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Beckett, War Memory, and the State of Exception

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Many of Samuel Beckett's texts are infused with the political knowledge and experiences of their author and remain tied to forms of war memory that resonate with conflicts past and present. Yet the type of political situation that Beckett pondered most consistently over the course of his career remains connected not to states of war, but to states of exception. The state of chronic suspension that has come to characterize his post-war texts has particularly powerful historical and transnational underpinnings and owes much to the cultural memory and political legacies of states of siege and emergency that have made so much of modern history.

Keywords: Samuel Beckett / politics / state of exception / war

Many things bear Samuel Beckett's name or have been adorned with his portrait. The world has seen Beckett beer bottles, Beckett coins, and Beckett stamps come and go, as well as a Beckett bar and a Beckett gastro-pub, Beckett boots and luxury bags, a Beckett public square, a Beckett bridge, and, last but not least, a ship: the Irish military vessel LÉ Samuel Beckett. At the ship's naming and commissioning ceremony in 2014, Taoiseach Enda Kenny paid tribute to Beckett's life choices and the military honors he had received for his involvement with the French Resistance. "I want to remember Samuel Beckett," Kenny said, "not just the literary and dramatic genius but the uncompromising man whose insight into life and his decisions in how to live it are so instructive for us today and always" (Kenny). Since then, the rescue and humanitarian missions conducted by the LÉ Samuel Beckett in the Mediterranean Sea have been described in some detail in the press, along with its state-of-the-art military equipment, its deployment at

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international arms fairs, its recent services to the *Star Wars* film cycle, and its interior decoration, which includes a photograph of Beckett in a Parisian café.

Like the decision to name a Dublin bridge after Beckett, this episode was met with a mixture of amusement and irritation, particularly in Ireland. Fintan O'Toole, notably, has marvelled at the irony of naming the ship after "one of the greatest enemies corporate culture has ever had" (12). The response of the Beckett Estate to the tribute was warm and appreciative, contrasting with the virulent opposition manifested by Stephen Joyce to the naming of the LÉ James Joyce (a "disingenuous and presumptuous" idea, he wrote to Alan Shatter, the parliamentarian who had issued the initial proposals) (McCarthy 7). For Shatter, the ship naming campaign, which diverged from the custom of using Irish mythological female figures, was a diplomatic enterprise that would "facilitate greater recognition for [Irish] naval services when they visit foreign ports" (McCarthy 7).

It is difficult to know what to make of this tribute to Beckett. Indeed, few writers have scrutinized states of suspension and aftermath as closely, and few writers have granted to political history and political symbols such direct and immediate articulations. We might also wonder what the refugees who have boarded the LÉ Samuel Beckett have made of this: under what circumstances can a connection between a military ship and a famous exile who only ever wrote about suffering and waiting become comforting, or indeed appropriate? Nonetheless, the anecdote illustrates the ways in which Beckett's name, life, and work remain tied to war and emergency, and to protean and confused forms of political memory. To those who have been forcibly displaced, or seen their rights threatened or withdrawn, Beckett's writing portrays situations that are all too recognizable and concrete. The coordinates—ruins, ashes, mud, and stones—deployed in many of his texts are not simply the coordinates of terror, suffering, and devastation, but remnants of a type of warfare that resonates with conflicts past and present. Just like the author, the work wears its political knowledge lightly. Yet it stands firmly on the side of the powerless and is borne out of a deep awareness of what happens in situations of emergency in their dual sense: when one's life is under threat, and when the law has been lawfully suspended.

In what follows, I evaluate what Beckett's postwar work owes to the memories and legacies of military states of emergency, to the aftermaths of the law's legal abrogation, and to those situations that arise when state powers are no longer answerable to the customary rule of law. The type of political situation that Beckett pondered most consistently and fully over the course of his career, I argue, remains connected to the state of exception—what Giorgio Agamben defines as the locus not of an execution of the law, but of its undecidability and inexecution. In his influential book, *State of Exception*, Agamben sketches the contours of a modern history that coincides with the history of martial law, rule by decree, and states of emergency, states of siege, and states of war. This history, in turn, is deeply pertinent to Beckett's own political knowledge and experiences. As I demonstrate here, the Beckett writing to and within states of emergency is a compelling thinker of power and subjugation, and has few affinities with the

lonely prophet of doom commonly proffered by modern literary studies. His texts, strewn with bodies trapped in, swallowed by, and choking on political symbols, nurture a relation to political history that becomes strikingly literal once considered against the long history of states of exception.

Agamben certainly points us in this direction when he summons Beckett in his recent book *Means Without End*, in which he returns to ideas central to *State of Exception*. Power, he argues, “no longer has today any form of legitimization other than an emergency, and [...] power everywhere and continuously refers and appeals to emergency as well as laboring secretly to produce it” (Agamben, *Means* 5). In this sequel, Agamben seeks “genuinely political paradigms” in commonly depoliticized experiences and phenomena extending to the sphere of pure gesture (ix). This endeavor leads him to conclude that politics “*is the sphere of pure means, that is, of the absolute and complete gesturality of human beings*” (59; emphasis in original). Beckett briefly enters into this reflection: for Agamben, a capacity for political emancipation surfaces, and new configurations of politics become possible, when a literary text—and the few texts he cites include Beckett’s television play *Nacht und Träume*—offers a synthesis of the literal and the experiential (55).

The kind of emancipation that Beckett’s work might ignite, however, remains murky, here as elsewhere. Theodor Adorno gave a compelling articulation to this problem in *Negative Dialectics*, where he described the “fissure of inconsistency” between Beckett’s emphasis on “a lifelong death penalty” and his “only dawning hope [...] that there will be nothing any more” (380-1). The “legacy of action” that Adorno discerns in Beckett’s “image world of nothingness as something” is defined in powerful terms, pertinent to the subject of this article—as “a carrying-on which seems stoical but is full of inaudible cries that things should be different” (381).

In the definition that Agamben offers in *State of Exception*, the state of exception encompasses a wide range of situations closely tied to “civil war, insurrection, and resistance” (2). The state of exception is also “the legal form of what cannot have legal form”—a legal state that lies at the limits of political fact and public law itself, and at the same time “binds [and] abandons the living being to law” (1). Agamben’s commentary owes much to Théodore Reinach’s 1885 study of the French state of siege, which highlights the significance of emergency legislation to a broader legal system. For Reinach, the exceptional measures that enable the proclamation of the *état de siège* are the public law equivalent of legitimate defense and derive from “a principle anterior and superior” to all other legislation (Reinach 7). Bringing Reinach’s views in dialogue with arguments advanced by Walter Benjamin and Carl Schmitt, Agamben outlines a space located at the boundary of the law and at the boundary of life, “the no-man’s-land between public law and political fact, and between the juridical order and life” (*State* 1).

In different terms, Walter Benjamin and Hannah Arendt have also pointed to the enduring significance of emergency law. For Benjamin, the state of emergency is the constitutional state that became “not the exception but the rule” in the long “tradition of the oppressed” culminating in pre-war Nazi Germany; in order to

be effective, he argues, the struggle against fascism must create a “real” state of emergency and free itself from aghast naivety and amazement (257). The state of emergency marks the moment at which, for Arendt, “thinking ceases to be a marginal affair” and gains its true moral and political significance (445). “When everybody is swept away unthinkingly by what everybody else does and believes in,” she observes, “those who think are drawn out of hiding because their refusal to join is conspicuous and thereby becomes a kind of action” (445-6).

These observations resonate with many of Beckett’s own experiences and recollections, and with many facets of his writing practice. There are few degrees of verbal and physical violence, and few forms of subjugation and suffering, that do not find representation in Beckett’s texts, just as there are few states of being that do not chime in some way with a suspension of the law. The state imagined by Beckett is not lawless, but suffers simultaneously from an excess of the laws regulating customary practice and from their sudden suspension. Even Beckett’s early hero Belacqua—the archetype of political complacency—has internalized the terminology of emergency: in *More Pricks Than Kicks*, he refers to his carefully-orchestrated walks around Dublin as “raids” (44). Later texts present characters haunted by visions of lynchings, trials, long sentences, and mass graves. “I wasted my time, abjured my rights, suffered for nothing,” says the narrator of *The Unnamable* (308). Here as elsewhere, the French text is richer in political dread than its English counterpart and mentions a botched prison sentence or a forced labor sentence: “j’ai perdu mon temps, renié mes droits, raté ma peine” (32; emphasis added), which translates literally as ‘I have wasted my time, abjured my rights, made a mess of my sentence.’ There are similar episodes in *Malone Dies*, *Mercier et Camier*, and “Suite,” as well as in *En attendant Godot*, *Fin de partie*, and their English counterparts. These works diffusely recall border zones, battlefields, penal colonies, and internment camps, and feature characters who seem to know much about homelessness, displacement, and survival—those circumstances when a suitcase is also the promise of a lifeline.

It is rare to glimpse the shadow of common law in Beckett’s work: all too often, the law has been replaced by a hodgepodge of archaic rules and authoritarian practices that are as powerful as they are absurd. An emblematic episode in *Molloy* involving Molloy’s negotiations with a police officer reveals a law that fulfils many functions, none of which have anything to do with protection or justice. Agreeing to dismount one’s bicycle when entering a town, as the law requires, does not mean that one can rest on the handlebars, for example. The police officer who arrests Molloy explains that “[his] way of resting, [his] attitude when at rest, [...] [his] head on [his] arms, was a violation of [...] public order, public decency” (20). Physical limitations mean nothing: indeed, “there are not two laws, [...] one for the healthy, another for the sick, but one only to which all must bow, rich and poor, young and old, happy and sad” (20). Molloy’s brief stay at a police station featuring a gallery of lawyers, policemen, priests, and journalists offers further insights into a law misapplied and misappropriated. Anything, particularly summary execution, is possible at any moment, and Molloy feels “trapped”

and “visible,” at the mercy of forces that are continually making and remaking their own laws: “All these righteous ones, these guardians of the peace, all these feet and hands, stamping, clutching, clenched in vain, these bawling mouths that never bawl out of season” (35).

In *En attendant Godot*, Estragon’s question—“We’ve lost our rights?”—and Vladimir’s answer—“We got rid of them” (20)—mark one of the many points at which the familiar predicament of Beckett’s characters, with nowhere to go and little to remember beyond faint memories of a past or continuing “combat,” becomes indexed to a multiplicity of possible and confusedly familiar situations (9). Read along the grain of its “inaudible cries that things should be different,” to borrow Adorno’s phrase (381), the postwar work offers a startling reflection on the relation between political passivity and political awareness, which chimes with philosophical preoccupations prevalent at the time of its writing.

These subjects are central to Karl Jaspers’s controversial study of guilt, *Die Schuldfrage* (published in French translation by the Editions de Minuit in 1948, the year after its German publication). The philosophical and political ramifications of guilt, for Jaspers, are tied to the new emergency military government established by the Allied forces, which renders the possibility of a return of democracy in Germany as a distant prospect. Distress and failure—concepts that Beckett scrutinized closely—rank high in Jaspers’s investigation. Noting that most people only understand the kind of distress that affects them personally, Jaspers warns against the extreme social divisions that have arisen in the war’s aftermath and calls for a better recognition of distress and failure as key forces within the body politic. He differentiates between the many criminal, political, moral, and metaphysical forms that guilt can take, and asks all German citizens to recognize the part that they have played in supporting Nazism. “No one is guiltless,” he warns (16). His arguments resonated with those advanced by others such as Martin Niemöller, whose celebrated song of resistance, popularized later, summarizes all too well the consequences of failing to stand up for the socialists, the trade unionists, and the Jews: finding that there is no one left to stand up in one’s defense when one’s turn comes.

Beckett was probably aware of Jaspers’s work from an early point: during the late 1940s and early 1950s, their work was published in the same three French periodicals: *Fontaine*, *Deucalion*, and *Les Temps Modernes*. There are many affinities between Jaspers’s reflection on the political experience of ordinary citizens and the characteristic mixture of passivity, cowardice, small-scale courage, and fortitude displayed by many of Beckett’s characters. Notably, Moran—who perceives himself as “the faithful servant [...] of a cause that is not [his]” (*Three Novels* 132)—is one of many narrators who are complicit with the indescribable state of affairs that reduces others to fearful servitude and possibly death. He attends to mysterious missions that include “see[ing] about” Molloy (*Three Novels* 92)—or, in the French text, “s’occuper” (*Molloy* 125) (“taking care of,” suggesting an assassination or some form of brutality)—and he describes these tasks as mere attempts to follow the “reasonings and decrees” issued by a voice that “exhorts [him] to continue to the

end" (*Three Novels* 132). Affirming his readiness to follow orders, he vouches to continue even if "the whole world, through the channel of its innumerable authorities speaking with one accord, should enjoin upon me this and that, under pain of unspeakable punishments" (132).

Beckett knew much—more than most—about the laws and constitutional amendments through which governments have administered colonial rule, war, the aftermaths of war, and challenges to sovereignty, and he was intimately aware that states of emergency bring mass arrests, forced internment, and detention camps. Notably, a petition he endorsed in the early 1980s against Jaruzelski's proclamation of martial law in Poland and the detention of political dissenters was phrased as a proclamation of solidarity with dissenters and civilian victims in a time of fear, uncertainty, and threat ("Appel"). His own exposure to war and conflict was unusually extensive for someone of his privileged social class, and made accessible to him a direct political knowledge that few of his contemporaries shared.

The rhythms of his writing were often attuned to the rhythm of political history: in late 1946, for example, the "siege in the room"—the phrase he used to designate the period of prolific writing that began in the war's aftermath—replaced life under the wartime state of siege, just as a new French Constitution celebrated "the victory won by free peoples over the regimes that have attempted to reduce to servitude and degrade human beings" ("Préambule"). Even the earliest first-hand accounts of Beckett's artistic ambitions collected during the 1960s (which overwhelmingly present metaphysics as his principal preoccupation) tentatively suggest a political knowledge that exceeds the limits of common experience. In the magazine *Encore*, Charles Marowitz admitted that he had found himself "frightened in [Beckett's] presence as [he] might be in the presence of a man who came within a hairsbreadth of death and survived" (43). Likewise, in the *New York Herald Tribune*, John Gruen did not linger on his impressions but described Beckett as a "somewhat terrifying," "constrained and diffident" figure (31).

Beckett's life and travels exposed him to different types of emergency legislation—for example, to the effects of the Irish Emergency when he returned to Ireland in 1945 and 1946 and, during the following decade, to the emergency legislation passed to curb the colonial war spreading across Algeria and France. During the 1930s and early 1940s, those whose status, nationality, and belongings came under threat in Nazi Germany and in occupied Paris included some of Beckett's relatives, friends, and acquaintances—in particular, his Jewish uncle, William "Boss" Sinclair and his family; Lucie Léon, the Russian-born wife of James Joyce's collaborator Paul Léon, who spent much of her adult life categorized as "stateless"; and the Jewish artists Jankel Adler and Otto Freundlich, whom Beckett had met in Paris prior to the war (Morin 73, 52, 159).

Emergency law was for him a political reality from a young age: his school years coincided with the deployment of the 1914 and 1915 Defence of the Realm Acts, which granted to the British military the power to arrest, detain, try in military courts, and execute Irish civilians perceived as a threat (Campbell

8-27). From his childhood, he remembered “the unhappiness” and “the troubles” (Knowlson 20-1) that made it necessary to “get [...] away” to school in Enniskillen (Gordon 10). Lois Gordon emphasized Beckett’s proximity to the political events that shaped the modern Irish state, remarking on his likely political literacy from an early age (7-31), while W.J. McCormack stressed that Beckett entered Portora Royal School when unilateral partition was imposed, and that he traveled between Enniskillen and Dublin during the worst times of the Irish War of Independence and the Irish Civil War (380). Later, these events became enshrined in literary records with which Beckett was familiar: Ernie O’Malley, with whom he became friends in the mid-1930s, published in the Spring of 1936 a memoir entitled *On Another Man’s Wound* (his friendship with Beckett seems to have begun shortly after the book’s publication). In this highly significant book (Morton 46), O’Malley offers a detailed portrayal of the state of exception, describing the curfews, night raids, armed patrols, torture, interrogation, hunger strikes, public meetings, and demonstrations, as well as the dangers that came from using certain words or whistling certain tunes.

Beckett’s journey through Nazi Germany in 1936 and 1937, widely perceived as a turning point in his adult life, marked another moment at which he was exposed to lives spent under the shadow of unrepealed emergency legislation. The Germany where he was once fined for wandering in a “dangerous fashion,” as he reported (*Letters 1* 394-5), was a country where civil rights had been suspended since the 1933 emergency Decree for the Protection of People and State. He records indirect responses to this state of affairs in the diaries he kept of his journey. While pondering a sort of memoir, for example, he entertained the prospect of writing an article about Hamburg’s Ohlsdorf cemetery, in a “cold elegiac” tone bearing similarities with the Code Napoléon (Nixon 113)—the legal text that defines the modalities according to which French nationality and civic rights can be enjoyed and withdrawn. While in Germany, he had numerous conversations about the dangers of Nazism. His interlocutors included the art historian Will Grohmann, whom he met in Dresden, and who offered his own poignant observations: “it is more *interesting* to stay than to go, even if it were feasible to go. They can’t control *thoughts*” (qtd. in Nixon 139; emphasis in original).

The idea that even in the most oppressive and terrifying circumstances, something in the human spirit remains free and indomitable haunts many of Beckett’s later texts, and chimes with reflections offered by others. Hans Magnus Enzensberger (whose early political essays Beckett deeply appreciated) argues that, while there have been many kinds of totalitarian societies, “there are no societies of total control. [...] Some little worlds, some little niches subsist. This came true under Nazism and in Stalin’s USSR. There is always a space in which one is able to maintain a certain dignity and is not obliged to capitulate, without becoming a hero” (qtd. in Semo 3; my translation). Beckett, for his part, appears to have been fascinated by figures whose repertoire supports such a proposition—for example, the clowns Bim and Bom, whose act endured from the late tsarist period through to the late Stalinist years.

The manner in which Beckett's work invokes the darker side of history is so prevalent that it has become common to see him feature alongside Kafka in discussions of the capacity of literature to reflect on, and sometimes anticipate, regimes of exception. The predilection that Adorno, for example, expressed for Beckett and Kafka comes across strongly in his reflections on Nazism and authoritarian rule. Beckett's writing held similar significance for a lesser-known figure: Charlotte Beradt, one of Arendt's postwar friends, who published in the 1960s a remarkable collection of dreams collected in Berlin between 1933 and 1939, at a time when she was affiliated with the German Communist Party. Beradt discerned important truths in the dreams of ordinary Germans. At the other end of the political spectrum, others felt the same: Robert Ley, the Nazi-era leader of the German Labor Front whom she cites in her epigraph, once stated that "The only person in Germany who still leads a private life is the person who sleeps" (qtd. in Beradt 8). Beckett emerges in her study as a writer who, like Kafka, displays unusual intuition and gives uncanny forms to the political nightmares experienced by others. Notably, Beradt relates the words of a Jewish lawyer who once dreamt that he was sitting on a yellow bench reserved for Jews next to a rubbish bin in Berlin's Tiergarten Park, and that he had put a sign around his neck that read, "I Make Room for Trash If Need Be" (134-5). For Beradt, this dream chimes with the situation portrayed in *Endgame*, with its characters already trapped in bins, who have lost everything except their physical place in the world (135). One wonders what Beradt would have made of *Eleutheria*—Beckett's first full-length play, published posthumously—where Victor Krap's nightmare ("towers ... circumcised ... fire ... fire ...") functions as a prelude to his denunciation of the passivity displayed by all those who "come across an infinite number of mysteries every day, and [...] pass by on the other side," greeting with horror, pity, and relief any "solution which is not that of death" (144-5).

It is not in Nazi Germany but in wartime France, split between a German-occupied zone and a 'free' zone administered by the Vichy regime and controlled by a fiercely anti-republican far right, that Beckett was most directly exposed to the realities of emergency law. The state of siege—proclaimed from September 1939 to October 1945—provided legal frameworks for a succession of regimes: for the 'phoney war' of 1939-1940, for the Vichy government headed by Philippe Pétain and Pierre Laval, and for Charles de Gaulle's Provisional Government (Simonin 365-90). The moments at which Beckett used the privileges conferred by his Irish passport to assist others and serve resistance cells are well known. He occasionally found himself in some difficulty—particularly after crossing the demarcation line in September 1942 (the 'free' zone was to remain under the control of the Vichy regime for only another month before passing into German hands). He sought refuge in the Vaucluse region, in a village called Roussillon; he was suspected of having forged papers, his movements were restricted to the village and its surrounding area, and he was fined for crossing the demarcation line illegally. His difficulties with the local authorities continued the following year. What little remains of his wartime correspondence conveys the manner in which he was both exposed to and preserved from the anti-Semitic and xenophobic logic

of the Vichy regime. “They can’t believe that I can be called Samuel and am not a Jew,” he wrote to the First Secretary of the Irish Legation in Vichy (*Letters* 2 xvii).

Emergency law throughout this period had an extraordinary reach and an extraordinary constitutional brutality. In July 1940, the state of siege made it possible for Pétain to replace republican proclamations of liberty, equality, and fraternity with “the rights of work, family, and fatherland,” and to pass constitutional legislation transferring to himself as head of state all executive powers formerly assumed by the Chambers of Parliament, paving the way for the suppression of parliamentary powers (Azéma 152-79). The powers ordinarily exercised by civil authorities were transferred to the army, and numerous measures were taken as part of Pétain’s National Revolution to reshape the fabric of the state beyond the realms of justice and public order. Four years later, in August 1944, the state of siege enabled de Gaulle to re-establish the French Republic, to declare as void all the constitutional acts and legislation passed after July 1940, and, thereafter, to categorize as ineligible to public office any parliamentarian who had previously passed Pétain’s constitutional amendments (“Ordonnance du 9 août 1944”; “Ordonnance du 20 novembre 1944”).

The texts Beckett composed in the war’s immediate aftermath feature historical details recalling the extended period covered by the state of siege. Mercier and Camier’s journey, for example, begins with an altercation involving a veteran of the Great War, who has been appointed by a mysterious body to implement law and order around the parking of bicycles and the ownership of dogs (unlike the episode relating Molloy’s arrest, bicycle rules are not invoked clearly). The French original lingers on the encounter, but the episode is abbreviated in the English version. In the French text, Mercier and Camier are all too aware that the dogs mating nearby contravene a specific decree, if not the law as a whole, like the locked bicycle that can’t be moved (“*Ils contreviennent à l’arrêté, dit Mercier, au même titre que la petite reine*” [*Mercier et Camier* 20-1]; ‘they breach the decree, said Mercier, in the same way as the bicycle’). The identity of the “*gardien*”—a “ranger” in the English text—is unmistakable: he is there to keep watch, threaten, and denounce. Everything about his manner, outfit, and obsessions suggests a satire of the laws and constitutional amendments through which Pétain sought to implement his National Revolution. War veterans were at the forefront of Pétain’s agenda: notably, a 1940 decree instating a new *Légion Française des Combattants* (French Legion of Combatants), and dissolving all previous veterans’ associations, conferred a range of civic, social, and moral roles upon a new federation gathering veterans of the Great War and of the 1939-1940 war (“*Loi portant création*”). The legion, which was deployed across the Vichy zone and banned from the German-occupied zone, soon gave rise to another corps, the *Service d’Ordre Légionnaire* (the Legion’s Order Service), conceived to act as “the Marshal’s eyes and mouth” (Ferro 224-46). Beckett’s characters mock the veteran’s credentials, recalling the time when he was “crawling in the Flanders mud, shitting in his puttees. [...] Will you look at that clatter of decorations, said Mercier. Do you realise the gallons of diarrhoea that represents?” (16).

The memory of war, in Beckett's work, is the memory of states of exception; it is also the memory of the symbols through which states have claimed their power to abrogate the law. The texts written and translated over the course of the Algerian War of Independence (1954-1962) are the most striking in this respect, and feature numerous details invoking the emergency politics of the *raison d'état* that shaped perceptions of legality and sovereignty throughout this period. The state of emergency, first declared in Algeria in 1955, was framed as applicable to metropolitan territory as well, building on prior war legislation created in 1938. Emergency law gave public authorities the power to control public spaces and movement—in practice, this permitted them to orchestrate the mass internment of civilians, declare a curfew, create special security zones, assign people considered as “suspects” to their residence, forbid any meetings in public places including bars and cafés; and, last but not least, to “take all measures necessary to keep control” over publications, the press, radiophonic broadcasts, cinematic projections, and dramatic performances (“Loi no. 55-385”). The following year, another decree extended powers of censorship to “all means of expression,” as part of a body of “exceptional measures” giving “special powers” to the government and the army in order to maintain public order and “safeguard” the national territory in Algeria (“Décret no. 56-274”).

Initially, the state of emergency was only applied for a few months; however, the “special powers” remained in force throughout the war years, and soon became synonymous with torture, disappearance, imprisonment without trial, and summary execution. Emergency legislation was deployed on French metropolitan territory at key turning points, such as May and June 1958; the law was modified in 1960, at the time of the “Week of the Barricades” in Algiers, and was applied again in France at the time of the Generals’ Putsch and thereafter, from April 1961 to May 1963 (Thénault 63-78). The extended shadow of the state of emergency looms large in Beckett’s portrayals of the war; his correspondence reveals the attentiveness with which he followed events in Algiers and in Paris.

Torture and the consequences of emergency legislation, such as internment without trial and summary execution, are situated at the center of texts such as *Comment c'est* and *How It Is*, *Fin de partie* and *Endgame*, *Happy Days* and *Oh les beaux jours*, *Pochade radiophonique* and *Rough for Radio II*, *Fragment de théâtre II* and *Rough for Theatre II*. The comments Beckett made about *Fragment de théâtre II*, with which he had great difficulties, convey his attempt to harness the legal rhetoric at work around him: he referred to the unnamed protagonist who stands at the window, seemingly ready to jump, as the “*prévenu*”—the accused—who may eventually regain his freedom (*Letters* 3 167 n2). *Pochade radiophonique* revolves around another victim: Fox, the tortured, whose situation recalls Algerian war testimonies published by the Editions de Minuit, as well as other accounts of torture such as those Ernie O'Malley published two decades previously. In *On Another Man's Wound*, O'Malley described being “blindfolded, handcuffed, kicked down the lane and into a motor car and driven away,” then “seated [...] on a wooden form” (218). “They tied my hands and legs as before. I felt trussed; they

put a cloth across my eyes. [...] Blood dribbled down my buttocks and legs. [...] I could not walk when I was told to move on. The guard lifted me, carried me along and flung me into a room. My head struck the stone floor and I was dazed” (222-3).

Beckett’s texts from the Algerian war years present worlds in suspension, in which the main priority is survival, and the desert is often deployed as an explicit setting and as an ideal tied to the promise of escape. This is not an innocuous choice: in the late 1950s and early 1960s, the Algerian desert was an overdetermined political space, which made desertion a permanent possibility and a permanent threat. It was also a site impacted by wider geopolitical tensions: the Algerian Sahara was depicted by de Gaulle, during an unofficial trip in March 1957, as “an immense chance” that should not be lost under any circumstances (Abramovici 53). Control of the Sahara Desert, where considerable oil resources were discovered in 1956, influenced the conduct of the Algerian war and its outcomes, and the desert became a strategic site providing opportunities for nuclear testing as well as oil drilling.

Actes sans paroles I or *Act Without Words I*—“the desert mime,” as Beckett called it (*No Author* 12)—invokes the political topography of Algeria at war, with its lone protagonist thrust into a “[d]esert,” submitted to “[d]azzling light” and a regime of thirst administered by a mysterious force offstage (*Complete Dramatic Works* 203). In 1957, at a time when many French people knew at least one conscript who had been sent to Algeria, a French performance of the mime came across as a political allegory about desertion (Jacquemont). The piece was conceived to accompany *Fin de partie / Endgame*, another play invoking the desert, in which desertion fleetingly emerges as the last possibility for survival. In *Endgame*, Nell’s last word to Clov is “Desert!”; it is both the final instalment in her extended recollection of Lake Como and an injunction whose meaning can undergo subtle variations depending on which syllable is stressed. Clov understands her pained utterance as a recommendation to “go away, into the desert” (103). In *Fin de partie*, Nell’s line is whispered, subversive; she says to Clov, “*Déserte*” (37). This is an order unconnected to her recollections of youth (the final e puts her line in the imperative mood, and removes any possible connection to her fractured description of Lake Como). Her murmur comes across as her last wish: that her disappearance might lead to his desertion.

At other key moments, the play invokes the long history of conquest, war, and empire. Notably, Hamm’s descriptions of his manor and former grounds, which once suffered from varying levels of fertility and rapidly changing yields, resonate with accounts of the colonization of Algeria: the colonial emphasis on farming led settlers to lands that proved difficult to cultivate, breeding severe food shortages, epidemics, and crisis. Beckett’s characters speak and act like colonial settlers in texts written long before the beginning of the Algerian war: Moran, like Clov, wears “*babouches*” at home (160). The narrator of *L’Innommable* relishes the odd colonial reference: he compares, for example, the color of dawn to a “Tunis pink” (“*ce rose de Tunis, c’est l’aurore*” (189); “Look at this Tunis pink, it’s dawn” (404)),

and he occasionally resorts to words tied to the colonization of Algeria such as “*barouf*” for racket and “*sabir*” for gibberish (86, 65). *Sabir*, a pejorative term, originally designated the Arabic inflected by Italian, Spanish, and French spoken in Algeria and other parts of North Africa after the 1830 conquest of Algeria.

In a manner similar to *Act Without Words I* and *Endgame*, *Happy Days* replays war anxieties through motifs that function as powerful political referents recalling the topography of war and colonial conquest. The setting—“scorched grass” in “[b]lazing light” (*Complete Dramatic Works* 138)—evokes the aftermath of forcible removal and perhaps plunder. In the French text, Winnie speaks of a world ruled by sinister forces when she drops her guard and loses courage, and she insults the desert—“*ce fumier de désert*”; ‘this muck of a desert’ (51). She finds solace, she admits, in thinking about having her throat cut—a guerrilla method favored by the Algerian National Liberation Front; the line “*Ça que je trouve si réconfortant quand je perds courage et jalouse les bêtes qu’on égorge*”; ‘that’s what I find so comforting when I lose courage and become jealous of the animals who get their throats cut’ (24) appears only in the French translation. The play began to find form in October 1960, and a particularly intense period of writing followed in early 1961 (Pilling 152-3), at a time marked by great uncertainty over the referendum on Algerian self-determination and the birth of the Organisation Armée Secrète (Secret Army Organization), a terrorist organization defending the interests of the *pieds-noirs*, the French living in Algeria. Considered in this context, the position of Winnie and Willie, stranded settlers who pretend to continue as normal, left alone in a hostile land that only wishes to see them disappear, becomes a literal illustration of the tensions Beckett witnessed around him.

Many among the *pieds-noirs* felt betrayed by de Gaulle and profoundly resented his attempts to resolve the conflict through political means. Their fate was clear long before the 1962 Evian Accords: as early as May 1961, a State Secretariat was created to investigate the eventuality of mass departures from Algeria to France (Scioldo-Zürcher 564-9). At the end of that year, the French National Assembly passed a law designed to set up infrastructure and support for mass repatriation (“Loi no. 61-1439”). Suzanne Beckett—who was, like her husband, a child of empire (she had spent part of her youth in colonial Tunisia)—would have been sensitive to the fragility of their situation. Beckett, for his part, seems to have been deeply concerned about the impact of emergency legislation and about the war’s broader political stakes. When he began work on *Happy Days*, a wider Cold War context rattled by the Algerian war was on his mind: early notes from 1956 featured allusions to nuclear strikes, and a male protagonist who wore striped pyjamas (Gontarski 49, 40)—a costume recalling the Nazi prisoner of war camps and concentration camps. Beckett’s speculative play with a powerful symbol of war memory resonated with the perception shared among many in France that the methods employed by the army to quell the Algerian conflict had Nazi precedents.

Beckett’s choice of readings during this period conveys an ambition to understand the breadth of the legislative measures supporting the Algerian war. In 1959,

from the Editions de Minuit, he bought a copy of Henri Alleg *La Question* (Morin 201), a testimony in which Alleg shows how his arrest, torture, and detention directly arose from the law granting to the army the power to take “exceptional measures” in order to control the Algerian conflict. Another book published by the Editions de Minuit, which Beckett acquired in May 1960, offered a detailed investigation of the legislation on “special powers.” This was *Le droit et la colère*, co-authored by Jacques Vergès, Michel Zavrian, and Maurice Courrégé, the three lawyers who defended FLN militants in the courts and prisons (Morin 201-2). Insurgent Algeria, the authors assert, is a country characterized by an “absence of rights,” at the mercy of an emergency legislation incompatible with the human rights conventions endorsed by the French government (Vergès, Zavrian, and Courrégé 63-72). Vergès, Zavrian, and Courrégé describe how a series of decrees restricting individual rights were gradually implemented and expanded the powers of the army; they pay close attention to the prevalence of summary execution and the rise of unexplained disappearances and, reproducing many letters and documents, relate the arrests of the lawyers defending Algerian prisoners and the censoring of their correspondence with their clients. The book pays close attention to a February 1960 decree that assigned all matters related to the Algerian war to military tribunals operating under military orders, creating a distinctive loophole that placed Algerian political prisoners beyond the protection of the Geneva Conventions and beyond the guarantees offered by common law (130-1).

Beckett’s concern with states of exception resonates in *Comment c’est* (or *How It Is*) and throughout the drafts that preceded its completion. The manuscripts developed around familiar coordinates of conquest, war, and emergency: passages gradually elided in drafts of this arduous experimental text reveal a narrator vainly attempting to fulfil the semblance of military orders and canvassing a hostile territory. The deaths and births of empires, together with the joys and sorrows of the living, surface as recurrent motifs across drafts. The published text, however, summons a specific strand of war memory, tied to a long history of French military losses and defeats. The narrator crawls through sullied mud, out of which other bodies and things emerge; he chokes on mud, and speaks in, through, and to mud.

Dredging through mud, eating mud, and sinking in mud are common tropes in war novels relating journeys through the French and Flemish Ardennes: notably, Louis-Ferdinand Céline’s *Voyage au bout de la nuit* (which Beckett admired greatly) and Claude Simon’s *La route des Flandres* (which Beckett had less regard for; he nonetheless read it upon its publication in 1960, while struggling with *Tout Bas*, the text that would subsequently become *Comment c’est* [*Letters* 3 360]). Céline’s and Simon’s novels share the same coordinates as Beckett’s text: mud, tinned rations, vigils, patrols. They summon the battles fought in the north of France, from the 1870s Franco-Prussian War to the First World War to—in Simon’s case—the defeat of 1940. Céline’s hero, Bardamu, professes his dislike for “those endless fields of mud, those houses where nobody’s ever home, those roads that don’t go anywhere,” concluding: “And if to all that you add a war, that’s completely unbearable” (11). To impending death on the battlefield, he

would infinitely prefer “[his] own kind of death, the kind that comes late”; war, after all, is nothing but “eating Flanders mud, my whole mouth full of it, fuller than full, split to the ears by a shell fragment” (17). Likewise, Simon’s *The Road to Flanders*—which anticipates both the subject matter of Beckett’s text and its experiments with punctuation—begins with an anecdote involving dogs eating mud. Here mud submerges even the possibility of war: Simon’s narrator discovers that his brigade “no longer existed; had been not annihilated, destroyed according to the rules—or at least what he thought were the rules—of war” (124), but had been “so to speak absorbed, diluted, dissolved, erased from the general-staff charts without his knowing where nor how nor when” (125), “somehow evaporated, conjured away, erased, sponged out without leaving a trace save a few dazed, wandering men hidden in the woods or drunk” (126). Beckett’s text goes a few steps further: the world is mud, and swallowing mud or being swallowed by it are the two alternatives that circumscribe all all actions. Lines elided from a previous draft ask profound questions about war memory: the narrator ventures a guess that the present era, “which even to [him] seems characterized by unrivalled abjection,” may “seem heroic in its own way, eventually, seen from the future” (*Comment 221*; my translation).

For Beckett, political history was synonymous with war, and its representation raised deep and troublesome questions about form and about responsibility. In conversation, he had a tendency to portray the political shifts taking place around him by means of plain euphemisms, and to push political experience beyond the realm of articulation: in 1955, he spoke of a “malaise,” “loss of spirit,” and “blackout,” for example (Bowles 28). In a later interview, he drew attention to his texts as reflections of a “mess” and “distress” that he had not invented, but that he, and anyone else sensitive to the world, could witness everywhere (Driver 242). He said to his interviewer, Tom Driver, that he placed his own hopes in an art form that “admits the chaos and does not try to say that the chaos is really something else” while continuing to honor the very function of form: to “[exist] as a problem separate from the material it accommodates” (244-245, 243). The Algerian war, unnamed, looms large in his meditations on form in the early 1960s, just as it looms large in his declarations about a world reduced to the most utter “confusion,” so much so that “our only chance now is to let it in [...], open our eyes and see the mess” (Driver 242). “It is not a mess you can make sense of,” he concluded (Driver 242). To another interlocutor, he offered a similar argument about a literary form situated in a state of exception, deprived of the customary adornments and comforts. He confided to Lawrence Harvey that “Being is constantly putting form in danger,” and that “he knew of no form that didn’t violate the nature of being ‘in the most unbearable manner’” (435).

These declarations about an art of writing built on desolation and hindered expression are commonly interpreted in the second, third, or fourth degrees, as renewed affirmations of the bottomless metaphysical despair to which Beckett’s work gives free rein. A different reading is possible: as Alain Badiou suggests, we should take the author himself “at his word” (39-40) (“*au pied de sa lettre*” [9])

in order to understand the nuances of his writing. To read Beckett in the first degree is to move beyond the old cliché according to which the work is about the meaninglessness of human experience; it is also a step toward recovering a sense of its political immediacy and the rawness of its ties to war memory.

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