



UvA-DARE (Digital Academic Repository)

Beckett, Biopolitics and the Problem of Life

Farrant, M.

DOI

[10.1007/978-3-030-47110-1_8](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-47110-1_8)

Publication date

2021

Document Version

Final published version

Published in

Beckett and Politics

License

Article 25fa Dutch Copyright Act

[Link to publication](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

Farrant, M. (2021). Beckett, Biopolitics and the Problem of Life. In W. Davies, & H. Bailey (Eds.), *Beckett and Politics* (pp. 123-138). (New Directions in Irish and Irish American Literature). Palgrave Macmillan. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-47110-1_8

General rights

It is not permitted to download or to forward/distribute the text or part of it without the consent of the author(s) and/or copyright holder(s), other than for strictly personal, individual use, unless the work is under an open content license (like Creative Commons).

Disclaimer/Complaints regulations

If you believe that digital publication of certain material infringes any of your rights or (privacy) interests, please let the Library know, stating your reasons. In case of a legitimate complaint, the Library will make the material inaccessible and/or remove it from the website. Please Ask the Library: <https://uba.uva.nl/en/contact>, or a letter to: Library of the University of Amsterdam, Secretariat, Singel 425, 1012 WP Amsterdam, The Netherlands. You will be contacted as soon as possible.



CHAPTER 8

Beckett, Biopolitics and the Problem of Life

Marc Farrant

Life in Beckett is nothing if not something to be lamented. This is a problem for any discussion of Beckett and biopower. It is far from obvious that an oeuvre characterised by an ebbing of vitality, by an irrepressible drive to return to the primordial “ooze” (*Worstward Ho* 96), should constitute a source of resistance towards regimes of sovereign power and violence. To enlist the feeble bodies of Beckett’s misanthropic monologuers in service of such a resistance seems both too little and too late.¹ As Matthew Feldman writes in the introduction to *Beckett and Death* (published on the centenary of Beckett’s birth): “Beckett’s text can be read as something akin to an epitaph for all of humanity” (11). As compensation, however, this is perhaps how we might conceive of Beckett’s works as providing a form of testimony; as bearing witness to the horrors of the twentieth century (mechanised warfare; genocide; the wilful inhumanity of entrenched nativism) through the emaciated and

¹This perhaps explains the absence of the terms biopolitics or biopower in many historicist studies of Beckett’s works (e.g. Emilie Morin’s *Beckett’s Political Imagination*). This chapter is concerned not with how Beckett’s writings fit within existing political frameworks, but how they interrogate the very meaning of the political as such.

M. Farrant (✉)
Goldsmiths, University of London, London, UK

decimated selves thrust forward on both the page and the stage. As Seán Kennedy suggests, history thereby emerges as “both ineffable and ineluctable, it could neither be expressed nor escaped” (187).

This chapter argues that biopolitics is a unique and useful resource for discussing Beckett’s complex relation to politics, history and political violence. By enlisting the discourse of biopolitics, one is able to re-inscribe the prior paradigms of existentialist humanism and post-structuralist anti-humanism—so fundamental to Beckett’s reception in the decades that succeeded the Second World War—in a material context that is both more receptive to recent developments in historical scholarship (particularly with regard to Beckett’s fraught relationship to Ireland, and his personal exposure to the Nazi and Vichy regimes in the 1930s and 1940s) and more pertinent to a discussion of the political effects generated by the works. Therefore, rather than focus on biopolitical themes such as surveillance, confinement, sequestration and borders, all of which no doubt have considerable purchase in Beckett studies, I focus on two entwined features: the relation between language and life, and the notion of sovereignty. Such a focus, especially regarding a work’s effects, aims to circumvent a tendency to identify the narrative voices in Beckett’s works with the biographical personage of Beckett. Rather than allowing us to read the *life* into the works, my biopolitical approach aims to delineate life as an ineluctable and often ineffable remainder, crucial to the resistance of Beckett’s works to instrumental approaches.² This resistance to resistance is famously epitomised by Beckett’s most political play, *Catastrophe* (1982), both in the oblique glare of the “Protagonist” and in the implicit warning to scholars and readers: “This craze for explication! Every I dotted to death” (459). By raising the question of whether a work’s politics can be considered apart from its author’s, and therefore as independent or in excess of historical, biographical or thematic criticism, I aim to highlight the further question of whether a work’s politics can be considered apart from its range of uses and, therefore, to reveal the urgency of Beckett’s oeuvre in contemporary debates.

To begin to define what biopolitics is, and whether or not the term is synonymous with biopower, it is helpful to turn to the problem of humanism in Beckett. Earlier existential humanism, an approach typified by Martin Esslin’s reading of Beckett in “The Theatre of the Absurd”

²Such approaches include biographical criticism, which would read into this very resistance a form of positive political resistance or affirmation.

(1960), responded to the inherent negativity of Beckett's works by outlining an affirmation of the timeless absurdity of the 'human condition': "the recognition of all these bitter truths will have a liberating effect: if we realize the basic absurdity of most of our objectives we are freed from being obsessed with them and this release expresses itself in laughter" (12–13). Insofar as such criticism emphasised the redemptive qualities of the Beckettian text, it paved the way for later post-structuralist or postmodernist affirmations of the negative. As Steven Connor adumbrates, although criticism no longer necessarily persists in advancing a timeless sense of the 'human condition', there is nonetheless a recalcitrant feeling that Beckett criticism "has learnt to give every extremity of dilapidation in his work a positive reflex of value" (*Theory and Cultural Value* 82). More recently, however, Beckett scholars have turned away from both the redemptive strategy of existentialism and the post-structuralist affirmation of rootless subjectivity. Instead, rather than pivoting on the concept of value implicit within the notion of humanism, scholars have begun to focus on the nature or *being* of the human as such. As Ulrika Maude argues, "Samuel Beckett's writing can be characterized as a literature of the body" (170). By turning to the embodied forms and nervous pathologies found across the works, the formerly cerebral Beckett has been displaced by a fleshier Beckett where the very being of the human being is now at stake (and crucial to this wager is the distinction between the human and animal).³ Biopolitics is a distinctively useful resource for the discussion of Beckett, therefore, since it combines both questions of the value *and* nature of life. In other words, biopolitics constitutes the possibility of *revivifying*, in a literal sense, what was at stake in prior existential and philosophical readings of Beckett's works.

Indeed, the discourse of biopolitics posits that the very foundations of human society (notably the juridico-political foundation of rights) arise through the entanglement of originary distinctions that separate the living from the non-living, the human from the non-human. Originally formulated in *The History of Sexuality Volume I* and his lecture courses at the Collège de France in the mid-1970s, Michel Foucault establishes biopower as a central feature of modern society, defined by the

³The embodied Beckett has often been situated or grounded in terms of his writings on painting and the visual arts. For an insightful account of Beckett's writings on the visual arts, especially the relation of the post-war writings to French anti-humanism, see Kevin Brazil's essay "Beckett, Painting and the Question of 'the human'".

appropriation of life through mechanisms of sovereign forms of power. Sovereignty, for Foucault, arises as the power of the prince to inflict death. In the dialectic of sovereign power traced by Foucault, “The sovereign exercised his right of life only by exercising his right to kill, [...] he evidenced his power over life only through the death he was capable of requiring” (*The History of Sexuality* 136). From the eighteenth century, however, Western politics undergoes a fundamental transformation, from the practices of sovereignty to those of biopower. The right to death exercised by the sovereign is sublimated into a form of life-enhancing or “life-administering power” (136): “[T]his formidable power of death [...] now presents itself as the counterpart of a power that exerts a positive influence on life, that endeavours to administer, optimize, and multiply it, subjecting it to precise controls and comprehensive regulations” (137). Biopower constitutes both the disciplinary techniques discussed by Foucault elsewhere in terms of mastery over individual bodies (such as the famous notion of panopticism), and a biopolitics which is centred on the governance and regulation of life in terms of a new political subject: the population. Both the disciplinary and regulatory senses of biopower and biopolitics, respectively, can be deduced from simply glancing at Beckett’s works. For instance, the confined spaces and reduced or mechanical movements, that occupy so much of Beckett’s dramatic oeuvre, provide an array of metaphors for the modes of incarceration and surveillance discussed by Foucault as endemic of biopower. Alternatively, notions of population control and governance are dramatised in *The Lost Ones* (a story about the pitiable denizens of a cylindrical purgatory) and abound in references to Ireland, notably to issues of abortion and contraception.⁴ Although biopower, for Foucault, is the more expansive term, I reverse this prioritisation below in order to better indicate how the techniques of biopower yield a way of re-conceptualising the very ground of politics.

This task of extending and deepening Foucault’s historical analysis is famously taken up in the work of the Italian philosopher, Giorgio Agamben. Indeed, Agamben starts from the premise that: “For millennia,

⁴In the polemical “Censorship in the Saorstát” (1934) Beckett mockingly writes: “France may commit race suicide, Erin never will” (*Disjecta* 86). This indictment of the postcolonial Irish regime’s attempt to preserve the life of the nation (by aligning contraception with depopulation) marks Beckett’s fundamental distaste for the biopolitical management of life.

man remained what he was for Aristotle: a living animal with the additional capacity for a political existence; modern man is an animal whose politics places his existence as a living being in question” (*The History of Sexuality* 143). For Agamben, the subjugation of life under modern forms of biopower is made possible through a founding moment in the philosophical tradition, where Aristotle draws a distinction between life as *zoe* (natural life) and life as *bios* (the linguistic and political life of the human proper). Extending Foucault’s thesis, Agamben argues that biopower doesn’t come to historically supplant sovereign power but rather constitutes it in the first instance: “Western politics is a biopolitics from the very beginning” (*Homo Sacer* 181). Utilising Aristotle’s distinction, Agamben argues that Western politics is founded by the exclusion of natural life from the political sphere. Man is a political animal because in language he “separates and opposes himself to his own bare life and, at the same time, maintains himself in relation to that bare life in an inclusive exclusion” (*Homo Sacer* 8). Taking the concept of ‘bare life’ (*bloße Leben*) from Walter Benjamin’s critique of Carl Schmitt in “Critique of Violence” (1921), and the latter’s formulation of the sovereign as the one who decides on the exception of the rule of law in each society, Agamben argues that the sovereign ‘state of exception’ in fact constitutes the norm of the law in modern democracy.⁵ Like the sovereign prince who wields power over life by negating it, modern democracies are founded by an inclusive exclusion:

[T]ogether with the process by which the exception everywhere becomes the rule, the realm of bare life [...] gradually begins to coincide with the political realm, and exclusion and inclusion, outside and inside, *bios* and *zoe*, right and fact enter into a zone of irreducible indistinction. (*Homo Sacer* 9)

Bare life is therefore neither *bios* or *zoe*, but instead the politicised form of natural life that emerges as a limit-concept between the political and the natural. Whereas in pre-modern times the figure of bare life (which Agamben associates with the Roman *homo sacer* and the figure of the medieval bandit) appears at the limit of the legal order, in our modern

⁵ Agamben’s translation of ‘bare life’ (as *vita nuda* in Italian) is contentious. A more accurate translation suggests the term ‘mere life’, as used by Benjamin’s translators in the *Selected Writings*.

era all life is laid bare. Accordingly, rather than posing as an aberration, the Nazi concentration camps constitute for Agamben the “nomos” (166) of the modern. This logic of inclusive exclusion arguably defines the predicament of several of Beckett’s characters and narrators. The narrator-protagonists of Beckett’s *Trilogy* all inhabit liminal or ‘bare’ states, often between life and death. The perambulating Molloy thus crawls around like a beast, his creaturely movement in correspondence with the indeterminacy of his destination: “No, I never escaped, and even the limits of my region were unknown to me. [...] For regions do not suddenly end, as far as I know, but gradually merge into one another” (*Molloy* 65).

This extension of the state of exception, or broader biologisation of politics, also takes on a historical dimension. Beckett was familiar with the social Darwinism and discourses of degeneration that informed Nazi doctrine.⁶ As Kennedy suggests, “[i]n an obvious sense, Beckett’s characters are degenerate: vagrants, perverts and the mentally ill were some of the main villains of degeneration theory, and it is precisely these outcasts that dominate his work” (197). The resulting state of the people who populate Beckett’s works might indeed best be summarised in terms of creaturely life. Taking inspiration from the writings of Eric Santner, Joseph Anderton defines creaturely life as “the suspended state of being in uncanny proximity with the non-human animal to which a subject is exposed when detached from the constitutive values and normative meanings that structure human life” (266). Rather than simply falling outside the borders of the ‘human’ per se, this sense of creaturely life yields another means of conceptualising a logic of inclusive exclusion, of belonging precisely by virtue of not belonging, or of existing in a relation of non-relation.⁷ Indeed, it is through the perceived vulnerability of such a state—a vulnerability derived not merely from an exposure to embodied life, but from a defencelessness generated precisely by a breakdown in cultural forms and human values—that we can begin to demarcate the continued biopolitical import of Beckett’s works. Such an

⁶As Maude notes, Beckett’s extensive reading in the early 1930s included Max Nordau’s *Degeneration* (174), a key antecedent of the Nazi’s later designation of degenerate art (*Entartete kunst*).

⁷Several critics, including Amanda Dennis, Anthony Uhlmann, and Jean-Michel Rabaté infer the notion of “non-relation” from Beckett’s correspondence with Georges Duthuit and the famous “Three Dialogues”, published in *Disjecta*. See especially Dennis’s recent article, “A Theater of the Nerves: Samuel Beckett’s Non-Representational Art”.

import, I argue, is not merely a matter of revalorising the body in opposition to biopower. Rather, through the very breakdown of the mimetic conventions of Western art and narrative, Beckett's writings attest not merely to the objective fact of biological mortality, but to the material consequences of ontological finitude.⁸

LIFE AND LOGOS

Central to Agamben's attempt to link Foucault's account of biopolitical models of power and the juridico-institutional foundation of Western politics, via the concept of sovereignty, is the question of language. If the "production of a biopolitical body is the original activity of sovereign power", and the "modern state therefore does nothing other than bring to light the secret tie uniting power and bare life" (6), this follows from Aristotle's original conception of the *polis* as the arena proper to man as a social animal. Indeed, for Agamben "[t]he link between bare life and politics" bears a direct relation to the "metaphysical definition of man as 'the living being who has language'" (7). The transition from voice to language, from embodied speech to abstract *logos*, thus constitutes a division internal to the human being who is thereby maintained in a relation of inclusive exclusion. A rare essay to deal with the topic of Beckett and biopolitics, Jacob Lund's "Biopolitical Beckett: Self-desubjectification as Resistance", establishes the point at which language interpolates the self as the source of a radical resistance to "biopolitical control". The impersonal language and strategies of desubjectification in Beckett's work thus "bears witness to a potentiality, to a subject that is capable of becoming the subject of its own desubjectification: a subject that resists and evades biopolitical control" (76). In this section I will explore the relation between language, sovereignty and bare life in Beckett's *The Unnamable*, and ultimately issue a caution with regards to claims of Beckett's resistance.

The Aristotelian conception of the human as a speaking animal has a long history in Western thought. Notably, in the context of Beckett's extensive reading of philosophy and interest in Cartesian dualism, René

⁸Indeed, insofar as mimetic objectivity can be seen as complicit with myths of historical progress (including racial purity), by exposing an ontological rather than merely biological contingency, I argue that Beckett's texts suggest a limit to Maude's preference for a "biomechanical rather than conceptual understanding of self" (183).

Descartes argued for a fundamental division of the human and animal predicated on the latter's lack of speech:

For it is quite remarkable that there are no men so dull-witted or stupid – and this includes even madmen – that they are incapable of arranging various words together and forming an utterance from them in order to make their thoughts understood; whereas there is no other animal, however perfect and well-endowed it may be, that can do the like [...] This shows not merely that beasts have less reason than men, but that they have no reason at all. (*Discourse on Method* 45)

This insistence that, firstly, animals possess no language and, secondly, that language therefore must be a sign of reason, is fundamentally challenged by Beckett's art of the logoclast. Writing to Mary Manning Howe on 11 July 1937, Beckett spells out an aesthetic doctrine that will inform his later writing: "I am starting a Logoclast's league. [...] I am the only member at present. The idea is ruptured writing, so that the void may protude [*sic*], like a hernia" (*Letters I* 521). In the famous "German Letter" to Axel Kaun in the same year, Beckett discusses a "Literatur des Unworts" (515) that further compounds a non-representational practice. Throughout the trilogy, Beckett's ruptured writing or 'unwording' is set to work so as to disintegrate the self-sufficiency of the Cartesian cogito, the auto-affecting subject whose very speech is testament to the putatively rational nature of the human.

It is with *The Unnamable* that this disintegration of the human as speaking animal reaches its apotheosis. *The Unnamable* begins: "Where now? Who now? When now? Unquestioning. I, say I. Unbelieving. Questions, hypotheses, call them that. Keep going, going on, call that going, call that on" (1). Through this disruption of the narrative conventions that orientate the reader regarding place (where), person (who) and time (when), the final work in the post-war *Trilogy* dramatically tests the link between the subject-constituting personal pronoun ('I') and the form of life (political; human) it is supposed to safeguard. Accordingly, Beckett's texts recall Émile Benveniste's celebrated writings on the deictic functioning of pronouns, which Agamben draws upon to extrapolate a theory of language whereby the subject is constitutively split or divided. For Benveniste, insofar as neither 'I' nor 'you' refer to an objective reality, but only indicate the subjects of and within an utterance, the personal

pronoun substitutes for the living subject of the enunciation. This substitution is something that Beckett's nameless narrator seems all too aware of: "I say I, knowing it's not I" (123–24). This results in a transmutation from an I-subject to an I-object, and the unnameable narrator is substantiated by the very discourse that renders him absent: "Let us go on as if I were the only one in the world, whereas I'm the only one absent from it" (120). For Daniel Katz, such an effect is seen to affirm and typify Beckett's post-war prose as an attempt to dismantle the "coherent 'voice effect' and all the metaphysical suppositions it entails" (16).

For Agamben, this expropriation of the subject in language is the human being's entrance into discourse and politics; the separation within the self that separates the proper being of the human as a political animal, from the individual's mere animal or bare life:

[T]he psychosomatic individual must fully abolish himself and desubjectify himself as a real individual to become the subject of enunciation and to identify himself with the pure shifter "I", which is absolutely without any substantiality and content other than its mere reference to the event of discourse. (*Remnants of Auschwitz* 116)

The impossibility of the private 'I' in *The Unnamable* is also a central issue in Maurice Blanchot's famous review of the novel, "'Where now? Who Now?'". For Blanchot, the novel revolves around "an empty center that the nameless 'I' occupies", which we are unable attribute by "a comfortable convention [to] Samuel Beckett" (212).⁹ This inability, however, does not breed mere capitulation, but rather necessitates why "*The Unnamable* is condemned to exhaust infinity" (213). For Lund, and following Katz's earlier work, it is in this radical absence or nothingness of the 'I' that we are able to envisage new forms of relationships through its pregnant potentiality—new forms of embedded subjectification in social, ethical and political constellations: "It is a matter of remaining within this double-movement of subjectification and desubjectification, in this no-man's-land between identity and non-identity, since this place, which

⁹To do so would be to reassure ourselves with the "security of a name", by situating "the 'contents' of the book on this personal level at which everything that happens happens under the warrant of a conscience, in a world that spares us the worst unhappiness, the unhappiness of having lost the ability to say I" ("Where now? Who Now?" 213).

is so difficult to encircle and maintain, is the site of resistance against biopower” (75).

If every subjectification involves a desubjectification, we might ask whether it follows that every desubjectification involves a subjectification, especially in terms of a spatial or embodied ‘site’ of resistance. For Lund, if Agamben provides the tools to overcome a dualistic conception of the human (split between nature and politics, life and logos, mind and body), thereby resolving the aporias of the Beckettian text in terms of a “zone of [...] indistinction”, might this not involve having to rethink precisely what we mean by resistance? This problem can be further elucidated once we connect the paradox of linguistic (de)subjectification with Agamben’s paradoxical account of the origin of the sovereign as the one who exists both inside and outside the law simultaneously. As Lund argues: “The ‘I’ is a paradox. The linguistic ‘I’, to which I refer by the concept of the subject of the utterance, is at the same time a non-I, in that the narrator not only used the personal pronoun to refer to him or herself but also to mark the distance to his or her self” (70). Similarly, for Agamben, “the sovereign is, at the same time, outside and inside the juridical order” (15). As constituted through the power to proclaim the state of exception, the legal authority of the sovereign resides paradoxically in the capacity to suspend the law. This analogous logic perhaps warns against any attempt to seek the sources of one’s resistance in the conditions of one’s subjugation. Instead, to deploy an idiom associated more with ethical readings of Beckett, the logic of an inclusive exclusion permits an alternative and conceptualisation of *otherness*; of a sense of difference beyond mere opposition. Accordingly, if by revealing the fundamental paradox that lies at the heart of sovereignty one is nonetheless able to lessen claims to timeless or absolute legitimacy, one is, like Beckett’s narrator, still ineluctably stuck with the problem of the solipsistic self narrating itself by unnarrating itself into infinity: “I can’t go on, I’ll go on” (134). In the next and final section, I draw a link between solipsism and sovereignty in order to explore an alternative way of thinking of resistance as a negative rather than positive attribute of the works.

SOVEREIGNTY AND SOLIPSISM

Through the concept of solipsism, we can see how the paradox of sovereignty is refracted through Beckett’s works. In other words, just as we are constituted through “the words of others” (*The Unnamable* 25),

then the zone of indistinction that marks the self cannot simply be seen as a source of freedom, since this freedom is one side of the coin of a logic that makes the relational concept of others and otherness equally dependent upon a notion of the self as a sovereign authority. One thinks of the eponymous narrator of *Malone Dies* as a solipsistic author residing over his narrative dominion, creating *ex nihilo* the others that populate his stories; just as without them, he would cease to be. In sum, what renders the human both same and other, both *zoe* and *bios*, cannot be wholly a site of resistance, as this parallels the activity of sovereign power that Agamben defines as the “‘politicisation’ of bare life—the metaphysical task *par excellence*” (*Homo Sacer* 8). The link, therefore, between the sovereign silence that marked Georges Bataille’s early praise for Beckett’s rendering of the inhuman in *Molloy*, and the inhumanity of a sovereign violence that duplicates the ontological silence of the animal in the historical silence of oppressed peoples, must not be forgotten. That is, the link between the inhumanity *of* the human and the inhumanity *of* the human *to* the human.

Indeed, if life is truly what is at stake in politics (as the repressed category or concept that lies beneath any claim to freedom or legitimacy), then similarly embodied life cannot simply be a source of resistance, since the reduction of the human being to a body is precisely what biopower and acts of sovereign violence aim to achieve. The question is not, therefore, what new forms of life emerge from the disintegration of the subject, but rather how to move beyond mistaking the body as a source of significance. If Beckett’s works really constitute a literature of the body, the question is therefore not what the body means but of how it *bears* meaning. Indeed, Beckett’s writings encourage us to think accordingly precisely by virtue of the way that they refuse the category of life from functioning: firstly, in opposition (namely, in opposition to death) and secondly, as a source of value whatsoever. When life itself is named as such it is therefore often deployed as a source of bathos or target of abuse (much like the frequent exhortations to God): “fuck life”, as the protagonist in *Rockaby* puts it (442); “Bugger life!”, as Watt exclaims in *Mercier & Camier* (94); in *Molloy*, “I was limply poking about in the garbage saying probably, for at that age I must still have been capable of general ideas. This is life” (57); in *Malone Dies*, “all this ballsaching poppycock about life and death, if that is what it is all about, and I suppose it is, for nothing was ever about anything else to the best of my recollection” (52). The theological affirmation of immortal life is also the target of ridicule,

as in *Endgame* when Clov asks: “Do you believe in the life to come?”, to which Hamm replies (sardonically stripping away the religious overtone): “Mine was always that” (116). Life as a positively charged source of affirmation or value thus always threatens to recede to a point of absolute non-value, like an everyday or commonplace platitude. The moment in *Endgame* where Hamm and Clov kill the flea is the apogee of this refusal to allow life to function as a source of oppositional resistance. As Shane Weller argues, the killing “is arguably carried out in order to put an end not just to a life of suffering but to life ‘as’ suffering” (215).

To return to the discussion of humanism, this indeterminacy as to the *value* of life is directly related to the indeterminacy of the *nature* of life when it comes to the question of ‘*what is life in Beckett?*’. Indeed, the indeterminate co-implication of life and death found across Beckett’s work makes it difficult to account for life as a matter of positively identifying processes of formalisation (for example, life as a ceaseless or multiple becoming). Rather, as Molloy states, “to decompose is to live too” (22). The unbecoming of life in Beckett indicates a potentiality or an openness to change that is far from positive and even less certain as a source of resistance. This potentiality lies not in a future or present continuous state but, paradoxically, in a belatedness that renders living as a condition that is always already dying; a condition memorably encapsulated in Pozzo’s sense, in *Waiting for Godot*, of giving “birth astride of a grave” (83).¹⁰ Beckett’s notion of the “wombtomb” (45) in the early *Dream of Fair to Middling Women* (1932), further compounds this sense of fatedness. Just as to be born is to be fated to die, so too does Beckett’s morphological critique of the ontogenetic fallacy of the womb as a source of pure life, portend the equally impure state of death, of a death itself stuck in a state of arrested development or condemned to an anal birth that would prevent its proper consummation. Thus, that which renders life absent from the beginning, renders absence itself absent. As Pozzo puts it: “I don’t seem able to depart”, to which Estragon replies: “Such is life” (46).

Just as sovereign power paradoxically kills in the name of life (in the name of a life to come, or the life of the nation), it seems foolhardy to search for Beckett’s resistance to such a heinous logic by replicating this

¹⁰Already in *Proust*, drawing on Schopenhauer’s reformulation of the Christian concept of original sin, Beckett gestures towards a literary thinking of life as constituted by an internal economy of death; of existence marked from the beginning by a corrosive force: “the original and eternal sin of [...] having been born” (67).

paradox in a naming or conceptualising of life in the works (as ‘embodied life’, for instance). Life must therefore function as a misnomer, as that which cannot be named and therefore valorised. Such a functioning disrupts Agamben’s own separation of life in terms of *zoe* and *bios*, and therefore, perhaps, also disrupts the latter’s wholly non-biological solution to biopower: the post-biopolitical life of beatitude, the Deleuzian or immanentist notion of a “happy life” that is epitomised for Agamben by Franciscan monasticism (*Means without End* 114).¹¹ What is at stake in Beckett’s unwording is therefore not a matter of resistance—at least not in terms of an opposition derived from an alternative concept of life. Insofar as solipsism and sovereignty remain ineluctably entwined, that supreme selfhood is indistinguishable from absolute otherness and from the power to render others as absolutely other, any projection beyond the human runs the risk of complicity. As Jean-Michel Rabaté argues, Beckett therefore “frustrates the Deleuzian impulse to push the speaking and desiring subject beyond the human altogether” (41).¹² By denying the sovereignty or self-sufficiency of life, one indeed disrupts the right to exercise death, but such an originary denial already places life on the side of death. To perpetuate this sense of “life without end” (11), as Molloy phrases it, is thus to risk that end from the very beginning; a risk that inscribes the vigilance of Beckett’s work from beginning to end.

For earlier critics, such as Theodor Adorno, this vigilance constituted the negative freedom of Beckett’s writing. Through the discourse of biopolitics, however, it becomes possible to recast this vigilance in terms of a commitment to what Rabaté has called Beckett’s endeavour of “introducing us to the generic universality of defenceless life” (15). Insofar as such a generic universality cannot be *named* as such, or simply pinned down as a theme in the works, we might relate it instead to what Mary Bryden termed the “dynamic stillness” (179) of Beckett’s writing. This dynamic stillness names the textual or palindromic economy of the on/no that is operative across the oeuvre and distilled by the “nohow on” (103)

¹¹ As Jacques Derrida points out, in Aristotle’s phrase *zoon politikon* (man as a ‘political animal’), the function of *zoe* is in contradistinction to Agamben’s use of the term. See *The Beast and the Sovereign: Volume I* for Derrida’s critique of Agamben.

¹² For Rabaté, this frustration of the Deleuzian paradigm is caused because Beckett’s efforts to push beyond the human mode of being remain entangled within a theological framework (for instance, the absolute otherness of God is indistinguishable from God as a figure of absolute sovereignty).

of *Worstward Ho*. Such an economy attests to a sense of life as one of infinite or generic finitude, to the absolute certainty of our contingency. To paraphrase Adorno, the task is therefore not simply to translate formal effects into thematic tropes, but rather to see the unsolved antagonisms of life (not only in terms of society, but as a concept that is in itself problematically split between the social and the biological, culture and nature) as reflected in immanent problems of form.¹³ This sense of life as constitutively unsolved, as the site of an inherent vulnerability both in our reasoning and with regard to our mortal selves, is therefore not merely to be accounted for in terms of the pithy phrases that the Beckettian text provides. Instead, through an experience of reading attuned to Beckett's dynamic manipulation of literary forms and life forms, the reader is left in the unfinished situation of Beckett's Molloy, when he asks: "My life, my life, now I speak of it as of something over, now as a joke which still goes on, and it is neither, for at the same time it is over and it goes on, and is there any tense for that?" (34).

WORKS CITED

- Adorno, Theodor. *Aesthetic Theory*. Translated by Robert Hullot-Kentor, Continuum, 2011.
- . "Trying to Understand Endgame". Translated by Michael T. Jones. *New German Critique*, vol. 26, 1982, pp. 119–150.
- Agamben, Giorgio. *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*. Translated by Daniel Heller-Roazen, Stanford UP, 1998.
- . *Means without End: Notes on Politics*. Translated by Vincenzo Binetti and Cesare Casarino, Minneapolis UP, 2000.
- . *Remnants of Auschwitz: The Witness and the Archive*. Translated by Daniel Heller-Roazen, Zone Books, 1999.
- Anderton, Joseph. "The Impulse Towards Silence?: Creaturely Expressivity in Beckett and Coetzee". *Beyond the Human-Animal Divide*, edited by Dominik Ohrem and Roman Bartosch, Palgrave Macmillan, 2017, pp. 265–282.
- Barfield, Steven et al., editors. *Beckett and Death*. Continuum, 2009.
- Bataille, Georges. "Le Silence de Molloy". *Samuel Beckett: The Critical Heritage*, edited by L. Graver & R. Federman, translated by Jean M. Sommermeyer, Routledge, 1979, 2005, pp. 60–69.

¹³In *Aesthetic Theory* Adorno writes: "The unsolved antagonisms of reality return in artworks as immanent problems of form" (7).

- Beckett, Samuel. *Catastrophe. The Complete Dramatic Works*. Faber and Faber, 2006, pp. 455–461.
- . “Censorship in the Saorstát”. *Disjecta Miscellaneous Writings and a Dramatic Fragment*, edited by Ruby Cohn, Grove Press, 1984, pp. 84–88.
- . *Dream of Fair to Middling Women*. The Black Cat Press, 1992.
- . *The Letters of Samuel Beckett, Vol. I: 1929–1940*. Edited by Martha Dow Fehsenfeld and Lois More Overbeck, Cambridge UP, 2009.
- . *The Lost Ones. Texts for Nothing and Other Shorter Prose, 1950–1976*. Edited by Mark Nixon, Faber and Faber, 2010, pp. 99–120.
- . *Malone Dies*. Edited by Peter Boxall, Faber and Faber, 2010.
- . *Mercier & Camier*. Edited by Seán Kennedy, Faber and Faber, 2010.
- . *Molloy*. Edited by Shane Weller, Faber and Faber, 2009.
- . *Proust*. Calder & Boyas, 1970.
- . *Rockaby. The Complete Dramatic Works*. Faber and Faber, 2006, pp. 431–442.
- . *The Unnamable*. Edited by Steven Connor, Faber and Faber, 2010.
- . *Waiting for Godot: The Complete Dramatic Works*. Faber and Faber, 2006, pp. 7–88.
- . *Worstward Ho. Company, Ill Seen Ill Said, Worstward Ho, Stirrings Still*. Edited by Dirk Van Hulle, Faber and Faber, 2009, pp. 79–103.
- Benjamin, Walter. “Critique of Violence”. *Selected Writings: Volume 1, 1913–1926*, edited by Michael W. Jennings, Harvard UP, 2004, pp. 236–252.
- Benveniste, Émile. *Problems in General Linguistics*. Translated by Mary Elizabeth Meek, Miami UP, 1971.
- Blanchot, Maurice. “‘Where Now? Who Now?’”. *The Book to Come*, translated by Charlotte Mandell, Stanford UP, 2003, pp. 210–217.
- Brazil, Kevin. “Beckett, Painting and the Question of ‘The Human’”. *Journal of Modern Literature*, vol. 36, no. 3, 2013, pp. 91–99.
- Bryden, Mary. “Beckett and the Dynamic Still”. *Samuel Beckett Today/Aujourd’hui*, vol. 14, 2004, pp. 179–192.
- Connor, Steven. *Theory and Cultural Value*. Blackwell, 1992.
- Dennis, Amanda. “A Theater of the Nerves: Samuel Beckett’s Non-Representational Art”. *Journal of Modern Literature*, vol. 40, no. 4, 2017, pp. 134–143.
- Derrida, Jacques. *The Beast and the Sovereign, Volume I*. Translated by Geoffrey Bennington, Chicago UP, 2009.
- Descartes, René. *Discourse on Method: Selected Philosophical Writings*. Translated by John Cottingham et al., Cambridge UP, 2006, pp. 20–56.
- Esslin, Martin. “The Theatre of the Absurd”. *The Tulane Drama Review*, vol. 4, no. 4, 1960, pp. 3–15.
- Foucault, Michel. *The History of Sexuality: Volume I, The Will to Knowledge*. Translated by Robert Hurley, Penguin, 1998.

- Katz, Daniel. *Saying I No More: Subjectivity and Consciousness in the Prose of Samuel Beckett*. Northwestern UP, 1999.
- Kennedy, Seán. “‘Humanity in Ruins’: Beckett and History”. *The New Cambridge Companion to Samuel Beckett*, edited by Dirk Van Hulle, Cambridge UP, 2015, pp. 185–199.
- Lund, Jacob. “Biopolitical Beckett: Self-Desubjectification as Resistance”. *Nordic Irish Studies*, vol. 8, no. 1, 2009, pp. 67–77.
- Maude, Ulrika. “Beckett, Body and Mind”. *The New Cambridge Companion to Samuel Beckett*, edited by Dirk Van Hulle, Cambridge UP, 2015, pp. 170–184.
- Morin, Emilie. *Beckett’s Political Imagination*. Cambridge UP, 2017.
- Rabaté, Jean-Michel. *Think, Pig!: Beckett at the Limit of the Human*. Fordham UP, 2016.
- Santer, Eric. *On Creaturely Life: Rilke, Benjamin, Sebald*. Chicago UP, 2006.
- Weller, Shane. “Not Rightly Human: Beckett and Animality”. *Samuel Beckett Today/Aujourd’hui*, vol. 19, 2008, pp. 211–221.