication, Murphy is struck by an impossibility. If he could only eliminate his preferences, he would be free to enjoy one hundred and twenty possible combinations of experience, rather than six or twenty-four. But why does Murphy, who does not seem especially fond of phenomenal experiences, want to multiply the number of them available to him? Schopenhauer might say: because the elimination of preference is a kind of reprieve, if not an outright escape, from the suffering of the will decanted into the individual organism. The fewer active wishes the subject is subject to, the less he must suffer from obligatory motion sickness on the swings and roundabouts of desire. But Schopenhauer also specifically states that it is “the throng” and multiplicity of aims that makes suffering so keen (“[t]he satisfaction of a wish ends it; yet for one wish that is satisfied there remain at least ten which are denied...” he laments (Schopenhauer 253)). The best we can hope for, in that universe, is to turn away as much business as possible from the local branch of the will. But Murphy is longing not for a mere ten wishes, he is longing for 20 times the number of wishes currently at his disposal. Anything less than the sum of possible combinations of experience is, in this unusually passionate analogy, like fascists vandalising the first naked public statue in London, a historical detail that invests this passage with a (perhaps histrionic) seriousness that, as I suggested at the beginning, has been overlooked or misinterpreted by Beckett criticism.

Unveiled by Prime Minister Stanley Baldwin in 1925, Jacob Epstein’s “Rima” statue provoked a “hullabaloo” in the British press (Friedman 31). Baldwin, hilariously, had no prior knowledge of the statue’s subject matter before he unveiled it (Friedman, 40). Chris Ackerley suggests that the “red permanganate” is a way of “disguising the debt” that Beckett’s portrayal of the Smeraldina-Rima owes to W. H. Hudson’s “wild girl” in *Green Mansions: A Romance of the Tropical Forest* (Ackerley, *Demented* 107-8). It is possible Beckett had this in mind, but red permanganate was, *pace* Ackerley, actually used to deface the statue. According to a report in *The Times* on the 7<sup>th</sup> of October 1935, twelve days before Beckett redrafted this passage, it was “disfigured” with “permanganate of potash”; the culprits were later identified as the “Independent Fascist League”, who “attached a card emblazoned with a Swastika and the inscription ‘God Save Our King and Britain from the Cancer of Judah’” (“News in Brief”, 9). Given that Beckett was “appall[ed]” by Nazi antisemitism, his Jewish aunt and uncle already having been forced to leave Germany in 1933, this deplorable vandalism complicates the passage’s apparently light-hearted tone (Knowlson 182). It also adds a tellingly sexual dimension to the theme of object-choice, again comically undermined by the triviality of the objects in question.

During his sojourn in Germany in 1936-37, Beckett would come to associate fascism with militarism, cultural nihilism and overblown political rhetoric; but the signifier is more ambiguous here (Nixon, *Diaries* 84-109). Rather like the plot of *Murphy*, the defaced statue counterposes something life-destroying with something life-giving, in this instance desire and aesthetic contemplation. Just as the fascists try to destroy Epstein’s erotic statue, all three of Murphy’s “life’s goods” are destroyed: his life, his relationship with Celia and his “little world” of quasi-aesthetic narcissism (Beckett, *Murphy* 44, 111). But it is not fascists who do this in the novel: it is very specifically “the Market” (44). What are we to make of this astonishing elision of fascism and economic rationality? I want to suggest that fascism, here,

is not a particularly vivid political referent – but nor is it one of Beckett’s flippant, aggravating inclusions of ostensibly political material for the sake of it. At its most specific, it stands for the elimination of difference, on the provocative basis that neither fascism nor the neoliberal concept of preference can tolerate “variety” (62). The comparison must be too profane to stop there, however. Beckett cannot only be likening persecuted groups with food, racism with taste. He has had some intimation that connects fascism and market rationality more deeply, more vaguely, obscuring the more obvious differences between them.

In *Society Must be Defended*, Foucault puzzles over the fact that biopower co-exists with the technology to destroy entire populations. As the power to “make live”, biopower surely cannot be reconciled with, say, the permanent threat of nuclear warfare, since that murderous capability belongs to a bygone age of sovereignty, where a single individual wields the “right of death” absolutely (Foucault, *Society* 253). To ease the contradiction, Foucault suggests that death does in fact continue to play a positive role in the biopolitical regulation of society. Killing or letting die can fall within the purview of biopower, Foucault says, provided the state’s intention is *primarily* to make live. Racism, for example, pitches the well-being of one group against the existence of another. As long as the privileged demographic stands to benefit, the biopolitical state can implement harmful and even, in the case of National Socialism, directly murderous policies. For Foucault, Nazism takes “the play between the sovereign right to kill and the mechanisms of biopower to this paroxysmal point”, a murderous fulcrum at which “generalized biopower” allows sovereignty to be “re-transmitted” through “the entire social body” (260). It is only by “exposing the entire population to universal death” – by making the “superior race” feel its existence biopolitically threatened at all times – that sovereign power is able to reassert itself in the form of “dictatorship” (260). Death might appear to have been withdrawn as an instrument of power in the age of biopolitics, but it persists in a dormant state, ready to be reactivated as the link between biopower and fascism.

What form does death take in its latency? Foucault has a partial answer. As the biopolitical power over life took the place of the sovereign right of death, death became “privatized” (248). Where it had once been the object of vast ceremonies, it now became largely “hidden away” and subject to taboo (247). Foucault attributes the change to medical advances in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century, which significantly reduced the likelihood of epidemic catastrophes. The sovereign withdrew his right of death because death itself had (somewhat) withdrawn from life, with the upshot that technologies for living became the new norm of power. But this leads Foucault to a rather baffling conclusion. Death’s withdrawal from life – first biologically, then in terms of power – in fact makes it *more* present in life, not less:

Death was no longer something that suddenly swooped down on life—as in an epidemic. Death was now something permanent, something that slips into life, perpetually gnaws at it, diminishes it and weakens it. (244)

If death has ceased to be an immediate threat at the level of biology and/or power, it has at the same time been dispersed into the fabric of living. With the birth of biopower, technologies that “make live” may lessen the grip of death on populations, but in “privatiz[ing]” it, death ceases to be an individual event and becomes a “permanent” feature (241, 248).

I want to conclude that, through a dim apprehension of death’s immanence in the everyday, *Murphy’s* biscuit scene has improbably struck on Foucault’s “paroxysmal” intersection of death, choice and fascism. For Foucault’s neoliberal subject, every decision is taken under the duress of rational utility maximisation, with the ultimate budget constraint of the human lifespan. Freud says as much in “The Theme of the Three Caskets”, which tells us that choice is a way of virtually mastering death by encountering it in small doses. Death may

have been privatized by neoliberalism, but that does not mean it is not felt as the coercion to individualize consumption choices, generally to the advantage of “one’s lecherous tyrants, the moneybags” (Beckett, 2009 49). Murphy keenly feels that. His lunchtime frolics with the “total permutability” of desire constitute a utopian denial of mortality in Freud’s terms, but they also suggest that Foucault is wrong to think that death has totally withdrawn from power in the age of neoliberalism (62). Much as the death cult of fascism was increasingly making itself felt in the mid-to-late 1930s, Murphy has internalized the sovereign menace of death in the form of everyday economic decisions, where he tests his mortality against the silly duress of time’s winged budget constraint. Within the novel’s biopolitical regime, his real death constitutes a kind of protest, a final refusal to submit to the “*quid pro quo*” of quasi-fascistic biopower, the “big world” that preserves life at the expense of all “life’s goods” (3, 44).

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