

Seeing beyond the Anthropocene with Joyce and Beckett

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Abstract This article suggests that the literary works of James Joyce and Samuel Beckett may offer a means of ‘seeing beyond the Anthropocene’. A close look at Joyce’s “The Dead” and the “Proteus” and “Penelope” episodes of *Ulysses* as well as at Beckett’s play *Endgame* and other works will show how these writers’ distinct ways of looking at the world, and the life and death of mortal human beings, provide radical critiques of (and perhaps alternatives to) anthropocentric idealism. Their insights are still highly relevant today as the ecological crisis demands a fundamental reorientation of the (post) human relationship with the earth.

Keywords James Joyce. Samuel Beckett. Anthropocene. Ecology. Posthuman.

Summary 1 Introduction. – 2 Learning ‘Wavespeech’. – 3 The Beginning of the Endgame. – 4 Conclusion.



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1 Introduction

One often thinks of James Joyce as a writer who focused on the urban environment of Dublin around 1900 and of Samuel Beckett as a playwright of ‘the absurd’ whose works are characteristically set in no particular place or recognisable environment at all. The distinct perspectives of both writers, however, arguably anticipate two of the future scenarios envisaged in the contemporary imagination as humanity hovers between visions of apocalyptic environmental disaster and visions of a new, green, environmentally friendly way of life. Recent broadly ecocritical discussions of the writings of both Joyce¹ and Beckett² have drawn attention to the relevance of aspects of their works to contemporary ecological concerns. This essay will assemble readings of texts such as “The Dead”, episodes of *Ulysses*, and *Endgame*, drawing on these discussions and earlier commentaries (e.g. Adorno 2000; Ellmann 1974) to reveal how these twentieth century Irish writers did indeed prophetically ‘see beyond the Anthropocene’.

If the Anthropocene has come to be widely understood as the modern era in which the very geological make-up of the planet has been fundamentally altered by human activity (Lewis, Maslin 2015), what ‘seeing beyond’ it signifies is perhaps a different matter. As so much of the planet’s population is increasingly conscious of the disastrous effects of the Anthropocene in terms of climate change and the global environmental crisis, any glimpse of what might lie beyond (or what path might lead beyond) the Anthropocene would be welcome. While neither Joyce nor Beckett may have heard of terms such as the Anthropocene or climate change, their relevance to these matters lies in their critiques of fundamental philosophical/cultural attitudes that have deeply influenced human beings’ relations with their natural environment and the planet with now widely recognised disastrous results. Joyce’s critique of the prevalence of varieties of philosophical idealism that promote the soul and the spirit at the expense of the body and the earthly, and Beckett’s critique of the arrogance of anthropocentric claims to know and master the world are both still relevant in a time of ecological crisis. This will be clear to those (e.g. Klein 2015) who recognise that ‘Seeing beyond the Anthropocene’ and finding a way out of the current crisis is more than a matter of technological innovation and installing a few solar panels. What is required, according to Latour (2018) for example, is a fundamental cultural and philosophical change of direction involving a coming ‘down to earth’ from environmentally and socially destructive idealist

1 Borg 2017; Brazeau, Gladwin 2014; Fairhall 2014; Leonard 2014; Walsh 2014.

2 Boulter 2018; Olsson 2022; Rabaté 2016.

flights of fancy; overcoming modern anthropocentrism will be vital for any undoing of the damages of the Anthropocene and a recovery of ecological balance on the planet (cf. White 1967; Pope Francis 2015).

In so far as Joyce and Beckett sought to overcome enormously influential, deep-seated attitudes to the world prevalent within western modernity, their critiques may be related to the recent use of the term 'posthuman', where that is understood to refer to a critique of the legacy of humanism as fundamentally anthropocentric, as well as Eurocentric, androcentric, and certainly not very eco-friendly.³ The term 'posthuman' will be relevant in that sense in the following also, as it has been applied in recent discussions of the treatment of the environment in the works of Joyce and Beckett (Borg 2017; Olsson 2022; Rabaté 2016).

Such abstract terms may at first seem alien to the great literary works themselves and these writers' treatment of everyday life and the life of the body. As Fairhall writes,

Joyce's fiction does not engage much with Dublin nature [...], yet it does investigate [...] the locus of the human experience of nature - the body. (Fairhall 2014, 568)

Both Joyce and Beckett are renowned for their down-to-earth treatment of this aspect of nature - the body. Beckett was famously particularly minimalistic in his approach.

In 'down-to-earth' terms, one may say that Joyce and Beckett saw beyond (or outside) the Anthropocene in turning their attention to the down-to-earth life, decay and death of human bodies, perhaps what an anthropocentrically driven culture has paradoxically programmatically repressed in the ruthless modern pursuit of abstract wealth and power. Rather than such pursuits, what is ultimately foregrounded in their writings is a modest, non-aggressive version of everyday mortal life grounded on the earth with few material things but with a rich supply of playful language, imagination, and humour. Their focus on aspects of life other than an obsession with the immediate instrumentalization of all human and natural resources for profit and power in itself suggests their playful literary works may hold out - as both 'autonomous works of art' in Adorno's sense (Adorno 1982) and Bakhtinian 'carnavalesque' subversion (Bakhtin 2009) - an alternative to the destructive mainstream culture of the capitalist Anthropocene. As such, their works may indeed help in the contemporary collective effort to 'see beyond the Anthropocene'.

3 Cf. Ferrando 2013; Hayles 2010; Simon 2019; Braidotti 2019a; 2019b.

2 Learning ‘Wavespeech’

The closing scene of James Joyce’s story “The Dead” with the snow “general all over Ireland” (Joyce 2006, 194) could be seen as a final, melancholic, depressing reinforcement of the theme of death in that story (and in *Dubliners*). It can, however, also be read as the final reconciliation of Gabriel Conroy (initially a rather conceited, would-be modern, cosmopolitan individual, with little time for the rural West of Ireland or the real mortals around him) with his own mortality, other mortals, *and* the culturally loaded natural environment bearing the scars of famine and imperialist domination west of the city of Dublin (Kane 2022).

Early in the story Gabriel casually dismisses the suggestion that he go to the West of Ireland for his holidays and show more interest in his own country and the Irish language, saying he intends to go to France, or Belgium, or Germany, ultimately irritably declaring that “Irish is not my language” and he is “sick of [his] own country, sick of it!” (Joyce 2006, 164-5). As Ellmann writes:

the west of Ireland is connected in Gabriel’s mind with a dark and rather painful primitivism, an aspect of his country which he has steadily abjured by going off to the continent. (Ellmann 1982, 248).

By the end of the story, however, he has apparently been shocked out of his sense of his own superiority to his “own country” and the most rural west of it by hearing something of his wife’s past love life there. Gabriel finally becomes aware that the snow falling softly outside the window of his city-centre hotel room is also falling on a remote cemetery in the countryside far to the west - and seems to feel that it is at last establishing an emotional connection between him and that rural, natural environment of the West for which he previously had so little time:

Yes, the newspapers were right: snow was general all over Ireland. It was falling on every part of the dark central plain, on the treeless hills, falling softly upon the Bog of Allen and, farther westward, softly falling into the dark mutinous Shannon waves. (Joyce 2006, 194)

In a paper exploring “The Dead” in relation to the cultural as well as ecological significance of the Irish bogs, Fairhall writes:

the interplay between his [Gabriel’s] consciousness and forms of wetness extends his recognition of his kinship with other human beings into an intuitive sense of relatedness to the bog, the snow, the River Shannon’s waves, and the treeless hills. (Fairhall 2014, 568)

This, he continues, “illustrates an aspect of what Stacy Alaimo calls trans-corporeality”, a concept that “addresses ‘the interconnections, interchanges, and transits between human bodies and nonhuman natures’”.

The end of “The Dead” arguably signals a shift away from a lofty critical attitude towards provincial, rural Ireland on the part of the self-consciously modern, cosmopolitan writer (Joyce himself) towards a kind of “faith” (Joyce quoted in Ellmann 1982, 107) or philosophy of life – reconnecting mortal human bodily nature *and* the natural environment – that is further developed in *Ulysses* and *Finnegans Wake*.

That shift is again treated in the first part of *Ulysses*, as the young, highly intellectual Stephen Dedalus strives to find an alternative to the two “masters” of the “Imperial British state” and the “Holy and Apostolic Roman Catholic Church” as well as to all the other “voices” demanding his allegiance (Joyce 1960, 24; 2007, 73). What Stephen apparently arrives at as an alternative is what he mulls over in the “Proteus” episode; it then conveniently comes to life in no. 7 Eccles Street in the very bodily persons of Leopold and Molly Bloom. The lofty intellectual who “does not yet bear a body” (in the Linati Schema reproduced in Ellmann, 1974) is apparently approaching a more ‘down-to-earth’, Aristotelian philosophy of life that integrates the soul with the life (and death) of the body *and* with the material world of the natural environment. James Fairhall neatly summarizes Stephen’s intellectual progress thus:

If the goal of Stephen’s growth in *A Portrait* is to transform himself into the son of the mythical artificer Daedalus, escaping biology through art, then the goal of his primal struggle in *Ulysses* is to reconcile with necessity in the form of mother-as-nature. (Fairhall 2012, 69)

Fairhall also suggests that

by the time Joyce was composing *Ulysses* – certainly by the time he was working on “Proteus” – he had become something of a philosopher of nature. (Fairhall 2012, 91)

It is precisely in a natural environment that the “Proteus” episode of *Ulysses* is set: Stephen surveys the “ineluctable modality of the visible” of “seaspawn and seawrack, the nearing tide, that rusty boot” on the shore of the “snotgreen” Irish Sea and wonders whether he is “walking into eternity along Sandymount strand”. He closes his eyes “to hear his boots crush crackling wrack and shells. [...] Crush, crack, crick, crick” (Joyce 1960, 45). *Ulysses* may be celebrated for its focus on a modern urban environment, but, from the opening scene at the “scrotumtightening” (3) Forty Foot to Molly Bloom’s “O and the

sea the sea”, this elemental ‘Anthropocene-dwarfing’ force of nature is never far away, as is appropriate for an epic based on Homer’s *Odyssey*. Stephen comes to some kind of vision as he walks alone by the sea on Sandymount Strand, and there is a parallel here with the scene at the end of chapter four of *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, when he “discovered his artistic vocation while walking on Dollymount Strand” (Joyce 2011, 957; cf. Leonard 2014). One might conclude that some of Stephen’s best thoughts come to him where the city meets the sea. The complete shift of focus in the episode immediately after “Proteus” from Stephen to Leopold Bloom making breakfast at home is the logical follow up to the young intellectual’s ‘snotgreen-sea’ inspired musings here.

Richard Ellmann’s (1974) heading for his discussion of the “Proteus” episode is “Why Stephen Dedalus Picks his Nose” (as Stephen does at the end of the chapter). One of the reasons why Stephen does so is that what he picks out is a very graphic example of physical decay, the counterpart of birth and creation which had figured in the earlier part of his train of thought. Both counterparts are aspects of a natural world understood as in a state of constant protean flux. Stephen is coming to realize that his own body is part of this natural cycle. Indeed, Fairhall (2012, 91) suggests that *Ulysses* as a whole

investigates and represents the transcorporeal interweaving (a continuous, feminine process rather than a fixed, masculine property) of nature and human nature.

Another related reason for the nose picking is that Stephen and Joyce have been thinking of Aristotle, a philosopher who, according to Joyce, was “the greatest thinker of all time” (quoted in Ellmann 1974, 12). Aristotle, the “*maestro di color che sanno*”, is in Stephen’s mind from the first lines of “Proteus” with the reference to the “ineluctable modality of the visible” (45). Ellmann explains Aristotle’s relevance in Dublin around 1900, where, in the Romantic mysticism of devotees of the Celtic Twilight, Joyce observed “an idealism as rampant as Plato’s” (13). “Against idealism”, Ellmann writes, Aristotle “declared that the soul was inextricably bound up with matter” (16). Picking one’s nose while meditating on the meaning of life and death is perhaps a graphic illustration of that connection. It also shows that Stephen in fact now does ‘bear a body’ and that he is part of the material natural world of decay and death, birth and growth, not soaring above it.

That human beings are so related to the earth is of course a classic ecological point. Stephen is coming ‘down to earth’ – the English title of Bruno Latour’s 2017 book *Où atterrir?* – and coming to an understanding of “nature-as-process” as well as of his own modest position within this process (Latour 2018, 74). As Stephen’s thought processes

in “Proteus” revolve so much around *processes* of growth and decay, he may be landing somewhere close to Latour’s suggestion that:

It is perhaps time [...] to stop speaking about humans and refer instead to *terrestrials* (the Earthbound), thus insisting on *humus* and, yes, the *compost* included in the etymology of the word ‘human’. (2018, 86; emphasis in the original)

Stephen’s rejection of religious and political masters as well as of philosophical and cultural forms of idealism and mysticism may be bringing him to an Aristotle-inspired philosophical position that is not too far from Latour’s urgent contemporary philosophical argument: both recognise the necessity of coming ‘down to earth’.

It would perhaps then be not too far-fetched to characterise “Proteus” (and *Ulysses*) as an early example of ‘ecology’, the term Haeckel coined in the late nineteenth century, defining it as “the investigation of the total relations of the animal both to its inorganic and to its organic environment” (quoted in Herber, s.d., 1). The “critical edge of ecology”, Herber argues, is that it

clearly shows that the totality of the natural world - nature taken in all its aspects, cycles, and interrelationships - cancels out all human pretensions to mastery over the planet. (2)

That latter phrase would resonate with Joyce’s Stephen, the disgruntled “servant of two masters” - “the imperial British state [...] and the holy Roman catholic and apostolic church” (Joyce 1960, 24).

Just as Stephen’s thoughts flow into each other in this episode devoted to his ‘stream of consciousness’, the watery ‘lagoonscape’ he sees and hears is an environment where everything seems to flow into everything else. His train of thought is from the first inspired by the natural environment of shifting sand and flowing water, and he appears to merge with the flowing, swirling world around him through a combination of a mental use of onomatopoeia and a physical act of urination:

In long lassoes from the Cock lake the water flowed full, covering greengoldenly lagoons of sand, rising, flowing. [...] Listen: a four-worded wavespeech: seesoo, hrss, rsseeiss, oos. Vehement breath of waters amid seasnakes, rearing horses, rocks. In cups of rocks it slops: flop, slop, slap: bounded in barrels. And, spent, its speech ceases. It flows purling, widely flowing, floating foampool, flower unfurling. (Joyce 1960, 62)

Everything flows in “Proteus”, and of course the sense of flux and flow is a fundamental feature of Joyce’s *Weltanschauung* as of his literary practice, where words and meanings so often flow into each other.

Looking out across the sea, Stephen recalls hearing about the search for the body of a recently drowned man and imagines the body decomposing in the water:

Bag of corpsegeas sopping in foul brine. A quiver of minnows, fat of a spongy titbit, flash through the slits of his buttoned trouserfly. God becomes man becomes fish becomes barnacle goose becomes featherbed mountain. Dead breaths I living breathe, tread dead dust, devour a urinous offal from all dead. Hauled stark over the gunwale he breathes upward the stench of his green grave, his leprous nosehole snoring to the sun.

A seachange this, brown eyes saltblue. Seadeath, mildest of all deaths known to man. Old Father Ocean. (Joyce 1960, 63)

This is not just a morbid meditation on death, drowning, and the decay of the body, but part of Stephen's evolving philosophy recognizing the interconnectedness of all things, including life and death. That interconnectedness is most evident in the line "God becomes man becomes fish becomes barnacle goose becomes featherbed mountain". If the Christian idea of the incarnation of God the Father in a human body connects the divine and the human, Stephen's sentence playfully elaborates on this, apparently inspired by the slightly comic image of the minnows nibbling at the drowned man's genitalia. The mutation of the barnacle goose (that has presumably digested the fish) into the featherbed mountain is indeed comic, punning with the associations of the name of the mountain behind Dublin Bay (as well as of the name of Joyce's partner, Nora Barnacle). The line suggests a playful kind of pantheism, in which "God" may be imagined as present in fish, birds and mountains, as much as in "man". It can be read as a "curious celebration of natural sustainability" where "circularity and interdependence supersede isolation and alienation", as Leonard writes (Leonard 2014, 265). Stephen's insight offers a playful alternative to the persistent anthropocentric emphasis on the 'special relationship' between 'man' and 'God', perhaps indeed a root cause of the current ecological crisis (cf. White 1967; Pope Francis 2015).

The playful, associative leap from "goose" to "feathers" to "featherbed" to the name of the mountain in Stephen's consciousness is just one example of Joyce's increasingly playful, associative, and punning approach to language, consciousness, and the "whirled without end" (Joyce 1975, 582) as of his life strategy of "silence, exile, and punning", as one critic punningly rephrased Stephen's formula (Menand 2012). That playfulness is also part of Bloom's character and outlook, and it is taken to an extreme in the pun-filled pages of *Finnegans Wake*. Joyce's punning playfulness may also be said to be a fundamental part of a philosophical approach to a world (or "whirled") where

everything, every meaning, and every body is related to everything else. That world of interdependence where sounds, meanings, and identities slip into each other is essentially an ecological vision. In an essay on the “Ecology of the Pun” in *Finnegans Wake*, Walsh points out that puns are “units of meaning in flux, open to and influenced by their textual environment” (Walsh 2014). Things, meanings, and sounds are interwoven to an extraordinary degree in wordplay that produces meaning as an “ecology of structures”, as Walsh puts it. Joyce’s avant-garde language places the emphasis on interrelationships, rather as ecology highlights the interrelationships between species of animals and plants on the planet.

Stephen’s musings on decomposition and re-composition in “Proteus” are echoed later when Bloom at the funeral rather playfully and irreverently considers how close the Botanic Gardens are to Glasnevin Cemetery:

The Botanic Gardens are just over there. It’s the blood sinking in the earth gives new life. [...] Well preserved fat corpse gentleman, epicure, invaluable for fruit garden. (Joyce 1960, 137)

Earlier in the morning Bloom already alluded to related ideas in his brief conversation with his wife in “Calypso”. Molly points at the word “metempsychosis” she came across while reading, and she asks Bloom what it means. He answers:

Some people believe, he said, that we go on living in another body after death, that we lived before. They call it reincarnation. That we all lived before on the earth thousands of years ago or some other planet. [...] Metempsychosis, he said, is what the ancient Greeks called it. They used to believe you could be changed into an animal or a tree, for instance. What they called nymphs, for example. (78-9)

However incidentally the idea is mentioned here as Molly lazes in bed, it again recalls Stephen’s philosophical musings on life, death, the body, the soul, Protean flux and the interconnectedness of man, fish, goose, featherbed mountain, and God. Metempsychosis, as Bloom explains it, establishes a connection between individual human lives and deaths and the lives and deaths of animals and trees.

Bloom’s down-to-earth character (and philosophy) is evident to readers from the beginning of the “Calypso” episode, with the memorable itemization of the inner organs he “ate with relish” (65), to the end, as he follows the ‘call of nature’ at the end of the garden (83). His interest in food and the material, practical side of life (preparing breakfast and going to the butcher’s) make him appear comfortable in his own body in a way that Stephen, the young intellectual, is not. Of course, he is not just solid matter or flesh: the interior

monologue shows that he has a rich, exotic, idiosyncratic imagination and intellect. Bloom's first appearance in the book, immediately after Stephen's thoughtful monologue in "Proteus", seems to present readers with an exemplary Aristotelian 'soul' that is "inextricably bound up with matter". That "matter" is not just Bloom's own body, but the material, physical, and natural environment.

It is entirely fitting then that Bloom's first spoken words in *Ulysses* ("O, there you are") are a response to the "Mkgnao!" of a furry, non-human animal (65). His elaborate, sustained conversation with the "pussens" as he makes breakfast in the kitchen shows him easily interacting with the domestic animal as a fellow creature he recognizes as having intelligence of its own. Bloom's simple chat with the cat and consideration of what this fellow nonhuman creature might be thinking could be said to already indicate a modest readiness to step outside of a purely anthropocentric perspective.

Like the minnows Stephen imagines nibbling on the drowned man's nether parts in "Proteus", Bloom's cat, Ruben Borg writes,

participate[s] in the cycle of organic transformation, proceeding from birth to burial, from individual creature to decomposing body, eating and producing waste, [thus] offer[ing] a Copernican challenge to the philosophical grammars that traditionally grant human consciousness a place of privilege among all organic forms. (Borg 2017; cf. Kime Scott 2014)

In simply talking to the cat, Bloom may be said to have set aside those all too anthropocentric "philosophical grammars", recognized his fellowship with other species, and come 'down to earth'. Bloom's association between the "pussens" and his wife, Borg suggests, also establishes a deep link between Molly Bloom and that earth.

In Joyce's extraordinary finale to *Ulysses*, the breathless "Penelope" episode, Molly appears in all her individual down-to-earth, full-minded as much as full-bodied, creaturely humanity; she also appears (despite all the particularity of her concerns) as somehow more than herself, as a kind of universal, symbolic figure, an 'everywoman' representing perhaps 'the (eternal) feminine', or perhaps really 'the human', or indeed 'the (eternal) feminine' as 'the (post)human'. In addition to her down-to-earth awareness of her body and the cycles of her bodily life as part of an embodied world, her never-ending sentences seem to reach beyond all physical boundaries, including any notional boundaries that may be used to define the self, a gender, or the human species as clearly distinct from (and supposedly superior to) the rest of the natural world, or even the universe. Molly reaches her passionate, imaginative, linguistic (and sexual?) climax, with thoughts of merging with the natural world in the rapturous closing lines of *Ulysses*:

and O that awful deepdown torrent O and the sea the sea crimson sometimes like fire and the glorious sunsets and the figtrees in the Alameda gardens yes [...] and I thought well as well him as another and then I asked him with my eyes to ask again yes and then he asked me would I yes to say yes my mountain flower and first I put my arms around him yes and drew him down to me so he could feel my breasts all perfume yes and his heart was going like mad and yes I said yes I will Yes. (Joyce 1960, 932-3)

Joyce wrote of his approach to the identification of Molly with Penelope in the final episode:

I have rejected the usual interpretation of her as a human apparition [...]. In conception and technique I tried to depict the earth which is prehuman and presumably posthuman. (quoted in Borg 2017, 1)

If the title of Joyce's epic sets up a series of identifications suggesting the realistic characters have epic, symbolic significance, Molly's identification with Homer's Penelope already indicates that she signifies something more than herself, or anything she says, does or thinks. Her identification with "the earth which is prehuman and presumably posthuman" clearly expands her significance beyond her individual or even symbolic womanhood *and* humanity to something larger than human life itself – something "prehuman and presumably posthuman", and thus truly 'beyond the Anthropocene'.

If Molly's words and thoughts may strike many a reader initially as a bit of a blur that is frustratingly unfocused as well as unpunctuated, her stream of consciousness may also be considered post-anthropocentric, intimately aware of the connectedness of everything, not seeking to impose any rational, instrumental order on the environment, or to establish hierarchies or priorities. The words, thoughts, desires, and memories seem to circulate here as vital elements of the vast ecosystem of "the earth which is prehuman and presumably posthuman". The latter phrase, Joyce's use of the symbol of infinity (in the Linati schema) to indicate the 'time' of this final episode, and the length of Molly's unending 'sentences' all contribute to a sense of time and space that extends 'beyond the Anthropocene'.

The renowned lack of punctuation in the final episode of *Ulysses* certainly contributes to a sense of a "whirled" of infinite interconnections, not divided up, contained, centred, subordinated, and mastered, but as sprawling, unruly, and anarchic as it is ungrammatical. In Molly's head, the word "yes" (of which, according to Jacques Derrida, there are 79 instances in the episode and at least 222 in *Ulysses*) (Derrida 1992, 306) appears to take the place of punctuation, as she pauses briefly between ideas that are affirmatively joined

by ‘yesses’, as much as by ‘ands’ (not counted by Derrida, the Author supposes). Molly’s mind, one might say, follows what Deleuze and Guattari called a rhizomatic “logic of the AND”:

In contrast to centered (even polycentric) systems with hierarchical modes of communication and preestablished paths, the rhizome is an acentered, nonhierarchical, nonsignifying system without a General and without an organizing memory or central automaton, defined solely by a circulation of states. What is at question in the rhizome is a relation to sexuality – but also to the animal, the vegetal, the world, politics, the book, things natural and artificial. (Deleuze, Guattari 2004, 23)

In the universal ecosystem of Molly’s streaming consciousness everything is connected with everything else. The fact that her first and last words here in “Penelope” are “yes” creates the impression that both are uttered *in medias res* and that the reader is suddenly eavesdropping on a monologue (or ‘Mollylogue’?) that has already begun and will never end but may well circle around to the first “Yes” again. While Molly’s thoughts revolve so much around her body, the abruptness of the shift of focus to Molly and to the narrative technique of unmediated and unpunctuated interior monologue at the beginning of “Penelope” makes her words seem paradoxically disembodied, as if they are freely floating above the rest of the book and the material world. The stream of words seems connected physically as well as mentally to both Molly’s own body *and* to an infinite universal ecosystem (of words, desires, memories, bodies, living things, nature, flowers of the mountains, and “the sea the sea” [Joyce 1960, 932]). Her infinitely resounding (recirculating) “Yes” is surely Joyce’s own resounding “Yes” to “the earth which is prehuman and presumably posthuman”.

And then there is *Finnegans Wake*. One thing the reader may grasp in the course of the swirling flow of words here is that Anna Livia Plurabelle does not merely *have* a stream of consciousness, she *is* a stream and part of the natural landscape itself. If the ‘real heroes’ of *Finnegans Wake* are “time and the river and the mountain” – as Joyce explained to Jolas (quoted in Barrows 2014, 333) – language in the book appears itself to be part of the natural process of the “riverrun” (Joyce 1975, 3) in the first line, as words, languages, and meanings flow into each other to an extraordinary degree. That Joyce’s words have the earthiness of nature itself was clearly noted by Samuel Beckett when he referred to the “endless verbal germination, maturation, putrefaction” of *Finnegans Wake* (Beckett 1972, 15). Joyce’s “abundant organic imagery” is indeed, as Barrows suggests, closely related to its language (Barrows 2014, 341).

Without getting any further into the complications of this extraordinary work, one may perhaps conclude that the perspective opened

up by James Joyce in “The Dead”, *Ulysses* and *Finnegans Wake* indeed involves seeing beyond the limits of anthropocentrism and the ‘Anthropocene’ to get a sense of the infinite vitality of the ‘posthuman’ earth. That is the extraordinary scale of the vision that opens up as Stephen Dedalus and James Joyce seek to “awake” from the “nightmare” of history (Joyce 1960, 42).

3 The Beginning of the Endgame

Samuel Beckett’s play *Endgame* (1957) opens with the words “Finished, it’s finished, nearly finished, it must be nearly finished”, spoken by the character Clov (Beckett 1981a, 456). The time, he tells wheelchair-bound Hamm, is “Zero”, “the same as usual” (457), and the scene all around, observed by Clov through a telescope, is “zero... zero... and zero” (471). There is nothing “on the horizon”, for, as Clov points out, “What in God’s name could there be on the horizon?” The waves on the ocean are like “lead” and everything “from pole to pole” is “gray” (472). No explanation is given as to what has happened to cause such apocalyptic devastation.

This type of empty landscape in a ‘zero’ time is of course characteristic of Beckett’s works. It has often been seen as related to an ‘existentialist’ view of life as devoid of given meaning. It is also sometimes understood in the context of the aftermath of Beckett’s own experiences during the Second World War and his awareness of the horrors of the Holocaust (Knowlson 1996; Davies 2022; Kane 2023).

Both interpretations are surely relevant, but in 1961 the philosopher Theodor Adorno also highlighted the reference to nature in the play, offering a particularly succinct summary of the end result of what is now called the ‘Anthropocene’. Soon after the play’s opening, when Hamm suggests that they have been forgotten by nature, Clov replies “There’s no more nature” (Beckett 1981a, 461). Adorno comments:

The condition presented in the play is nothing other than that in which “there’s no more nature”. Indistinguishable is the phase of completed reification of the world, which leaves no remainder of what was not made by humans; it is permanent catastrophe, along with a catastrophic event caused by humans themselves, in which nature has been extinguished and nothing grows any longer. (Adorno 2000, 324)

The fact that “there’s no more nature” and the “condition” depicted in *Endgame* as a whole is explained by Adorno as resulting from the “completed reification of the world” leaving “no remainder of what was not made by humans”. The latter is a neat summary of the

impression left by the 'Anthropocene' today as one looks around a rapidly urbanizing planet, hearing of increasing numbers of species threatened with extinction as well as of the devastation causing and caused by climate change.

The post-apocalyptic landscapes of "zero" in Beckett's *Endgame* (and in so many of his other works) can be related to a philosophical sense of 'nothingness' in the aftermath of the 'death of God', to the anomie of the modern world, as well as to a sense of *everything* lying in ruins in the aftermath of the Second world War and the Holocaust. They also however speak to the kind of awareness of the devastation of nature that is currently spreading around the world, along with the awareness that this is the result of centuries of the 'Anthropocene'.

If it may initially seem anachronistic to associate Beckett with a contemporary sense of global environmental crisis and a reassessment of centuries of human and planetary history captured in the term 'Anthropocene', it is worth remembering that he was always deeply sceptical about post-Enlightenment notions of 'progress'. As Jean-Michel Rabaté writes, Beckett's "bête noire was the grandiose and inflated self-delusion of anthropomorphism" (Rabaté 2016, 20). In *Mercier et Camier*, Beckett even coined his own neologism "anthropopseudomorphe", a term suggesting, according to Rabaté, that:

a lie (pseudos) is wedged in the middle of the main symptom of humanism: the projection of the human everywhere.

Such grandiose projections are parodied everywhere in Beckett's work. In *Endgame*, Adorno already also saw "the phantom of an anthropocentrically dominated world". In that play, Hamm's insistence on being pushed in his wheelchair "right around the world" and brought back to "the center again" by Clov graphically illustrates

the hubris of idealism, the enthroning of man as creator in the center of creation [...] entrenched [...] in that "bare interior" like a tyrant in his last days. (Adorno 2000, 346-8)

Anthropopseudomorphism, one might say, like the Anthropocene itself, goes back a long way. The coining of both terms suggests the endgame of both has truly been reached.

Adorno refers to the more immediate historical context of *Endgame* when, just before quoting Clov's "zero... zero... and zero", he writes:

In *Endgame*, a historical moment is revealed [...]. After the Second War, everything is destroyed, even resurrected culture, without knowing it; humanity vegetates along, crawling, after events

which even the survivors cannot really survive, on a pile of ruins [...]. (2000, 323)

The phrasing here is strikingly similar to the end of Beckett's essay "The Capital of the Ruins", describing the bombed ruins of Saint Lô in the immediate aftermath of the second world war: the experience of working in the Irish Red Cross hospital there left "one" with a

vision and sense of a time-honoured conception of humanity in ruins, and perhaps even an inkling of the terms in which our condition is to be thought again. (Beckett 1995c, 278)

Both Beckett's and Adorno's comments suggest that war could not be taken merely as an isolated or isolatable historical event, but the culmination of a "condition", the recognition of which could have enormous consequences for a certain "conception of humanity".

It is then not just nature that has apparently come to an end in *Endgame*, but humanity too, or a certain "time-honoured conception" of it. Adorno relates this not just to the war but to a wider "catastrophe" involving, on the one hand, "those deformations inflicted on humans by the form of their society" (Adorno 2000, 334) and, on the other, to "the hubris of idealism, the enthroning of man as creator in the center of creation" (346). When the decrepit Hamm has Clov wheel him in his wheelchair around the walls of the room "right around the world" and then "back to the center again", insisting on being "bang in the center", he resembles a "tyrant in his last days", Adorno writes. The "history of the subject's end" is apparently inextricably linked here with this parody of the mad claims of anthropocentrism.

What might be left after "the [anthropocentric] subject's end", after a "time-honoured conception of humanity" lay in ruins? What could be seen 'beyond the Anthropocene'? Perhaps Beckett's vision leaves us, to use Adorno's words again, with subjects

consist[ing] in nothing other than the wretched realities of their world, shrivelled down to raw necessities", "only pathetic details which ridicule conceptuality, a stratum of utensils as in an emergency refuge: ice boxes, lameness, blindness, and unappetizing bodily functions. (Adorno 2000, 329-30)

As a vision of the future (or even of the 1950s) that may seem fairly bleak. Yet Beckett's work arguably offers - to use his own words after WWII - not just a "vision and sense of a time-honoured conception of humanity in ruins", but also something of "an inkling of the terms in which our condition is to be thought again". Those terms may be post-anthropocentric as well as post-apocalyptic. Nowadays one might describe them as 'posthuman' in the post-anthropocentric sense of

'post-humanist', and part of a great cultural U-turn (away from destructive anthropocentrism) that may be a fundamental aspect of the response to the ecological crisis of the planet.⁴

While it would not be appropriate to "categorize" Beckett "as a thinker, writer, and practitioner of the posthuman", as Rabaté writes (Rabaté 2016, 41) – and indeed it would be wrong to "categorize" Beckett at all – there is a sense in which Beckett's work offers "inklings" which anticipate some of the concerns of those who use the term 'posthuman' in attempting to think through the implications of the climate crisis for "a time-honoured conception of humanity". In his essay "The Posthuman, or the Humility of the Earth", Rabaté (2016) points out how Beckett's ongoing "critique of anthropomorphism" was reflected in his particular appreciation of Cézanne's paintings of the Mont Sainte Victoire: "Cézanne", Beckett wrote,

seems to have been the first to see landscape & state it as material of a strictly peculiar order, incommensurable with all human expressions whatsoever. (quoted in Rabaté 2016, 40; cf. Knowlson 1996, 196-7)

Beckett clearly shared the painter's awareness of the incommensurability of the landscape with "all human expressions", despite the all too human fondness for seeing man as the measure of all things. According to Rabaté, Beckett also shared a kind of "new humility" with "the later Joyce" that involved a

reconciled sense that one will remain close to the Earth, an Earth that contains all the ashes of the dead along with the fertilizing humus for future plants. (Rabaté 2016, 45)

Indeed, it was probably from Joyce that Beckett first heard the word 'posthuman' (Rabaté 2016, 37).

In addition to reviewing some recent posthuman readings of Beckett's work, Jesper Olsson reminds us that even if "an ecologically oriented reading of Beckett" might seem surprising, he was "a reader of Ernst Haeckel, the inventor of the concept of ecology" (Olsson 2022). In an article referring to "Plant Life" and "Posthuman Endgames", Olsson persuasively argues that

what is at stake [in Beckett's work] is [not only] a series of endgames that explore the limits of the human, but also our entanglement with other beings on the planet [bringing] the human in to contact with plants, soil and dirt. (Olsson 2022)

⁴ Cf. Ferrando 2013; Hayles 2010; Simon 2019; Braidotti 2019b.

One could relate this to the fact that Beckett's characters, such as the protagonist in "First Love" (Beckett 1995b), constantly express an inability to 'know' anything beyond the immediate physical (and usually earthy, natural, though generally not so fertile) environment. They are equally often literally grounded on the earth, on the soil (if not indeed, as in *Happy Days*, up to their necks in it) or given to apparently lovingly lingering over the pleasures to be afforded by feeling or sucking a few stones (as in *Molloy*) or contemplating the odd root vegetable, such as the parsnip in "First Love" (Beckett 1981b; 1979). The old woman narrating Beckett's short prose piece "Enough" (1966) tells of the time she spent with a

strange man 'ejaculating' words on the ground, incessantly bent like a bow toward the earth, even caressing the soil with his face, eating the flowers on his way. (Olsson 2022)

In a phrase that could have come from many a Beckett character, she comments:

What do I know of man's destiny? I could tell you more about radishes. (Beckett 1995a, 192)

Olsson detects a "descent toward the terrestrial" and an "attraction to the earthly" in Beckett's prose pieces in which the characters almost seem to wish to "become earth", a move that can be interpreted as not just comically (or philosophically) 'absurd', and evidently rejecting all the trappings of society, civilization, culture, but as ecologically 'getting closer to nature' in tune with a contemporary post-anthropocentric, post-humanist interest in "becoming earth" (Olsson 2022, 4, citing Braidotti 2013).

The basic earthiness of the environments of Beckett's characters could be seen then as not just a "vision and sense of a time-honoured conception of humanity in ruins", but also something of "an inkling of the terms in which our condition is to be thought again". Those terms involve perhaps a coming "down to earth" (Latour 2018) somewhat comparable to Joyce's move and compatible (if never commensurate) with contemporary ecological as well as post-anthropocentric, post-humanist "inklings".

4 Conclusion

The extraordinary breadth and continuing relevance of Joyce's vision, taking in "the earth which is prehuman and presumably post-human", is no doubt in part due to his recognition that oppressive local circumstances - Stephen's "nightmare" of history - were part of a

much wider historical and philosophical context of narratives legitimating dominant powers and imperial exploitation of lands and peoples allied with narratives denying the earth and the body legitimacy. His attempt to break out of the confines of the colonial situation and the prudery of Irish Catholic, British Victorian and Imperialist attitudes to the body and sexuality involved reassessing and revaluing the physical and natural world and the relations of mortal human bodies and minds to that world of flux. His understanding of the life and death of the individual body and mind as part of a wider cycle of life and death and of the 'ecological' interdependence of bodies, minds, languages, and the physical and natural world is evident in his work. This is clear from the evocative scene of the snow "falling softly" all over Ireland at the close of "The Dead" to the meditations of Stephen Dedalus on Sandymount Strand, from Bloom's conversation with the cat and explanation of metempsychosis to Molly's naturally flowing words, and from the language merging with the river and the mountain and the sea in *Finnegans Wake*.

In the aftermath of yet another 'nightmare of history', after the devastation of war, fascism and the Holocaust, Samuel Beckett had all the more reason to attempt to see beyond the limits of the Anthropocene. The tone of his works is darker than that of Joyce's, conveying a more complete "vision and sense of a time-honoured conception of humanity in ruins". From "The Capital of the Ruins" to *Endgame*, where there is "no more nature", and to so many of his other plays and prose pieces of the 1950s and 1960s, there is a sense of "humanity in ruins", of civilization at the end of its tether, and a post-apocalyptic air that speaks to the current spreading awareness of the devastating results of the Anthropocene. The arrogance of anthropocentric pretensions to 'know' and master the world - so closely associated with the centuries of the Anthropocene and the legacy of 'humanism' - is constantly undercut in Beckett's work, as characters, such as the narrator of "First Love" or of "Enough", express their incomprehension regarding everything beyond the immediate physical, earthy environment, and, if one were fortunate, a few parsnips or radishes. Beckett's return to the fundamentals of the vulnerable, mortal body, the earth, and the "vegetal" (Olsson 2022) is arguably in many ways compatible with current concerns to come "down to earth" (Latour 2018) and reorient the human (or 'posthuman') relationship with the earth.

In conclusion, the works of both James Joyce and Samuel Beckett can be seen to have explored fundamental questions relating to such a reorientation of that relationship between human beings and the earth - understood, in Joyce's words, as "prehuman as well as posthuman". Both writers can be said to offer, in Beckett's words, an "inkling of the terms in which our condition is to be thought again". Such inklings are highly relevant today, as humanity as a whole seeks to wake up from the nightmare of its own history and see 'beyond the Anthropocene'.

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