

The Censor's "filthy synecdoche": Samuel Beckett and Censorship

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"The Royal Court Theatre, London (George Devine) want to do [Endgame] in the Fall. I don't see how they can do it without cuts which I won't have."

-- letter to Barney Rosset, 11 Jan 1957

"In London the Lord Chamberpot demands inter alia the removal of the entire prayer scene! I've told him to buckingham off." (sic)

-- letter to Alan Schneider, 29 Dec 1957

Samuel Beckett's antipathy and intolerance towards any form of state censorship are well documented, not least in James Knowlson's biography *Damned to Fame* (1996), as are his own run-ins with censorial bodies—the Irish Censorship of Publications Board and, in the United Kingdom, the Lord Chamberlain's office, which licensed theatre performances in England until 1968. Beckett's early collection of short stories, *More Pricks Than Kicks* (*MPTK*), as well as the novels *Murphy*, *Watt*, and *Molloy*, all ended up banned in Ireland under the Censorship of Publications Act of 1929, sometimes with considerable delay (as in the case of *Murphy*, banned more than 25 years after being first published), sometimes shortly after publication (as with *MPTK* and *Molloy*). The London performances of *Waiting for Godot*, *Endgame*, and, to a lesser extent, *Krapp's Last Tape* all followed lengthy wrangles with the Lord Chamberlain marked by petty revisions to the text, principle-based compromise, and the writer's incredulity.¹ This essay argues that Beckett uses obscene material to stage a confrontation with censorship practices in an attempt to turn the tables on the censor and expose the instability of institutionalised moral borders.

On his part, Beckett remained outspoken against censorship practices throughout his life. In 1958, upon hearing that Archbishop John McQuaid had intervened in the Dublin Theatre Festival programme, pushing the organisers to withdraw a stage adaptation of Joyce's *Ulysses* as well as Sean O'Casey's *The Drums of Father Ned*, Beckett responded by cancelling his permission to the Pike Theatre for the performance of his mimes and *All That Fall* at the festival. Apologetically, he also withdrew the theatre's rights to *Endgame*. Indeed, Beckett would instate his own ban on his home state, refusing to have his plays performed in the "[prevailing] conditions" in Ireland altogether (*Letters* III 112-113).² Finding the embargo near impossible to maintain, he lifted it in 1960. He signed off another ban on his plays a few years later, in 1963, following a request by South African writer and activist Freda Troup addressed to a host of playwrights, Arthur Miller, Graham Greene, Muriel Spark, and Harold Pinter among them (*Letters* III 543-544).³ Beckett agreed, along with the other signatories, to refuse the performance of his plays before segregated audiences under Apartheid in South Africa, a refusal that would cover the majority of theatres in the country, bar a small number of theatres at universities with a non-segregated student body (Knowlson 637). While the success of *Waiting for Godot* in the 1950s meant that he found himself in a more hospitable position in terms of finances and reputation (a position, which, one could argue, allowed him to stage such political interventions more confidently), Beckett had in fact never shown much restraint when it came to speaking up against the banning and censoring of art and literature. As early as August 1934, he agreed to write a piece on the Irish Censorship Act for the magazine *The Bookman*: "Censorship in the Saorstát". Incidentally, this was two months before *MPTK* was placed on the "Index of Forbidden Books in Ireland" (*Letters* I 176). The collection of stories was registered as number 465, a fact Beckett would smugly include in the revised version of the essay. "Censorship in the Saorstát" went unpublished until 1984, when Ruby Cohn included it in *Disjecta*, but Beckett's disgust for censorship would mark his

writing to a greater extent than is perhaps acknowledged. And disgust, this essay shows, will play a key part in Beckett's confrontation of the censor.

With this brief overview in mind (and the biographical material so much more accessible since Knowlson's book and the publication of Beckett's letters), it should not be surprising that, in the past decade or two, a lot of academic writing on Beckett has abandoned the view of his work as apolitical, even if this view has become by no means extinct. Beckett's censorship essay has accordingly received a lot of attention, Patrick Bixby writing in 2009, for example: "Outlining the Censorship Act with the audacious hyperbole and neologism of a frustrated young writer, Beckett rallies this language against the Bill's narrow-minded rhetoric of exclusion in order to decry the state's efforts not just to institutionalize a form of cultural insularity, but to tightly codify the social order" (12). If Leslie Hill was in 1997 still justified in lamenting the dearth of political approaches to reading Beckett,⁴ the critical interest in the role and space of the political in Beckett's work has been growing in scope and diversity ever since.⁵

I intend, in this essay, to follow suit, insisting on Beckett's concern with modes of sabotaging censorship and comparable (politically or culturally) repressive mechanisms. To be sure, the question of this interest goes beyond specific jabs at censorship institutions in Beckett's texts, such as one finds for example in *Murphy*: "Murphy knew what that meant. No more music. This phrase is chosen with care, lest the filthy censors should lack an occasion to commit their filthy synecdoche" (46). Besides such explicit references to censorship, this essay will look at the self-conscious use of offensive or obscene material—the gently pornographic and the faecal—relying largely on his mid-period novel *Molloy* (1951/55), with detours to *Murphy* and *Watt*. The essay argues that Beckett's at times playful, at times unyielding engagement with censorship and its objects is inextricably connected to questions of nationalist ideology and hegemonic cultural practices. Acknowledging Beckett's

humorous, satirical treatment of what is in the end his own, serious political engagement with the oppressive state apparatus, one finds that the most fun can be had in catching the censors off-guard, or, rather, with their pants down, in this battle of competing masculinities. As J. M. Coetzee writes in *Giving Offense* (1996), a collection of essays to which I will refer throughout this paper: “it is a revealing feature of censorship that it is not proud of itself, never parades itself” (35). To show up the censor, his paranoia and shame, his questionable moral standards must be brought under fire, and to do this, as Beckett is well aware, to “commit [the] filthy synecdoche,” there is no one better suited than the censor himself. The use of the gender-specific “himself” needs to be emphasised, as the moral order—and its implicit models of decency, obscenity, shame, as well as arousal—remain codified by a specifically male vocabulary and symbolic.

It is important to note that while the political potential of a text necessarily transcends representation (one recalls Adorno’s “Versuch, das ‘Endspiel’ zu verstehen” and his famous notion of *Bilderverbot* in *Negative Dialektik*),⁶ Beckett’s writing, as Hill puts it, “maintains, with respect to received political discourse, an irreducible distance or reserve” (“Up the Republic!” 911). What is more, the question of active or passive political resistance (individual, not collective, it must be said, in light of Beckett’s characters, perhaps with the exception of the novella *Le Dépeupleur*) must not be asked with an unbridgeable opposition between successful rebellion and resignation/submission in mind, but rather with the aporetic logic of “Ever tried. Ever failed. No matter. Try again. Fail again. Fail better” (*Worstward Ho* 81). In fact, the staging of political resistance does not even have to be conscious or willed, throwing wide open the question of what it actually means to resist authorities. Molloy’s political opposition is, for example, as Anthony Uhlmann points out, unintentional. Stopped and questioned by the police, Molloy is unable, but not unwilling, to cooperate and provide any of the demanded information: “rather than ignorance being tamed and used as a tool by

order, ignorance overcomes and dissolves that order. . . [Molloy] cannot follow orders; this is not necessarily because he does not want to, he is simply unable to” (Uhlmann 50). Indeed, Molloy admits: “To apply the letter of the law to a creature like me is not an easy matter. It can be done, but reason is against it” (21). An analysis of encounters with political, legislative structures and discourse that seek to limit not just cultural expression, but vocalisation, action, or movement in more fundamental terms, must take both the impossibility of an overt or global politics in Beckett’s work into account as well as an unstable, irreducible conception of political resistance. The reductive suggestion that there might be a homogenous Beckettian project staging an attack on hegemonic and authoritarian discourse must especially be avoided.

Furthermore, the investigation of the role of censorship in Beckett’s writing can only ever be fruitful when thought together with the problems of language, expression and subjectivity (or first-person utterance) that are central especially to *The Unnamable* and Beckett’s later prose. “Perhaps the central Beckettian paradox or ‘impossibility’ in the prose is,” in Daniel Katz’s words, “that of the absence of subjectivity, expressed content, expressing consciousness, and expressive signification, along with the presence of linguistic expression” (11). How far can the question of institutional censorship be legitimately pursued within a fictional space (itself disrupted) in which a stable understanding of identity, subjectivity and utterance is so radically discredited? Resisting censorship in Beckett can, in this sense, not be simply understood in terms of *individual expression despite institutional repression*, but in terms of the admission and “fidelity” to failure developed by Beckett in “Three Dialogues,” when it comes to the unavoidable “expressive act”: “The expression that there is nothing to express, nothing with which to express, nothing from which to express, no power to express, no desire to express, together with the obligation to express” (*Disjecta* 145, 139).

Nevertheless, in one of Beckett's late and, it could be argued, most overtly political plays, *Catastrophe*, the consolidation of the paradox of expression and political repression does in fact take place. Beckett was invited to write a play by the International Association for the Defence of Artists, for a performance at the Avignon Festival in 1982, which celebrated the imprisoned Czech dissident writer Václav Havel (to whom *Catastrophe* is dedicated) (Knowlson 677). In the play, the Protagonist (P) is inspected, undressed, repositioned, and figuratively anatomized by the Director (D) and his Female Assistant (A). Thus objectified and exposed on the stage, the Protagonist is under the imposition of a complete speech ban:

A: "What about a little . . . a little . . . gag?"

D: "For God's sake! This craze for explicitation! Every i dotted to death! Little gag!
For God's sake! "

A: "Sure he won't utter?"

D: "Not a squeak. [. . .]" (*Collected Shorter Plays* 299)

However, with Beckett's final stage directions, he is allowed a moment of rare overt defiance: "*Distant storm of applause. P raises his head, fixes the audience. The applause falters, dies*" (301). Puzzled that a reviewer had interpreted this as an ambiguous gesture, Beckett reportedly told James Knowlson later, "There's no ambiguity there at all . . . He's saying: you bastards, you haven't finished me yet!" (Knowlson 680). In his essay "Staging Whiteness," Anthony O'Brien stages an important critical intervention by complicating our understanding of P's resistance through questions of race and gender: "P's unfilial stepping out of role, the "anti-Oedipus" enacted by his raised head and the line of flight of his unveiled gaze, refuses the transfer of male privilege to good sons according to the established libidinal economy of the 'Law of the Father.' But claiming that power anyway, P's anti-patriarchy does not alter the structure of male desire which drives the stage action" (48). Indeed, running

through the present essay is a similar sense that the attack on male-dominated censorship discourse and practices in Beckett do not manage to transcend masculine codification. With its backdrop of political persecution and written at a time Beckett's cultural status was well-established, a focus on *Catastrophe* would transcend the specific arguments of this essay, but such (for Beckett) unconcealed political representation wants to be kept in mind. The same goes for the radio play *Rough for Radio II*—in which the gag actually comes to be used—and Beckett's last, short play *What Where*; in both plays, “agencies of torture are literalized and dramatically foregrounded” in their attempts to elicit a confession, in other words, stable, meaningful expressions, from their victims, who of course have nothing to confess, nothing to express (Miller 204).

Allow me, for the purposes of this essay and its closer look at the encounters with censorship in Beckett's work, to shift the spotlight on precisely those expressions the censor considers his moral duty to suppress: filth, in the broadest sense. To do so it is helpful to go back to “Censorship in the Saorstát,” in which Beckett's treats the 1929 Censorship Act in Ireland with the following words:

Part I emits the definitions, as the cuttle squirts ooze from its cod. E.g., “the word ‘indecent’ shall be construed as including suggestive of, or inciting to sexual immorality or unnatural vice of likely in any other similar way to corrupt or deprave.” Deputies and Senators can seldom have been so excited as by the problem of how to make the definitive form of this litany orduretight. . . . A plea for distinction between indecency obiter and ex professo did not detain a caucus that has bigger and better things to split than hairs, the pubic not excepted. (*Disjecta* 84)

Beckett, years before he got tangled up in hair-splitting with the Lord Chamberlain, is clearly aware of the censor's fundamental dilemma: to ban the obscene he must read(at least some of)⁷ the obscene. Hence the censor's unwillingness to distinguish between deliberate and

inadvertent indecency—he cannot be caught paying too close attention to such content—but hence also his excitement. In Coetzee’s deliberately phallogocentric formulation: “A censor pronouncing a ban, whether on an obscene spectacle or a derisive imitation, is like a man trying to stop his penis from standing up” (13). He becomes a laughable spectacle, which “is why the institution of censorship has to surround itself with secondary bans on the infringement of its dignity” (ibid). Indeed, this is in part the narrator’s point in *Murphy*: “lest the filthy censor should lack an occasion to commit their filthy synecdoche” (46). There is no way for the censor not to be “filthy” if, in his phallogocentric imaginary, he wants to uphold an “orduretight” national culture. With *More Pricks Than Kicks* already banned in Ireland, Beckett’s next major prose work *Murphy* relishes the idea of the censor’s eyes scanning the pages for filth. When the characters Miss Counihan and Wylie indulge in “oyster kisses” (“Miss Counihan had never enjoyed anything quite so much as this slow-motion osmosis of love’s spittle”), the narrator admits: “The above passage is carefully calculated to deprave the cultivated reader” (71). Beckett calls the censor into action on two fronts: to interpret the “oyster kisses” passage in the filthiest way possible, and to write up the derisive infringement on the censor’s own dignity.

In *Watt*, too, Beckett mocks the legal institutions’ obsessive preoccupation with sex. Arthur recommends “Bando,” a capsule of supposedly aphrodisiac potency, to Mr Graves for his marital problems, but unfortunately, the product is, as its name suggests, banned. “For the State,” Arthur laments, “taking as usual the law into its own hands, and duly indifferent to the suffering of thousands of men, and tens of thousands of women, all over the country, has seen fit to place an embargo on this admirable article, from which joy could stream, at a moderate cost, into homes, and other places of rendez-vous, now desolate” (170). The passage echoes Beckett’s censorship essay, in which he identifies the ban on literature advocating contraception as the true motivation behind the legislation: “Part 4 enshrines the essence of

the Bill and its exciting cause, in the general heading tactfully enveloped among the ‘other purposes incidental’, the prohibition namely of publications advocating the use of contraceptives, blushing away beyond endurance of the most dogged reader among the Miscellaneous and General” (86). In Beckett’s first major foray into writing in French, “First Love,” the narrator states ironically: “What constitutes the charm of our country, apart of course from its scant population, and this without help of the meanest contraceptive, is that all is derelict, with the sole exception of history’s ancient faeces” (33-34). Contraception itself was prohibited in Ireland in 1935 under the Criminal Law Amendment Act (Stewart 58), only a few years before Beckett undertook the writing *Watt*, in which Arthur’s grievance about the artificial stimulant is grotesquely preceded by the incestuous genealogy of the Lynch family. Paul Stewart summarises: “[The] 28 souls of the Lynch family, from the 85-year-old patriarch to the four-year-old twins, Pat and Larry, are a catalogue of suffering and a Swiftian satire on Beckett’s part of the ban on contraception and the de Valera vision of the fecund, rural Catholic family. The family is determined to reach their collective 1,000 years, and they breed regardless of the inevitable consequences: pain and death” (61). The rural Catholic family remains unspoiled through institutional protection (with State and Church in union): “France may commit race suicide, Erin never will,” Beckett ironically states (“Censorship” 86). One recalls his ban on segregated performances of his plays in South Africa, where “blood-contagion” had become a key metaphor in Apartheid discourse (Coetzee 183).⁸ Already in *Watt*, then, as shortly thereafter in “First Love,” state (and church) intervention and prevention of sexual practices are paired with the oppressive discourses of racial and national purity and identity, which find further practical expression in the censoring and prohibition of uncouth or sexually promotive artistic production.

With the trilogy, and the shift to the first-person narrative, explicit stabs aimed extra-diegetic parties such as one finds in *Murphy* become rarer, and more subtly embedded, and

the characters' sexual encounters are described less for the enjoyment of the censor than out of the characters' own compulsions, not least to serve as reminders for their (mal)functioning bodily faculties. Sexual depravity and the linguistic expression thereof form an integral part of the characters' basic (in both senses) life struggle. Molloy, for example, reflects on sex and love in a lengthy passage:

She had a hole between her legs, oh not the bunghole I had always imagined, but a slit, and in this I put, or rather she put, my so-called virile member, not without difficulty, and I toiled and moiled until I discharged or gave up trying or was begged by her to stop. . . She bent over the couch, because of her rheumatism, and I went from behind. It was the only position she could bear, because of her lumbago. It seemed all right to me, for I had seen dogs . . . Perhaps she too was a man, yet another of them. But in that case surely our testicles would have collided, while we writhed. . . I would have preferred it seems to me an orifice less arid and roomy, that would have given me a higher opinion of love it seems to me.(56-57)

Beckett's "carefully calculated" depravity, perhaps not so surprising for a writer who had at one point accepted to translate the Marquis de Sade's *Les 120 Journées de Sodome*,⁹ meant the Irish censors had little patience for his characters' erectile dysfunctions or his ruminations on love. *Molloy* was banned less than a year after the publication of its English translation in 1955. Beckett's response shows little surprise or flourish: "I suppose you have heard that all editions of *Molloy* have been banned in Ireland" (*Letters* II 601).¹⁰

While the various reasons for the particular prurience of some of Beckett's texts cannot be fully explored in this essay—Stewart studies some of these reasons at length in *Sex and Aesthetics in Samuel Beckett's Work* (2011)—it is worth remaining with the above passage from *Molloy* for just a while longer. The uncertainty as to his lover's name (Ruth? Edith?), even to the sex ("Perhaps she too was a man"), and the gaps in his account are

consistent with Molloy's patchy memory throughout the first part of the novel. Digging up these sexual memories, Molloy shows little interest in discretion and restraint, and it is important to remember that the narrative Molloy is compiling forms a type of commissioned testimony or journal, which he writes in his mother's room before they are collected by an unidentified man. Molloy's much-studied Oedipal wish—his bond to the “mother-anus machine” to use Deleuze and Guattari's word-creature (2)—is also at the forefront of his reflections on sexual “commerce” (57). Almost as a preface, Molloy asks: “Could a woman have stopped me as I swept towards mother?” (55). “I once rubbed up against one,” he continues, “I don't mean my mother, I did more than rub up against her. And if you don't mind we'll leave my mother out of all this. But another who might have been my mother, and even I think my grandmother, if chance had not willed otherwise” (56). In this light, the exquisite details of Molloy's sexual encounters might strike one as a particularly forceful resistance against the ego's censorial or repressive functions, or indeed further as the collapse of the censorship mechanism.¹¹ While Molloy undertakes a feeble attempt to distinguish between his mother and the other woman/women, he is of course miserably unsuccessful in “[leaving his] mother out of all this.”¹² The compromised position of Molloy's own, ego-driven censor is then at stake precisely in a passage that compromises the novel in the eyes of the actual censor, or, indeed, to push this point further that compromises Molloy's narrative in the realm belonging to a “big Other” as the symbolic order, understood specifically here in terms of the fictional idea of an anonymous, objective and authoritative body of power.

This movement between self-censorship, social transgression and institutional censorship does not pass unacknowledged in the novel: “It is true they were extraordinarily reserved, in my part of the world, about everything connected with sexual matters. But things have perhaps changed since my time” (58). Thus sexual liberation (remaining focalised on the male imaginary) and sexual repression have entered the discourse of national borders and

societal values and manners here, not least with regards to the Irish Free State and the Catholic Church. (While placing *Molloy* within a strictly Irish context is not the aim of this essay—Alexander McKee makes an interesting case in “Breaking the Habit”—Beckett’s ambiguous relationship to both Dublin (its arts scene) and provincial Ireland should be kept in mind.) Molloy has, in a sense, quite simply turned the tables: who is really deserving of the denomination “analysand,” Beckett’s neurotic or the repressed nation and its censor? Or, framed differently, who is the censored: the modernist artist or the morally protected community? This reversal is, as already signposted above, an intrinsic function of censorship (one that Beckett playfully draws on): from both a structural and psychoanalytic viewpoint, the censor is destined to act in shame and denial, to assume *himself* the position of the censored and repressed ego. The censorial state body’s role as an objective, unimpeachable institution of moral truth—the fictional “big Other”—is in this way unsustainable.

As Coetzee points out, the archaic ban on blasphemy makes this particularly clear, suffering, as it were, from “an embarrassing structural paradox, namely, that if a crime is to be satisfactorily attested in court, the testimony will have to repeat the crime” (35). To circumvent this practical dilemma, in Freudian terms, to displace it, the courts often used enciphered euphemisms for the blasphemous curse, or continued in closed session. This was done in the name of the Lord, or rather His non-naming. “That office waits for the day when, its functions having been universally internalized, its name need no longer be spoken” (ibid). Beckett encountered this paradox first hand with the London performance of *Waiting for Godot*. Writing to Barney Rosset, in April 54: “We were all set for a London West End performance until the Lord Chamberlain got going. His incriminations are so preposterous that I’m afraid the whole thing is off. He listed 12 passages for omission!” (*Letters* II 480).¹³ The Lord Chamberlain’s list contained such entries as “His hand pressed to his pubis,” “It’d give us an erection” and “Who farted?” (484). The Lord Chamberlain’s office was indeed

splitting “hairs, the pubic not excepted,” policing the nation’s phalluses and the ensuing arousal.

However, this reflexive assault on the censor’s virtue is at the same time and to a large extent assimilated by the office’s hegemonic position and execution of authority. Beckett’s specific case makes this apparent. Donald Albery, who negotiated on Beckett’s behalf, advised him, not without guile, to offer “alternative dialogue” rather than omissions, commenting: “[It] is surprising how near and how strong you can make the alternative. The fact that you have agreed to alter something seems to be more important than the alteration itself” (*Letters* II 481). Indeed, such are the at once sanctimonious and farcical implications of Albery’s insight into the “Lord Chamberpot’s” motivations that lead Nicholas Johnson to conclude: “the censor is not interested in the particulars of changes, but rather in the recognition of power that Beckett’s willingness to submit implies. The threat hanging over Beckett is exclusion from the [theatrical] community” (44). Verbal offense and blasphemy become matters of principle. If alteration implies complicity (and distinct as it is from the Catholic trope of martyrdom), it allows the artist to keep slipping along the nebulous moral borders that have been drawn up by the cultural censor. Consider the following negotiation over *Endgame*: unhappy with Hamm’s blasphemous reference to God—“The bastard! He doesn’t exist!” (34)—the Lord Chamberlain accepts “swine” as a suitable replacement for “bastard” (Knowlson 451). “There’s a nice blasphemy for you,” Beckett writes in a letter, “I think I’d be rather less insulted by “bastard” myself” (*ibid.*).¹⁴

Insisting on the censor’s structurally untenable position provides, not only potent satirical fodder, but allows the writer to push and pull at the institutionalised moral borders; and yet, the attack is in effective, material terms also deflected by the largely anonymous censorial body. After all, to return to Coetzee, taking offense “always belongs to *someone else*: the man in the street, the man in the street taking offense on behalf of someone else,

woman or child, and so forth” (200). But what Beckett is invested in, as we have seen, is to exacerbate the censor’s embarrassment and shame, and to keep the tables turned. Beyond sex and blasphemy, the “filthy” censor is implicated in Beckett’s scatological games, not just mudslinging (the popular sobriquet for social satire), but shit slinging. What the censor has to deal with, Beckett already implies in his early censorship essay, are (the artist’s) *excretions*, which are propelled his way, while the legislation itself is described as a “constitutional belch” (87). Quoting the Minister for Justice, Beckett insists on the particular action of flinging: “. . . it is the effect which his thought will have the particular words into which [the author] has *flung* (italics mine) his thought that the censor has to consider” (84; sic).

Compelling arguments have been made regarding the questions of self and identity thrown up by Beckett’s more scatological texts like *Molloy*, *How It Is*, and “First Love,”¹⁵ but one should not dismiss the political aims. In her essay on abjection, Julia Kristeva writes, “Excrement and its equivalents (decay, infection, disease, corpse, etc.) stand for the danger to identity that comes from without: the ego threatened by the non-ego, society threatened by its outside, life by death” (*Powers of Horror* 71). The excremental trope—not least since Swift’s scatological satires which no doubt had an influence on Beckett—has been used to call into question the patriarchal, nationalist identity project, or, as the narrator of “First Love” proposes: “history’s ancient faeces. These are ardently sought after, stuffed and carried in procession. Wherever nauseated time has dropped a nice fat turd you will find our patriots, sniffing it up on all fours, their faces on fire” (34). Joshua Esty’s point in “Excremental Postcolonialism,” which finds in Beckett one of its case studies draws on this political dynamic. Highlighting the counter-discursive potential of excrement, Esty posits: “Excremental satire . . . expresses the partial misconception (or anal birth) of postcolonial nationalism” (48). If, as Esty writes, “much of Beckett’s scatological play in the 1930s and 1940s aims at puncturing the nationalist pieties of postcolonial Ireland” (46), then Molloy,

later, takes up excremental resistance in a more materially insistent way, lucky to escape punitive violence of a physical nature.

Molloy himself has his “[first] taste of shit” during his anal birth, when he is brought “into the world, through the hole in [his mother’s] arse” (*Molloy*13). In the episode already mentioned in relation to Uhlmann’s reading of resistance, Molloy gives the authorities a taste of the same shit. The border (or checkpoint) official who stops Molloy, for reasons the latter cannot quite comprehend, demands identification in the form of papers. Molloy, being pressed and willing to oblige, hands the officer the only papers he carries with him, bits of newspaper he uses to wipe himself: “In a panic I took this paper from my pocket and thrust it under his nose” (17). With this, he earns his arrest and a trip to the police station where he is interrogated. Even more literally than with the sexually explicit passages, Beckett here hands the “depraved” material straight over to the “filthy” censor, “flings” the shit “under his nose.” And indeed, if taking offense can always belong to *someone else*, the self-alienating, paradoxical nature of excrement threatens this auto-deflective gesture: a universal element, “stubbornly repellent,” shit is the material excess that belongs to no one in society (Phillips 177). Significantly, in *Molloy*, excrement (and what it entails: disease, infection...) has taken the place of an identity document within the context of the border control. Borders, whether jurisdictional or cultural, hold little to no meaning for Molloy: “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” (65). The instability of the self through the arrival of the non-self is carried over into the conceptualisation of a homogenous national culture; “society threatened by its outside,” to follow Kristeva. It is worth remembering that, as Alexander McKee points out, Moran, the censor-like paterfamilias who provides the second part of the narrative in *Molloy*, “bears more than a passing resemblance to D. P. Moran (1869-1936), a pugnacious journalist and propagandist for the Irish Free State” (44),

strongly invested in a nation that was “more homogenous in character” and “more protectionist in outlook: to impose laws on contraception, divorce, compulsory Irish, and censorship in order to police its moral borders” (Delaney, qtd. in McKee 53). Accordingly, the policing of moral borders by the censor collapses into the policing of national borders and vice versa, and thus Molloy’s scatological resistance is really staged on two inextricable fronts.

Perhaps it is in part the border-crossing, anti-nationalist nature of this resistance that motivated Beckett to cut thirteen pages of Moran’s narrative from an earlier typescript of the novel. About “the source of Ballyba’s prosperity,” Moran, in the published version, chooses to remain silent: “I’ll tell you. No, I’ll tell you nothing. Nothing” (140). The early draft in French, however, sent to Mania Péron for revision, included a lengthy, Swiftian account of Ballyba’s excrement-based economy (Van Hulle “Textual Scars” 308). Dirk van Hulle summarises the satirical passage:

the citizen’s stools were the source of Ballyba’s riches since the whole economy was based on excrement. Starting from the age of two every citizen was to oblige the O.M., short for Organisation Maraîchère [Market Gardening Organisation], with a certain amount of fecal matter every year, to be delivered on a monthly basis. As a rule, the residents of Ballyba stayed home. Only certain officials . . . could absent themselves without recompense for a period of no longer than eight days at the most, on condition that they could justify their absence with a travel order. (“The Obidil” 27)

A virtuous, white-wearing bureaucrat, named Obidil (literally and figuratively the mirror-image of “libido”), oversees the fluid running of the excremental economy.¹⁶As both Van Hulle and Edouard Magessa O’Reilly point out, the episode has fairly evident psychoanalytic overtones, intimated by the bureaucrat’s name and drawing on the association of faeces with

the gift, or indeed money, and sexual pleasure.¹⁷ Somewhat playfully, Van Hulle suggests that “even the very act of cutting the thirteen-page passage can be read as a parody of forms of repression,” though without an annotated edition, such a “textual scar” would pass unnoticed by the reader (“The Obidil” 29). That Beckett’s familiarised himself with Freud’s writing in the 1930s is well known, and O’Reilly conjectures that, beyond pressure from the printers and related concerns over public decency, it may have been the possibility of a flagrant, almost crude Freudian reading that Beckett wanted to remove from his novel. The inclusion of the passage would have signified a major overcoming of Moran’s repressive mechanisms; himself a censor-like figure, he is at this point in the narrative still well in control of his bearings, and thus decides to tell the reader “nothing. Nothing.”

To speculate on Beckett’s motivation for performing this incision on his earlier manuscript is, however, not the aim here—is it a case of pre-emptive self-censorship, stemming from external pressure or Beckett’s own feelings, or is it a case of artistic decision-making relating to the integrity of the finished text? More interesting to our purposes are the consequences of the excised passage on the pushing and tugging at moral and political borders in the novel. If shit belongs to no one in society, then the lengthy, contained passage on Ballyba’s faecal-based economy midway through *Molloy* would have located the transgression of moral borders and public decency specifically within a well-established tradition of Swiftian satire in Ireland. On the one hand, its inclusion would have rendered Molloy’s incidental excremental transgression meaningless within a society that has centred its civic duties and economic welfare on shit; on the other hand, it would have fixed the drifting historical and geographical traces scattered throughout the text. Like in his essay “Censorship in the Saorstát,” the moral stakes of Beckett’s first major French novel would have adopted much more overt, strictly sketched borders—those of Irish national identity and politics—and lost their fluid and transposable qualities. Later, in a letter to his German

translator Erich Franzen, Beckett wrote: “I prefer Gegend to Gebiet precisely because it is vaguer (limits never determined by Molloy) and somehow less administrative. Gebiet is a Moran word, not a Molloy word” (*Letters* II 458). Thus, while in tune with Moran’s determined borders and places, the satirical passage on Ballyba’s faecal-based economy had the undesirable potential to turn the *Gegend* [region] in which *Molloy* takes place into a *Gebiet* [district].

Before concluding, it is worth dwelling once more on the gendered nature of the moral discourse of shame, disgust and arousal. Perhaps tellingly, menstrual blood is absent in the largely phallogocentric discourse of excretive resistance in Esty’s “Excremental Postcolonialism” (which looks at four male writers).¹⁸ Apart from late, shorter plays such as *Rockaby* and *Footfalls*, Beckett famously centred only one text on a female lead, with *Happy Days*. Anthony O’Brien’s point that, in *Catastrophe*, defiant resistance becomes just as much the monopoly of the specifically male imaginary’s discourse as the exertion of political power, must largely apply here as well. Despite the characters’ occasional genital-identity crises, the back and forth with the censor in texts like *Molloy* or *Watt* is conducted within an obstinately masculine imaginary, and in this sense sexual liberation and political resistance remain “phallogocentrically” determined (at least until the explosive, compulsive expressiveness of the female voice in *Not I* in 1973). However—and acknowledging that this would have to be argued at more length elsewhere—the collapse, particular for example to *Molloy*, of such obstinately male discourses of sexual liberation and repression with that of national identity and values, may also signal the attempt at the deneutralization of the masculine subject, which, politically, so far took the place of the objective, neutral order in order to denounce the specific masculine coding of these discourses.

In the end, it is the soiling, anti-social excrements that can make the paradoxical structure of censorship most materially tangible: censorship expulses, forces moral and

cultural border crossings, and attempts to draw and police strict borders, only to find that to do so, the sanctimonious censors necessarily “commit their filthy synecdoche,” both repeating the immoral act and destabilizing the institutionalised moral borders. Whether with regards to blasphemy, sex, or faecal matter, Beckett’s autocratic censor is always filthy, his moral standards always shaky, his borders always arbitrary. The terms and conditions of shame, guilt, arousal, repression, and thus of censorship itself are found to be inversed. Beckett leaves one wondering: what happened to the Lord Chamberpot’s erection?

Notes:

¹ See Knowlson’s chapter “Censorship and *How It Is* 1958-60”.

² Letter to Carolyn Swift 27 Feb 1958.

³ Letter to Freda Troup 13 May 1963.

⁴ “It would indeed not be too much of an exaggeration to suggest that, with one or two notable exceptions, the approach to the political in Beckett today still remains positioned, much as it was in the early 1960s, between Lukács and Adorno: between, that is, on the one hand, the moralistic, teleological claim that a novel such as *Molloy*—this depiction of ‘the utmost pathological human degradation’ as Lukács calls it—falls damagingly short of any proper concern with the political, and, on the other, the almost exactly inverse contention that, like some obstinate apocalyptic remainder, Beckett’s writing bears critical witness to what has been thematised, notably apropos of *Endgame*, as the deficient and tawdry emptiness of post-historical, post-political, even post-modern capitalist Europe” (“Up the Republic!” 909).

⁵ See, among others, David Weisberg’s *Chronicles of Disorder: Samuel Beckett and the Cultural Politics of the Modern Novel* (2000), Marjorie Perloff’s “In Love With Hiding”: Samuel Beckett’s War” (2005), Patrick Bixby’s *Samuel Beckett and the Postcolonial Novel* (2009), Tyrus Miller’s “Beckett’s Political technology: Expression, Confession, and Torture in the Later Drama” (2009), *Beckett and Ireland*, edited by Seán Kennedy (2010), Alexander McKee’s “Breaking the Habit: Samuel Beckett’s Critique of Irish-Ireland” (2010), David Houston Jones’ *Beckett and Testimony* (2011).

⁶Emphasising the absence of the death camps, for example, Adorno suggests that “Beckett has given us the only fitting reaction to the situation of the concentration camps—a situation

he never calls by name, as if it were subject to an image ban” (*Negative Dialectics* 380). In “Versuch, das ‘Endspiel’ zu verstehen” [“Trying to Understand *Endgame*”], Adorno argues that Beckett’s resistance to understanding, to the concretisation of the timeless myth, makes him a precisely a figure of his historical moment. “The historical fiber of situation and language in Beckett does not concretize—*more philosophico*—something unhistorical: precisely this procedure, typical of existential dramatists, is both foreign to art and philosophically obsolete” (148).

⁷ “It is not necessary for any sensible individual to read the whole of a book before coming to the conclusion whether the book is good, bad or indifferent” (Dep. J. J. Byrne qtd. in *Disjecta* 85).

⁸ In May 1976, shortly before the Soweto uprising, Beckett granted permission to a theatre group in Johannesburg to stage the play in front of a non-segregated audience. (Knowlson 637).

⁹ See letter to George Reavey 8 Mar 1938 (*Letters I* 610-611).

¹⁰ Letter to Barney Rosset 2 Feb. 1956.

¹¹ By this I do not mean that Molloy’s adventures should be read as a dream sequence; censorship for Freud also works between the preconscious and conscious. Throughout Freud’s work, the “literal sense [of the term censorship] is always present: those passages within an articulate discourse that are deemed unacceptable are suppressed, and this suppression is revealed by blanks or alterations” (Laplanche & Pontalis rpt. in Tuckett and Levinson, n. pag.).

¹² In 1953, the French review *NNRF* had suppressed a page-long, sexually unambiguous excerpt from “Mahood” (*L’innommable*) in their publication, without prior consultation with Beckett who was outraged. The suppressed passage, in which the narrator is attempting in vain to masturbate with a “cul de cheval” in mind, proves similarly susceptible to a possible Freudian reading (*L’innommable* 76). See Paul Stewart’s chapter “A Rump Sexuality: The Recurrence of Defecating Horses in Beckett’s Oeuvre” in *Sex and Aesthetics in Samuel Beckett’s Work*. As to *NNRF*, after announcing to his French editor Jérôme Lindon the end of his collaboration with the magazine, Beckett drafted a nasty response to its editor Jean Paulhan and enquired about seeking possible legal action. In the end, the review published a half-hearted apology in a subsequent issue (see *Letters II* 357-363).

¹³ Beckett goes on: “The things I had expected and which I was half prepared to amend (reluctantly), but also passages that are vital to the play (first 15 lines of Lucky’s tirade and

the passage end of Act I from “But you can’t go barefoot” to “and they crucified quick”) and impossible either to alter or suppress.”

¹⁴Appreciative of the absurdity of the alteration, he expresses his hope to Barney Rosset that the Lord would be pleased at being called a “swine” over a “bastard” (Knowlson 451).

¹⁵ Especially since David Lloyd’s 1988 essay “Writing in the Shit: Nationalism and the Colonial Subject” and his 1993 book *Anomalous States*.

¹⁶“The travel orders were very difficult to obtain and were delivered by a strange character called the Odibil. (In the manuscript, the character’s name was initially a different anagram of libido [Odibil], not yet its mirror image Obidil, as in the published text; in the partial typescript, the Odibil is already changed into Obidil . . . Before taking up office, the Odibil had to swear an oath, which obliged him to live virtuously, to wear only clothes of an immaculate whiteness, and never to leave his house. It was believed that only death could relieve him of his obligation to perform his duties (Beckett 1947a, 4.7, 69r)” (Van Hulle “The Obidil” 27). Ultimately, Moran’s single mention of the Obidil in the published text appears much later than the description of Ballyba, and it remains brief and obscure: “And with regard to the Obidil, of whom I have refrained from speaking, until now, and whom I so longed to see face to face or darkly, perhaps there is no such person, that would not greatly surprise me” (170).

¹⁷See O’Reilly’s “Molloy, Part II, Where the Shit Hits the Fan: Ballyba’s Economy and the Worth of the World.”

¹⁸ Julia Kristeva differentiates menstrual blood as an internalized danger from the externally potent excrement; menstrual blood “threatens the relationship between the sexes within a social aggregate and, through internalization, the identity of each sex in the face of sexual difference” (71).

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