
Article:
Ebury, K. (2017) Nonhuman Animal Pain and Capital Punishment in Beckett's "Dante and the Lobster". Society and Animals, 25 (5). pp. 436-455. ISSN 1063-1119

https://doi.org/10.1163/15685306-12341454

‘In the midst of its enemies’: Animal Pain and Capital Punishment in Beckett’s ‘Dante and the Lobster’

Abstract:

This article offers a fresh examination of the representation of nonhuman animals in Beckett’s early aesthetics, using ‘Dante and the Lobster’ as a case study. Beckett’s story is illuminated by historical documents including newspaper articles which will allow readers to see more clearly the deliberate parallels drawn between the question of the lobster’s suffering and the planned execution of a criminal which Belacqua contemplates throughout the day. An alternative reading model of the text, focusing on the Joycean concept of parallax rather than the Dantean concept of pity will be developed. The article closes by examining Beckett’s views on allegorical readings of texts containing representations of nonhuman animals and his later notes on E. P. Evans’s 1906 work, The Criminal Prosecution and Capital Punishment of Animals.

Keywords: nonhuman animals; capital punishment; Ireland; postcolonial; allegory; parallax.

Samuel Beckett's 'Dante and the Lobster' is the most extensively discussed story of the More Pricks than Kicks collection; however, in recent years it has fallen out of favour, with only brief mention of the story in the 2013 collection of essays on Beckett and Animals edited by Mary Bryden which is otherwise extremely comprehensive. However, there is much still to say about the story, in particular about the rich historical context of Beckett's depiction of Belacqua's horror at the discovery that the lobster he has brought home must be boiled alive; here, contextualisation reveals a politics of nonhuman animal life linked with debates around capital punishment reform and the direction of the Free State in Ireland.

Since the close of Beckett's story is central to my argument, it is worth quoting in full:

> Suddenly he saw the creature move, this neuter creature. Definitely it changed its position. His hand flew to his mouth.
>
> "Christ!" he said "it's alive."
>
> His aunt looked at the lobster. It moved again. It made a faint nervous act of life on the oilcloth. They stood above it, looking down on it, exposed cruciform on the oilcloth. It shuddered again. Belacqua felt he would be sick.
>
> "My God" he whined "it's alive, what'll we do?" The aunt simply had to laugh. She bustled off to the pantry to fetch her smart apron, leaving him goggling down at the lobster, and came back with it on and her sleeves rolled up, all business.
>
> "Well" she said "it is to be hoped so, indeed."
>
> "All this time" muttered Belacqua. Then, suddenly aware of her hideous equipment: "What are you going to do?" he cried.
>
> "Boil the beast" she said, "what else?"
>
> "But it's not dead" protested Belacqua "you can't boil it like that."
>
> She looked at him in astonishment. Had he taken leave of his senses?

> “Have sense” she said sharply, “lobsters are always boiled alive. They must be.” She caught up the lobster and laid it on its back. It trembled. “They feel nothing” she said.
>
> In the depths of the sea it had crept into the cruel pot. For hours, in the midst of its enemies, it had breathed secretly. It had survived the Frenchwoman's cat and his witless clutch. Now it was going alive into scalding water. It had to. Take into the air my quiet breath.
>
> Belacqua looked at the old parchment of her face, grey in the dim kitchen.
>
> “You make a fuss” she said angrily “and upset me and then lash into it for your dinner.”
>
> She lifted the lobster clear of the table. It had about thirty seconds to live.
>
> Well, thought Belacqua, it's a quick death, God help us all.
>
> It is not (2010, 14).

The first question we want to ask is: why lobster? The presence of a lobster, shorthand for luxury and taste, in Beckett’s story is surprising, as Belacqua scarcely eats anything throughout More Pricks and at other moments in the story takes a gourmet’s pleasure in burnt toast and green cheese. (He also thinks of the cheese as a “good green stenching rotten lump of Gorgonzola cheese, alive” (2010, 7) and thinking of his toast as “spongy and warm, alive” (2010, 5), unusually preferring his bread and cheese alive and his lobster dead). The presence of lobster in Beckett’s story is due to a greater availability of lobster and thus to lower prices. A historical overview of Ireland’s lobster population by R. M. Browne et al. (2001) notes that:

> After World War I there was an increase in the Republic of Ireland’s lobster landings up to 1927...[Allen et al. (1926)] attributed this in large part to the protection afforded to the fishery due to a reduction in fishing effort because of World War I (51).

The authors of this overview also note a similar increase in lobster landings during WWII, which decisively links the wider availability of lobster in Ireland with large international conflicts (Ibid.). The very presence of lobster in the story highlights the new Free State's continuing involvement in international politics and the shared waters of the Irish Sea, despite its isolationism at the time when Beckett was writing.

The wider availability of lobster in Ireland in the 1920s and 1930s even led to an advertising campaign pairing Guinness and lobster, as in these images where lobster is made to appear distinctively Irish. One of these posters features the "voice" of the lobster, acquiescing in its own death on condition that Guinness be supplied:

> 'Tis the voice of the lobster.
>
> I heard him declare,
>
> "I am ready for dinner, if Guinness is there"
>
> As a duck demands peas, so a lobster appeals
>
> For a Guinness at dinner and other such meals
>
> It brings out the flavour, the epicures say.
>
> (And who should know more about flavour than they?)
>
> A lobster's a good thing, but do not forget a
>
> Lobster with Guinness is twenty times better.

And yet, ironically, in asserting Guinness and Lobster as distinctively Irish, this ditty still engages in an intertextual relationship with the English literary canon and Lewis Carroll's (2009) original Alice in Wonderland nonsense poem, "Tis the voice of the Lobster". Just as the presence of lobster in Ireland shows a residual relationship between the British and Irish States, popular culture such as these lobster advertisements shows a continuing reliance on English culture, even if only as a source of parody, for forming Irish identity.

Although the presence of lobster on Irish tables and in popular culture during the 1920s and 1930s undoubtedly shaped the story, Beckett scholars are unsure of the composition date of 'Dante and the Lobster'. In *Samuel Beckett's Library*, Nixon and Van Hulle (2013) point out that although the story is set in 1926, it is likely that it was written several years later:

> The story takes place on Wednesday 8 December 1926, the day before the hanging of the 'Malahide Murderer', Henry McCabe. The composition of the story, however, may have started much later. Beckett told Ruby Cohn that he forgot the order in which he wrote the stories of More Pricks than Kicks, but he believed 'Dante and the Lobster' was written first. The first recorded version of any of these stories is 'Walking Out', as John Pilling notes (August 1931; Pilling 2006a, 32). 'Dante and the Lobster' was first published in December 1932 in This Quarter (112).

This question of dating is relevant because in April of 1930 The Manchester Guardian recorded the following exchange between MPs under the tantalising title "COMMONS AND THE LOBSTER":

> COMMONS AND THE LOBSTER.
>
> Its Painful Death.
>
> In the House of Commons yesterday.
>
> Mr. FREEMAN (Lab – Brecon) asked whether the lobsters served in the House of Commons were boiled alive.

> Mr. COMPTON (chairman of the Kitchen Committee) said that lobsters served in the House of Commons were cooked in the orthodox way. He was informed that the fish were alive when placed in the steamer, but directly steam was turned on death was instantaneous.
>
> Mr. FREEMAN: Is the hon member satisfied that death is quite instantaneous in view of the fact that groans and cries can be heard for a considerable time after the fish is immersed in the boiling water, and in view of the inhuman way of killing and cooking these animals will the hon. member not prohibit their use in the form of diet?
>
> Commander SOUTHBY (C. – Epsom) ironically suggested that the Kitchen Committee should take steps to prevent the brutal practice of eating live oysters.
> (Laughter.)
>
> Mr. COMPTON denied the suggestion that there was anything in the nature of cries from the fish. This was the only way of cooking known, and the same applied to shrimps, mussels, winkles, &c. Taking into consideration, he added, the fact that the House had abolished a form of capital punishment perhaps his hon. friend would provide them with a humane killer for lobsters. (Laughter.) (11).

It seems clear to me that Beckett read this article. Pilling's (2011) attempt to date the story more precisely makes my argument more plausible. He comments in his note to the passage which playfully announces "Let us call it Winter": "in real terms this [play] would not be necessary: Henry McCabe was hanged on 9 December 1926. A possible indicator that "DL" was written over the spring or early

s*ummer of 1930"* (148, italics added). Whether or not Beckett read the Guardian article before composing the story in the spring, the connections between the newspaper exchange and the story seem quite possible. Firstly, we find a discussion about whether lobsters die instantly, which forms the haunting close of Beckett's story. With difficulty, Belacqua reconciles himself to the lobster's death by rationalizing it, only to be reproved by the narrator's interjection:

> Well, thought Belacqua, it's a quick death, God help us all.
>
> It is not (2010, 14).

Secondly, the issue is raised as to whether lobsters can feel pain – Mr Freeman calls up a vivid picture of the image of the dying lobster, with its "groans and cries". The behavior of Beckett's lobster undermines Belacqua's aunt's conviction that "They feel nothing", as we are told repeatedly that "It trembled" (Ibid.). Beckett goes further even than Mr Freeman, however, by moving beyond its pain towards a complex identification with the lobster's life and perspective:

> In the depths of the sea it had crept into the cruel pot. For hours, in the midst of its enemies, it had breathed secretly. It had survived the French-woman's cat and his witless clutch. Now it was going alive into scalding water. It had to. Take into the air my quiet breath (Ibid.).

The lobster may be anthropomorphized, but its animal otherness is not forgotten; Belacqua enters the lobster's perspective to remind us that humans are "its enemies". The Biblical-sounding language, which recalls, for example, Psalm 110, of its being "in the midst of its enemies" makes us think of the lobster as a prisoner-of-war or hostage or rebel, rather than an animal about to become food. The reference to Keats's "Ode to a Nightingale" foreshadows the lobster's death but also darkly

reminds us that this is not the romantic death that Keats imagines. His or her breathing may not be quiet. Finally, the link between Beckett's story and this newspaper exchange is further supported by the language choices of each text, in fact, their shared use of a particular linguistic and biological mistake. Both MPs refer to the lobster as a "fish", while Belacqua calls the lobster a fish to Mlle Glain because he does not know the French for lobster:

> "Oh" she gasped "forgive me. I intrude, but what was in the bag?"…
>
> Mlle Glain took a French step forward.
>
> "The parcel" she buried her face in the cat "the parcel in the hall."
>
> Belacqua spoke up composedly.
>
> "Mine" he said, "a fish."
>
> He did not know the French for lobster. Fish would do very well. Fish had been good enough for Jesus Christ, Son of God, Saviour. It was good enough for Mlle Glain (2010, 12).

More crucially, subtler themes of Beckett's story are also present in the article, including the implied comparison of the lobster's death with 'capital punishment'. I have already referred to the way the lobster is imagined as a hostage or prisoner. Throughout the story, we are reminded of the imminent execution of McCabe, the Malahide murderer, especially in relation to images of food and consumption: Belacqua cuts bread on a picture of McCabe and thinks of putting the loaf back into "its prison" (2010, 4-5). Most tellingly, we find that news of the failure of McCabe's petition for mercy adds "spice" to Belacqua's lunch (2010, 10); further, immediately after we contemplate "McCabe in his cell", Belacqua collects the lobster (Ibid.). In this link between cooking and capital punishment, Belacqua's conception of taste is a mixture of pleasure and pain, life and death.

Until the work of Jeri Kroll provided a corrective (1977), generations of Beckett readers and critics had failed to realize that McCabe was a real person, as she points out:

> Although those critics who puzzle about the Malahide Murderer at all suggest that Beckett invented him and chose his name solely for its associations with Cain (McCabe, son of Cain), it turns out that Henry McCabe was an actual person whose life was legally terminated by the Irish state—he was hung, in fact, for murder (1977, 48).

Kroll's attention to the real figure of McCabe adds ethical depth to the story, but she shows only a passing interest in the lobster, listing it briefly, with mock "apologies to the lobster's species", among other scapegoats and pariahs referenced in the story:

> Specifically, the representatives of the outcast or the victim in the story are: Cain, Jonah, Christ, McCabe, and the lobster, who were, are, or will be, respectively, exiled, swallowed, crucified, hung, or boiled. We regard the pariah, or the 'marked' person (apologies to the lobster's species), who is set aside for some kind of radical fate from the rest of humanity, with fear, with awe and, sometimes, with admiration (1977, 49).

James McNaughton (2010), in a more recent essay, suggests that the appeal of the murder case was linked to the trauma of the Irish Civil War:

> 'Ireland's first taste of its own recent history – group murder and big-house fire, botched trial, and execution – presented in a depoliticized form, popularized as a Gothic tourist spectacle, and then quickly forgotten' (2010, 67).

Although McNaughton's argument shows greater political complexity than Kroll's, he also shows little interest in the lobster and its links to McCabe. However, it seems clear that animal studies can enrich historicist and postcolonial interpretations of the story.

While Kroll rightly places McCabe among other outcasts and victims, the complexity of this is heightened when we consider that Beckett was aware that it was quite possible that McCabe was innocent: he may be more like Christ than Cain. In fact, one appeal of McCabe's name for Beckett is that it might mean either son of Cain (guilty) or son of Abel (innocent). The facts of the Malahide Murder case, based on Kroll's summaries, McNaughton's essay and on articles in the Irish Times, are these. Early on Wednesday morning, 31 March 1926, Henry McCabe summoned the Civic Guard in Malahide, notifying them that the house where he worked as a gardener was on fire. When the Civic Guard finally entered the house they came upon the bodies of the whole McDonnell family, two brothers Peter and Joseph and two sisters Alice and Annie, and also the bodies of their two other servants. The three women were found together in one room and had been severely burned by the fire; the men were found in separate rooms and had not been burned to the same extent. Signs of physical violence were found on the male bodies. When a postmortem was conducted after an exhumation, different quantities of arsenic were found in their system. Exact causes of death in all victims proved impossible to determine. McCabe was eventually tried, convicted and executed for the murders as the only member of the household left alive. When asked at sentencing if he had anything to say, McCabe said: "All I have got to say is God forgive them. I am a victim of bribery and perjury"(Anon. Nov 15, 1926, 10). Despite the evidence against McCabe being only circumstantial and despite irregularities in the police investigation, the jury took only forty-five minutes to decide to convict, while McCabe's fate was presented in the press as a story about the deterrent power of

capital punishment and the efficiency of the Irish State's justice system. Kroll reminds us that a leading article on "Police and justice'" in the Irish Times on 10 December asserted: "Like other criminals, he reckoned without the stringent efficiency of the protectors of the peace . . . The fate of Henry McCabe, ruthless and deliberate above the ordinary among criminals, ought to serve as a stern deterrent to all whom passion or greed tempt to the path of crime" (1977, 56).

Beckett was briefly but obsessively interested in McCabe's fate. Pilling (2011) notes that he inserted a reference to McCabe into his French translation, completed with Peron and published in the Nouvelle Revue Française, of the Anna Livia Plurabelle of Joyce's Finnegans Wake (145). Further, Kroll points out that the mad gardener who appears in 'Draff', the final story of More Pricks than Kicks, setting Belacqua's house on fire on the day of his funeral is undoubtedly a McCabe figure (1977, 57):

> On their return they found the house in flames, the home to which Belacqua had brought three brides a raging furnace. It transpired that during their absence something had snapped in the brain of the gardener, who had ravished the servant girl and then set the premises on fire. He had neither given himself up nor tried to escape, he had shut himself up in the tool-shed and awaited arrest (2010, 179).

McNaughton argues that the reappearance of McCabe in "Draff" "suggests that the state's notion of punitive prevention is deeply flawed", while Belacqua's death and the burning down of his house on the day of his funeral is "an obvious moral comeuppance for Belacqua" (2010, 73). McNaughton thinks only of Belacqua's negligence of McCabe, but the triggering factors for the gardener's madness that we see in Draff are violence against animals and the loss of his gardener's line:

> He heard Mary Ann [the maid he later ravishes] in the run, her voiced raised in furious hallali, butchering a fowl for the table…Some unauthorized person had taken his line, with the result that he was now helpless to put down his broccoli (2010, 176).

It is unlikely that Beckett would have seen McCabe's execution in the way the Irish Times did, as a vindication of capital punishment: in fact, he invented the petition for mercy "signed by half the land" (2010, 10), as there was in reality no outcry against the execution. We could link the execution's role in Beckett's story with the burgeoning strength of the abolitionist movement in the 1920s and 1930s discussed recently by Lizzie Seal (2014). A full parliamentary debate on the issue took place in 1929, the year before the composition of Beckett's story, with a parliamentary select committee recommending an experimental five year suspension of the death penalty which was not implemented. The reform of capital punishment that the M.P. in the Manchester Guardian article about lobsters ironically refers to - "Taking into consideration, he added, the fact that the House had abolished a form of capital punishment" (Anon. 1930, 11) – must be the abolition of capital punishment for desertion in wartime which was the only reform of capital punishment that took place in 1930. Seal also discusses two differing abolitionist movements: one, The Howard League, which "pointedly eschewed emotionalism, as this compromised rationality" (2014, 22), and the other, founded by Violet van der Elst, which used tactics modeled on suffragette campaigns (2014, 86). Josephine Donovan's (1990) essay "Animal Rights and Feminist Theory" seems relevant to this discussion, as she critiques such arbitrary divisions between rational and emotional arguments for ethical behaviour; in the newspaper article that I've discussed the other M.P.s's ironic, rational responses aim in part to rebuke Mr Freeman for his emotionalism. Violet van der Elst's more emotive appeals for the abolition of capital punishment frequently met with accusations from the authorities that she was insane, while

Freeman's anxieties about animal death are made to seem emotional. As Richard King (2010) argues, rationalist practices in relation to the rights of nonhuman animals have often caused harm: "After killing 54 lobsters in four different ways, Marine Biologist Elizabeth Murray concluded in 1962: 'From the point of view of kindness to the lobster, it is hard to say which is the best method of killing'" (127).

Belacqua's final response to the lobster is emotional, in contrast with his rational aunt who stands in the place of the executioner; however, some Beckett critics have focused on the presence of a Dantean concept of "pity" in the story linked to the ambiguous line "qui vive la pietà quando è ben morta..." (2010, 11)[1], but the link between the lobster and McCabe is never made on a conscious level by Belacqua. This line from the Inferno, which means either "here lives piety when it is quite dead" or "here lives pity when it is quite dead" troubles Belacqua: he asks his Italian teacher about it, and then towards the close of the story thinks to himself "why not piety and pity both, even down below?". For Caselli (2005), McCabe and the lobster are simply examples of "the absence of God's pity" (61), while for Slote (2010) Belacqua "wants to read pity into Dante's cosmology as well as into his own" (21). In most previous treatments of pity by Beckett critics, the emotion has rarely been historicised, nor has it often found its proper object in ethical consideration for McCabe and the lobster, rather it has been seen as a question of intertextuality.

However, the historical contexts I've highlighted offer a new perspective on the relevance of the idea of pity; in fact, I think what's more at stake is something like the Joycean concept of parallax. Andrew Gibson (2010) has argued that the story sees Belacqua's conversion to a more nationalist than Anglo-Irish position on the death penalty, rejecting the Irish State's continuing embrace of Crown Law (36). And yet, Gibson argues that "Belacqua's sympathy for McCabe is itself finally ambivalent", because he "displaces" feelings about McCabe's death onto the lobster

[1] See, for example, Daniela Casselli (2005): 59-62; Naho Washizuka, (2009): 75-83; Sam Slote (2010): 15-28.

(2010, 37); but Gibson suggests a hierarchy that does not in fact exist as far as the story is concerned. He aims to highlight what he thinks of as the political potential of the story; capital punishment, not lobsters, are important for a postcolonial argument. I would argue that comparing the suffering of lobster and condemned man degrades neither and that the concept of parallax enables us to see that: after all, David Nibert (2002) has recently argued in a book-length study for the entanglements of animal rights and human rights in a model of "interrelation" not so different from Joyce's. For example, Barbara Heusel (1983) explains the ethical value of Joyce's narrative parallax in a classic essay on the topic: "The significance of the parallactic structure is it allows the reader a double perception…Joyce creates Bloom as the contrary to Stephen to give the reader an experience in parallactic vision" (143). In Ulysses, Bloom and Stephen are linked because of the parallax view created by the narrative structure – they do not especially pity or sympathise with each other – similarly in Beckett's story it is for us as readers to invest ethical value in the ironic parallel made between lobster and criminal, which Belacqua himself never grasps and which critics such as Gibson have equally failed to investigate. In fact the very double meaning of "*pieta"* already allows us a parallax view, something Belacqua's Italian teacher senses when he asks her to translate it: "Do you think" she murmured "it is absolutely necessary to translate it?"

In her study of the revisions Beckett made to the story between the first version published in This Quarter in 1932 and the 1934 version published in More Pricks than Kicks, Kay Gilliland Stevenson (1986) highlights the way that 'marine metaphors' are deliberately added by Beckett at this point to heighten Belacqua's connection to the lobster: "suddenly dived", "diving into the public", "plain sailing", "gone swimmingly" (40). Stevenson also shows that parallels between Belacqua and the executioner are reinforced at this stage of rewriting:

> One sentence added in 1934 is more ambiguous. After "He had burnt his offering, he had not fully dressed it", Beckett inserts, "Yes, he had put the horse behind the tumbrel" (p.12). First, by turning a proverbial phrase around so that the cart is not (verbally) ahead of the horse, Beckett is neatly repeating and exemplifying the idea of lobster-like progress backwards. Secondly, however, the substitution of "tumbrel" for "cart" links Belacqua not with the lobster, innocent as Abel, but with executioners. There are many of these in the story: Cain, God as punisher of Cain, Ellis the hangman crossing from England to dispatch McCabe and Belacqua's aunt matter-of-factly lifting the lobster into the pot (1986, 42).

The revisions that Stevenson highlights again suggest that Belacqua's pity, or lack of it, is not as central to the story as previous generations of Beckett critics have suggested: as in parallax, the parallel between Belacqua and the lobster and Belacqua and the executioner takes place on the level of narration, very deliberately above the character that Beckett often ironises. This is important to point out because of the critical tradition, which Pilling strenuously challenges in an addendum to his volume (2011, 234)[2], to read More Pricks than Kicks in the light of Dubliners and the concept of epiphany. Although a Joycean influence is valuable for my argument, a different reference point is appropriate since parallax as a way of reading may be of general help to the reader when considering the place of nonhuman animals in a literary text. It seems clear that Belacqua has not had a transformative epiphany about animal being or about McCabe, as the rest of the stories of the collection prove, though the reader may have done so. We are not

[2] Pilling cites work by Phyllis Carey, Adrian Hunter and Barbara Reich Gluck to show that "there have been persistent attempts to bring More Pricks as close to Dubliners as it will go, and arguably closer than can comfortably be achieved" (2011, 234).

dealing with something like Dante's "rare movements of compassion in Hell", which Belacqua's Italian teacher says used to be a "favourite question" (2010, 11).

So far I've discussed a specifically Irish context for the popularity of lobster, and a mixture of English and Irish contexts for capital punishment; but we should also remember that capital punishment in Ireland was a relic of colonialism. Though a draft of the 1922 Constitution of the Irish Free State included a ban on the death penalty, the Civil War meant that British laws on capital punishment remained in force. In fact, although Cosgrave, head of the new government, claimed to oppose capital punishment in principle, he allowed the execution without trial of republicans. This is not to say that opposition to capital punishment did not exist: in 1925 an amendment was proposed suggesting the substitution of penal servitude as punishment for treason arguing that Ireland "should not follow the example of Great Britain, which was one of the states now in a majority in maintaining capital punishment" (Anon. 1925, 9). The Minister for Justice, Mr O'Higgins, pointed out in opposing the amendment that it only covered the death penalty for treason and that a better reform would be to abolish the death penalty for murder. Mr. O'Farrell responded by striking back directly at the ironies of O'Higgins's position, saying that "if the British had carried out their treason laws in recent years the Senate would now be without the Minister for Justice and other Ministers" (Ibid.). Of course, neither reform to punishment for treason nor for murder was enacted and the debate in Ireland was far less prominent than in the Britain during the 1930s[3].

In a further irony, which, as far as I've been able to determine, was not discussed in The Dàil, it is worth noting that as before independence, the British executioner still came to Ireland to perform hangings; Ryle Dwyer (2013) in the Irish Examiner notes that "Between…1923 and 1939, 26 people were executed [in

[3] Nonetheless, the gradual trajectory of abolition was similar in each country: the last execution took place in Ireland in 1954 and in 1964 in the UK; the abolition of capital punishment for most offences occurred in 1964 in Ireland and 1965 in the UK; full abolition was passed in 1990 in Ireland and 1998 in the UK.

Ireland]...The British hangman Tom Pierrepoint conducted 24 of those hangings. Two other British hangmen — William Willis and John Ellis — hanged the other two" (n.pag). "Ellis the hang-man", who is already on his way when Belacqua eats his lunch in the story, is clearly English and coming from England; he had previously executed the Irish revolutionary Roger Casement in 1916. One important thing which Kroll (1977) does not notice in her account, and which is not referenced in Pilling's (2011) notes to the story, is that Beckett gives the wrong executioner. It was actually Tom Pierrepoint, of the famous dynasty of executioners, who dispatched the Malahide Murderer. I would argue that, given the level of obsessional interest in McCabe shown on Beckett's part (the mad gardener in "Draff"; the insertion of McCabe into Anna Livia Plurabelle), we can credit Beckett with having read multiple articles about the case; this mistake must be deliberate. Stevenson points out the way that Beckett builds up comparisons between Belacqua and executioner when revising the story, but Ellis is an unusual type of executioner because of the way he draws together relationships of Irish nationalism, capital punishment and animals.

The irony of the executioner who executed rebels after the Easter Rising being commissioned by the new Irish State is probably enough to explain Beckett's substitution. However, another factor which might have influenced Beckett, given the implicit condemnation of capital punishment in the story, is that Ellis famously made a suicide attempt in 1924 after becoming traumatised by the botched execution of Edith Thompson. By the time the first version of "Dante and the Lobster" was published he was already dead after a further successful suicide attempt in September 1932. Because of Ellis's status as a minor celebrity, who after his retirement toured seaside towns performing mock executions, his first suicide attempt and his ensuing prosecution for attempted suicide, as well as his final suicide, were widely reported in the newspapers. His resignation from the post of hangman was covered as far afield as Australia: an article in Adelaide's The Advertiser from 17 May 1924 announced "A HANGMAN'S REMORSE". This article

and others offer another factor that might explain Beckett's substitution: Ellis's status as an animal-lover, which was well covered in newspapers after his retirement. The article in the Adelaide press reflects that when the reporter visited Ellis for an interview he was very reticent to talk about his profession:

> But he was ready enough to talk about his dogs. He is a dog fancier with a high reputation in the North, and is a familiar figure at the various whippet coursing grounds. He has bred some of the finest whippets in England, and has won many prizes. He has always protested against the practice followed by many owners and breeders of killing off dogs, when they become too old for racing. "I never part with an old friend," he said to me, as he stroked the head of a whippet which was very far past its prime. There is a story told about him locally—though Ellis denies it in a half-ashamed way—that he had not the heart to kill one of his pet chickens, and had to get a friend to do the job (Anon. 1924, 15).

Given the rationalist arguments in favour of capital punishment which enabled Ellis to do his work, the reporter appears fascinated by the way that Ellis's experience as an executioner fails to taint his sympathetic relationship with the vulnerable animal bodies of his pet dogs and chickens: in many ways this section of the article provides evidence for Ellis's 'remorse' about his past role. However, Ellis's apparently deliberate displacement from the violence of capital punishment, which the reporter had come to hear about, to sympathetic care for animals remains unsettling; it sees relevant that Belacqua, who is also imagined in the role of the executioner, is ultimately more comfortable with animal pain. Still, the threat of capital punishment still hangs over Ellis's connection to animals: there are very few surviving available photographs of him, but included in his memoirs is one of him at his home in Rochdale with three of the bulldogs he had bred; tellingly, someone has montaged

an image of Holloway Prison into the background.

Coda: Beckett, animals, allegory

It could be argued that both Gibson's chapter and my own double, or parallactic, thesis that the presence of the lobster is part of a postcolonial allegory about capital punishment, and that McCabe is part of a similar allegory about animal suffering, fall into a trap that Beckett himself condemns in a letter to the writer Kay Boyle published in the most recent volume of his letters (Craig et al. 2014). Boyle, then teaching a course on the short story at the University of Delaware, had sent him a lecture she was writing on James Joyce's Dubliners story "The Boarding House". Boyle argued for what we would now term a postcolonial reading of the story, which stressed the symbolic role of butchery in the opening of the story:

> Mrs. Mooney is the centuries' long British domination of Joyce's country, and the butcher history in which she is implicated both by father and husband is the history of the "Black and Tan". The cleaver with which her husband seeks to kill her is the instrument of that same history of violence (2014, note 2, 50).

Beckett responded to her letter to reprove her reading:

> I do not agree that the first five paragraphs are relevant only in terms of an allegorical context. I know nothing about short story or any other aesthetics. But it seems normal to me in exordium to the relation proper, to situate those whom it concerns and establish their climate. And I feel the butchery and cleavery have no other purpose than this, and that it is achieved?...But this is perhaps just my contrariness. It might also be enquired if these are short stories at all. They are chunks of Dublin, its air and light and scene and

> voices, and for me the only way to read them is right down in their immediacy. But that is the only way I can read the Vita Nuova, where allegory and analogy are proclaimed intentions. So regard all this as nothing more serious than the expression of a personal disability and blow up my lobster to whatever dimensions you fancy. All I know is the sudden stir of the bag that told me it was still alive - and suchlike particulars (2014, 48).

Boyle replied to make clear that her use of allegory in her, admittedly quite stretched, argument was ironic: "I am, in these analyses of short stories, trying to show how evil the allegory-symbol-seeking of the lifeless, bloodless, academically-paralyzed "new critics" of our time can be if allowed a free hand" (2014, note 1, 52). It is unclear whether Boyle's first position or her second is sincere; perhaps she retracted her ideas out of embarrassment. There are certainly several contradictions: Boyle simultaneously puts colonial politics and food politics into Dubliners, and then takes them out again, blaming the New Critics. Boyle's failed argument makes us want to respond by thinking seriously about the portrayal of the meat industry in Joyce's texts: suddenly we become aware of the traces of dead animals in "The Boarding House", what Beckett terms "the stir of the bag" (2014, 48). What Beckett's rejection of allegory returns us to is the 'immediacy' and being of the animal, specifically the lobster: "All I know is the sudden stir of the bag that told me it was still alive" (2014, 48). Slote argues of the Commedia's influence on Beckett, "allegorisation is already a mode of irony" and, moreover, both allegory and irony depend on "the hermeneutic skill of the reader" (19). Ultimately we cannot take Beckett's argument for a literal reading of texts too seriously, as in fact he engages in postmodern, ironic allegory far beyond "Dante and the Lobster".

Ackerley's (2010) Annotated Watt shows through studies of Beckett's manuscripts that passages in the novel were informed by notes about theological and judicial judgements applied to animals from texts such as the anonymously

published Curiosités théologiques par un bibliophile and E. P. Evans's The Criminal Prosecution and Capital Punishment of Animals (1906). In Beckett's novel, when Watt meets Mr Spiro in the train and is quizzed by him on the prize competitions of Crux, a Catholic monthly, one of the questions is:

> What do you know the adjuration, excommunication, malediction and fulminating anathematisation of the eels of Como, the hurebers of Beaune, the rats of Lyon, the slugs of Mâcon, the worms of Como, the leeches of Lausanne and the caterpillars of Valence? (2009, 21)

Another question follows, sent in by a reader of Crux:

> Sir
>
> A rat, or other small animal, eats of a consecrated wafer.
>
> 1) Does he ingest the Real Body, or does he not?
>
> 2) If he does not, what has become of it?
>
> 3) If he does, what is to be done with him?
>
> Yours faithfully
>
> Martin Ignatius MacKenzie
>
> *(Author of The Chartered Accountant's Saturday Night)* (2009, 22).

These examples are drawn by Beckett from The Criminal Prosecution and Capital Punishment of Animals. In fact, Evans strikingly opens the first chapter of his book with reference to "the rats of Lyons". On the question of the rat which appears in Watt, Evans gives a similar example which adds a dark resonance to the question of "what is to be done with him": "In 1394, a pig was hanged at Mortaign for having sacrilegiously eaten a consecrated wafer" (1906, 157). In an appendix, Evans provides a "Chronological List of Excommunications and Prosecutions of Animals

from the Ninth to the Nineteenth Century" which Beckett must also have seen, including animals from dolphins (Marseille, 1596) to a She-Ass (1750, Vanvres) (1906, 313-335). More interestingly, although Evans condemns the punishment of animals as "the common superstition of the age" (1906, 12), this is not to say he disapproved of capital punishment:

> A striking and significant indication of the remarkable change that has come over the spirit of legislation, and more especially of criminal jurisprudence, in comparatively recent times, is the fact that whereas, a few generations ago, lawgivers and courts of justice still continued to treat brutes as men responsible for their misdeeds, and to punish them capitally as malefactors, the tendency now-a-days is to regard men as brutes, acting automatically or under an insane and irresistible impulse to evil, and to plead this innate and constitutional proclivity, in prosecution for murder, as an extenuating or even wholly exculpating circumstance (1906, 193).

The contradictions here are not so different to that the reporter finds in his visit to Ellis the hangman, who has far more compassion for his animals than the men he executed through his long career.

Despite more recent work by Dirk Van Hulle and Mark Nixon (2013) on Beckett's library, we cannot be sure whether Beckett had read Curiosités théologiques par un bibliophile or The Criminal Prosecution and Capital Punishment of Animals at the time that he composed 'Dante and the Lobster'. However, Evans's treatment of a period when "Brutes [animals] and human criminals were confined in the same prison and subjected to the same treatment" (1906, 142) still illuminates the sense of his lobster as prisoner, hostage or defendant which we find in the story: "For hours, in the midst of its enemies, it had breathed secretly" (2010, 14). Further, although Beckett is tempted to condemn such readings of his story in his letter to

Boyle, his reading of Evans's text blurs allegorical and literal aspects of his portrayal of animals; as Beckett knew, historically animals were subject to trial and punishment, therefore we need not necessarily resort to a symbolic level to explore the likeness of the lobster and McCabe. Perhaps, instead, we could return to parallax as a third term that would trouble the distinctions between the literal and the symbolic, allegory and irony. Just as McCabe and the lobster, like Stephen and Bloom, are fellow travellers who never fully come together, Beckett offers two interpretive possibilities for readers of the story – we might care for the well-being of the lobster or we might see the lobster as a symbol – that cannot be productively resolved. Taken together the literal and the allegorical offer a stereoscopic view of nonhuman animals in Beckett's texts.

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