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## The Afterlife of Empire in Beckett's *How It Is*

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### Abstract

Relationships of political domination in Beckett's *Comment c'est* (1961)/*How It Is* (1964) are typically read through a specific historical moment (the Holocaust, the Algerian War) or literary representation (Dante, Sade). This article reveals spectres in the text, from the long history of the colonisation of Ireland to the legacy of Renaissance and Enlightenment humanism; it explores Beckett's sense of complicity in the Anglo-Irish Ascendency.

Les relations politiques de domination dans *Comment c'est* (1961)/*How It Is* (1964) de Beckett sont habituellement lues par le prisme d'un moment historique (la Shoah, la Guerre d'Algérie) ou d'une représentation littéraire (Dante, Sade). Cet article révèle les spectres de la longue histoire de la colonisation de l'Irlande et de sa postérité ; de l'héritage des humanismes de la Renaissance et des Lumières ; il explore le sentiment que Beckett avait d'être complice de la domination anglo-irlandaise.

### Keywords

Samuel Beckett, colonialism, orientalism, Irish history, Antoine Hamilton

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A more profound understanding of Beckett's political engagement has emerged in recent historical scholarship. In *Beckett's Political Imagination* Emilie Morin (2017, cpt 4) details how Beckett's work reacts to the systematic use of torture by the French military during the Algerian War, its public controversy and the trial of Beckett's publisher Jérôme Lindon for "provocation à la désobéissance" following Lindon's publication of victims' testimony. Beckett's grim narratives of the 1950s and 60s, which foreground bodily control and torture, resonate with their time, signifying beyond the context of World War II horrors. In James McNaughton's *Samuel Beckett and the Politics of Aftermath* (2018), Beckett's work is shown to respond to the ideological conflicts of the 1930s and 40s. While *Watt*, *Waiting for Godot* and *Endgame*, in particular, have been read in terms of Ireland's Great Famine and Irish famine memory (Pearson 2001, Roach 2002, Ulin 2006, Lloyd 2010, Kennedy 2012), McNaughton finds in Beckett's work a different engagement with the politics of food security: Stalin's *Holodomor* or genocidal terror-famine in Ukraine before the war, Nazi *Lebensraum* and *Hungerpolitik*, the battle to colonize the steppes of eastern Europe to secure grain to feed armies and populations, and the genocidal famine of some three million captured

Soviet soldiers. For McNaughton, Beckett asks if the starvation policies of Stalin and Hitler are the logical conclusion to European colonialism and Enlightenment. In response, Kennedy (2020, 62-65) resists the displacement of Irish contexts, he affirms Beckett's complicated sense of complicity as a colonial settler, and explores Beckett's reaction to genocide and the legacy of British relief policies during the Irish Famine of 1845-52. Previously Kennedy argued that *Endgame* "offers a damning critique of the Ascendancy's performance in Ireland and outlines a counter initiative for Big House culture" that is "nothing less than an end to the civilizing project of humanism itself, whether in Ireland, Germany or Algeria (2012, 118-119).

The debate comes into focus by examining the only extended prose work that Beckett wrote after France's war crimes and repression in Algeria became public knowledge. McNaughton offers no comment on *Comment c'est* (1961)/*How It Is* (1964), though for Morin (2017, ch. 4), as for Overbeck (2014), Piette (2016) and Walker (2020), Beckett's use of torture and interrogation for structural and thematic purposes responds directly to the political climate of Paris in the late 1950s early 1960s. This reading is complicated by narrative details in the French original that are undeniably located in Ireland, such as the appearance of the Dublin Ballast Office (Beckett 2001, 57); though unlike Beckett's great famine novel *Watt*, Ireland is not a recognizable backdrop. Indeed, it is often assumed that "the 'problem' of literary landscape is resolved" by Beckett with the invention of a ubiquitous expanse of mud in *How It Is* that has "no shape or history" (Kiely 1993, 80). While it alludes to Canto 7 of Dante's *Inferno* or Leopardi's "e fango è il mondo" (and mud is the world), this wasteland is held to be an abstraction designed to accommodate Beckett's twisted allegory of the torture of artistic creation. My book on *How It Is* acknowledges Beckett's explicit engagement with recent and past French history (Cordingley 2018, 4-5), though my concern was to explore philosophical sources and prove the mud to be the residue of ancestral and spiritual voices of Western civilisation. But if Ireland is indeed the "psychic navel to which Beckett retreated whenever he needed to understand" (Kennedy 2020, 64), one would expect it to figure in *How It Is*, a work that wrangles with questions of existence (often through uterine and digestive metaphors), and whose composition was particularly onerous (Cordingley 2018, 17-19). Here, I consider the place of Irish history in this text, from the colonisation of Ireland to the legacy of the Anglo-Irish Ascendancy. Intertextual dialogue with Sir Philip Sidney, Edmund Spenser, and the eighteenth-century Irish-French author Antoine (Anthony) Hamilton is shown to underscore Beckett's complex reflection upon the moral justifications of Elizabethan as much as Enlightenment humanism, and his persistent sense of complicity with the Ascendancy. Without privileging an Irish over a Continental Beckett – *How It Is* certainly is not Beckett's bog poem – I contend that the *how it is* of this fictional world calls to be read in relation to Ireland's *how it was*.

## **Houses of Hamilton, a spectral genealogy of possession**

Towards the end of Part 1 of *How It Is* the "I" recalls a time from his youth; memories arise of Dublin's Ballast Office, and of searching for faces in the clouds (or a divine plan). He is seated by a stonewall:

*la poussière alors les pierres à chaux et à granit confondues empilées pour faire un mur plus loin l'épine en fleur haie vive verte et blanche troènes épines confondues*

the dust there was then the mingled lime and granite stones piled up to make a wall further on *the thorn in flower* green and white quickset *mingled privet and thorn* (2001, 56-57, my emphasis)

This “thorn in flower” attests to the apocalyptic vision of fire in *Isaiah* 30:10-12, when “the people shall be as the burnings of lime: as thorns cut up shall they be burned in the fire” (KJV), contrasting with the boy’s comforting New Testament narrative when he nods off by this wall, meeting “Jesus in a dream” (57). Below, I refer this Biblical echo to the scorched earth policies to which Ireland was subjected by its colonisers that are symbolized by this wall, but an early draft of *Comment c’est* registers this Proustian moment:

[...] la blancheur de la poussière au pied des ~~vieux~~<sup>vieilles</sup> pierres empilées pour faire un mur et la couche qu’il y en [sic] avait et plus loin passée la propriété des Hamilton où ça devenait une haie d’aubépine ce genre de connerie, pas du tout comme ça vraiment en réalité pas décousus mais ce genre, comme une image mais avec des mots (384)

[...] the whiteness of the dust at the foot of ~~old~~<sup>old</sup> stones piled up to make a wall and the depth of dust there was then and further on past the Hamiltons’ property where it became a hedge of hawthorn that sort of rubbish, not at all like that really in reality not rambling/disjointed but that sort of thing, like an image but with words (my translation)

In Proust’s *Recherche* the *aubépine* (hawthorn) functions like the madeleine, in bloom its powerful fragrance triggers an epiphany of involuntary memories.<sup>1</sup> To invest this scene with such significance is dismissed here as a “connerie,” and Beckett obscures the Proustian symbol through subsequent revisions.

In the published text, the Proustian hawthorn is *quickset* (grafted) into a hedge resplendent with its “thorn in flower,” but this hedge is severed from its local significance. In the manuscript draft, the stone wall becomes a hawthorn hedge beyond a property belonging to a certain family of Hamiltons. Beckett’s neighbours, Arthur and Alma Hamilton, with their three sons and two daughters lived a little further down Brighton Road, Foxrock, in a grand home named Hollybrook.<sup>2</sup> The typescript revision of this manuscript paragraph effaces all mention of the Hamiltons and the “haie d’aubépine” is replaced with “l’*épine en fleur*.” This revision belies the presence of a different Hamilton, the Antoine Hamilton who wrote a farcical tale, *Histoire de Fleur-d’Épine* (1730; *The History of May-flower*).

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<sup>1</sup> Beckett’s annotations in his copy of *Du Côté du chez Swann* that remark the hawthorn can be accessed at [www.beckettarchive.org](http://www.beckettarchive.org) at p190-191 of Beckett’s edition.

<sup>2</sup> I thank Jane Bowes, Pádraig Laffan, and members of the Foxrock Local History Club for their help with this information.

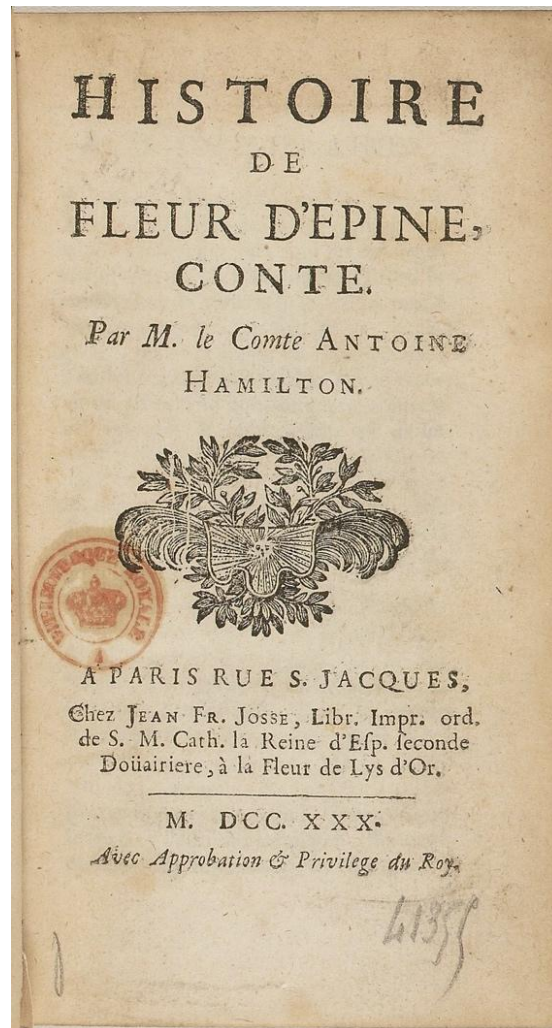


Figure 1. Antoine Hamilton, *Fleur d'Épine*, Paris: J.-F. Josse, 1730.

By conflating, condensing and transfiguring the obscure Hamilton family thorn with the Proustian *aubépine*, Beckett retains the link between his neighbour's property and Antoine Hamilton's image even as the autobiographical sign is effaced from the text, at once inflecting questions of aesthetics with local and geopolitical significance.

Born Anthony Hamilton in 1645 at Roscrea, Tipperary, the Gallicized Antoine Hamilton became an important figure in French literature. An aristocrat descended from Scottish landowners of the Ulster Plantations, he was grandson of the powerful James Hamilton, first earl of Abercorn, a Protestant nominated to serve on a Royal commission into the uniting of England and Scotland. Favoured by the King, James Hamilton became one of the chief Scottish "undertakers" in Ireland, receiving 3000 acres in the precinct of Strabane, county Tyrone, land confiscated from the O'Neil clan – part of the 3,798,000 acres taken from Irish chiefs in the wake of the Nine-Years War against English rule (O'Hart 1892, 501). The "Plantation" was the systematic colonization of Ulster to control, exploit and Anglicize the Catholic Gaelic population. James Hamilton's expansion into Ireland was a prosperous venture, and he is known as one of the 'founding fathers of the Ulster-Scots.' After his death in 1617, his son, Sir George Hamilton, first baronet (Anthony's father), and George's siblings were raised by their uncle, Sir George Hamilton of Greenlaw, who converted them to Catholicism (Wasser 2004, 838). Trouble began when the family was accused of harbouring Papists ejected from Scotland, by which "The Barony of Strabane [...] had become the sink

into which all the corrupt humours purged out of Scotland ran” (qtd. in Clark 1921, 3). In 1651, escaping a politically dangerous and treacherous Ireland, Sir George exiled his family in France, where the young Anthony spent nine formative years. After the execution of Charles I, the family left for England, before being given new lands in Ireland.

The Hamiltons often returned to France, and Antoine pursued a military career there until 1678, when he inherited the title of count from his brother. He left France to pursue farming ventures in Ireland, but met with little success and fled to England to escape his creditors, then returned to France to resume his military career. Soon enough he was back in Ireland, where family patronage resulted in him being sworn of the Irish privy council and appointed governor of Limerick, where he revived Catholic ceremonies. The revolution of 1688 drew him into the war in Ireland; he commanded the dragoons, under the Jacobite general Lord Mountcashel, and fought in Enniskillen (the location of Beckett’s boarding school); he survived the Siege of Limerick, but as a supporter of the Stuarts was outlawed with his brothers in 1691. Escaping to the court of James II, in exile at St Germain-en-Laye, he abandoned his military career and wrote poetry and prose (Chisholm 1910, 884; Corp 2004, 766-68).

Hamilton’s biographer writes of the ease with which he moved between the English court at St Germain and the French court at Versailles, where he earned a reputation as a wit (Clark 1921, 129). In the chapter on Hamilton in *Causeries du lundi*, a work Beckett read closely (Beckett 2009, 145), Charles Auguste Sainte-Beuve proclaims that Hamilton’s tongue possessed the unrivalled *clarity of expression* of the French *esprit*; and to “a degree that it eclipsed everything else, he was that *esprit* itself” (73). For this greatest of nineteenth century French literary historians, “the eighteenth century begins with Hamilton” (81). The Irishman’s reputation was established with his portrait of James II’s court in exile, *Les Mémoires du comte de Grammont*, a work widely known as the fruit of its author, but in which Hamilton presents himself as Grammont’s secretary, noting down the Count’s dictation (as does Beckett’s “I” in *How It Is*). In his “Biographical Sketch of Antoine Hamilton,” Horace Walpole wrote of the *Memoirs*: “if any book were to be selected as affording the truest specimen of perfect French gaiety, the Memoirs of Grammont would be selected in preference to all others” (1888, 12). Walpole and Sainte-Beuve dismiss the farcical fairy tales that Hamilton wrote for court entertainment, but *Fleur d’Épine* did not go unnoticed by Beckett.

With his mastery of French and literary accomplishments, Antoine Hamilton was something of an ideal Anglo-Irish expatriate writing in French; especially for a self-translator – Alexander Pope praised Hamilton for his 1713 French version of the *Essay on Criticism* (Clark 1921, 148). *Fleur d’Épine*, on the other hand, is a satire on the contemporary salon fad for the *conte de fées*. With it, and a number of other such tales, Hamilton invented a new genre in the French satirical tradition, aiming to accomplish for the fairy-tale what Cervantes had for tales of chivalry (Clark 1921, 232-34). Its central character, Facardin of Trebizond, is a kind of semi-westernized oriental knight-errant, and its plot is full of fantastical twists and turns, whose improbability surprises the tale’s hero as much as the reader. *Fleur d’Épine* probably appeared to Beckett as it does to us: a surrealist metafiction and satirical hybrid of fairy tale and oriental tale. By insinuating an allusion to *Fleur d’Épine* within his discourse, Beckett satirises the “conte énorme,” the “enormous tale” so “fertile in vicissitudes and peripeteias” (30-31, 71). When “I” associates Hamilton with the miraculous hawthorn – a symbol for Beckett of the ascetic as much as the aesthetic hope for salvation in epiphany (Cordingley 2018, cpt 6) – Beckett critiques the “I”’s sincere efforts to abandon his will and follow a mystic path as something as farcical as Hamilton’s satire.

Beckett’s neighbour, Arthur Hamilton of Hollybrook, was a direct descendent of Hugh Hamilton (1664–1728), the great-great-grandson of James Hamilton III, 2nd Lord Hamilton (1475–1529), who was Antoine Hamilton’s great-great-great grandfather, through whom the

House of Hamilton extends to James II Stewart King of Scotland (the First Lord James Hamilton, sixth Laird of Cadzow [1415-1479], married Princess Mary Stewart, Countess of Arran). Hugh Hamilton arrived in Ireland as an “undertaker,” like Antoine Hamilton’s grandfather. Beckett likely learnt of Antoine Hamilton through his neighbours, doubtless well aware of their family genealogies.<sup>3</sup> The Becketts were familiar with the Hamiltons, and the two families regularly shared the small transept of some half a dozen pews to the left of the altar at Tullow Church (with the exception of Beckett’s father, who abstained from mass).<sup>4</sup>

In the early twentieth century, Foxrock was a small but affluent Protestant suburb beyond the limits of Dublin. Many Foxrock families descended from Anglo-Irish gentry, who possessed, or had once possessed, large rural estates with a manor house. Scholars have identified Beckett’s writing with the genre of the Big House novel, especially in *Watt*, where Knott’s “establishment,” with absent landlord and team of domestics, is “a direct expression of the irrational heart of the politics of Protestant Ascendancy” (Kennedy 2014, 232; cf Bixby 2009, 119-57). The Becketts’ “Cooldrinagh” was named after the Big House of May Beckett’s family estate, which went bankrupt after the death of her father, forcing her into paid work. Cooldrinagh, a grand home with gardens on a large parcel of land, represented for her the regeneration of her family’s status (Knowlson 1996, 20). Occupying an even larger block of land,<sup>5</sup> Hollybrook was the suburban cousin of the Hamilton family’s “Hamwood Estate” located between Dunboyne and Maynooth in Kildare (<https://hamwood.ie/hamwood-history/>). Both are typical of the large houses whose naming gave the impression of an “ersatz Big House in its secure suburban setting,” insulated momentarily from the degeneration suffered by its rural predecessor (Whelan 2020, 260).

In *How It Is*, Beckett forges a typological connection between two branches of the House of Hamilton that derive from the brothers who arrived separately in the early seventeenth century during the Ulster plantations to colonise Ireland. Through the motif of the hawthorn Beckett insinuates his own family connection with the legacy of Anglo-Irish Ascendancy, for Cooldrinagh derives from the Gaelic, “back of the blackthorn hedge or copse” (O’Brien 1986, 347, fn. 6), blackthorn and hawthorn the same genus. And in an early draft of *Watt* the on-site but absent landlord of the Big House was not Mr Knott but Mr Roe, the maiden name of Beckett’s mother (Kennedy 2014, 223).

Historical and geopolitical concerns again emanate from local, personal contexts in Part 2, when “I” emerges from a hiding-hole to find himself in a “land of brothers” scarred by centuries of conflict, “a ruin land strewn with ruins all ages” (111):

life little scenes just time to see the hangings part heavy swing of black velvet what  
life whose life ten twelve years old sleeping in the sun at the foot of the wall white  
dust a palm thick azure little clouds other details silence falls again (111)

The boy in this second iteration of the scene by the Hamilton wall is explicitly “ten twelve years old”. This connects with an allusion from Part 1, when having climbed a hill one “April morning” “I” stops and gazes, seeing “the city fumes silent location of steeples and towers” (37), a scene that accords with Beckett’s description (Cronin 1996, 36), of his view from the

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<sup>3</sup> In the 1912 *A Genealogical and Heraldic History of the Landed Gentry of Ireland* Arthur Hamilton of Hollybrook, Foxrock is listed as a direct descendent of the Hamiltons of Hamwood Hall and as husband of Alma Crocker, of the House of Crocker (149). For Arthur Hamilton’s paternal line, see Irish genealogical records (<https://www.irishgenealogy.ie>). For Anthony/Antoine Hamilton’s see Corp (2004, 766–768) or entries for Hamiltons over 14 pages in the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* (11<sup>th</sup> edition; 878–891, which Beckett owned).

<sup>4</sup> Email from Jane Bowes (24 October 2020). Thanks also to Rev. John Tanner, Rector of Tullow Church for information on the Beckett family.

<sup>5</sup> Hollybrook appears some 15% larger than Cooldrinagh, given that *Thom’s Directory* shows Arthur Hamilton paying £60 of Ground rent in 1915 for Hollybrook Brighton Road, compared to Cooldrinagh’s £52.5s.

Wicklow Mountains of the smoke and flames over Dublin on 24 April 1916, the day of the Easter Rising, when Beckett was only ten. In the scene above, he recalls that moment from a post-apocalyptic present, with “white dust a palm thick azure little clouds other details silence falls again” (111); the “little clouds” (compare 1 Kings 18:44, and Joyce’s short story in *Dubliners*, “A Little Cloud”) offer no promise of relief, and *other details* registers the redacting of historical details from the record. Even so, the unspoken violence of armed resistance and repression haunts the scene. The ambiguity of the English “hangings” and “swing” is absent from the French “tentures” (110; window coverings); and the “heavy” velvet that situates “I” within a luxurious decor, as if looking out from a stately home, is ominous, black. The dust generates a disquieting association with mortality, compounded by the echo of the hangings – a method regularly used to execute rebels and Republican agitators during the Anglo-Irish Ascendancy. The ruined stone wall betokens a legacy of decay associated with powerful Ulster planters and their descendants, which reverberates with motifs of colonisation linked to the earlier “progress properly so called ruins in prospect,” and which prompted “I”’s comment, “ah if you had seen it four hundred years ago what upheavals” (25). These polyvalent “upheavals” of the mid-fifteenth century roughly designate the re-conquering of Ireland (1536-1607); though Beckett’s imagery here is influenced by incidents of the Civil War, which came perilously close to Cooldrinagh on 29 January 1923 when the neighbouring Kilteragh House, built by Sir Horace Plunkett, senator and founder of the Irish co-operative movement, was one of nine nearby houses burnt down by the IRA that night (Yeates 2015, cpt 4).

### Beckett’s faerie

Pim, the poor soul discovered in the mud of *Comment c’est* and martyred by the “I,” was in the earliest manuscripts first named Sidney (UoR-1655-3), evoking Sir Philip Sidney, author of *Astrophel and Stella*, *The Defence of Poesie* and *Arcadia*. Had his name been retained, his tortured coupling with “I” would have engaged a debate with Sidney’s themes, notably the tradition of courtly love and the social value of imaginative fiction. It would have assumed an intensely political dimension, for Sidney fought ardently for the consolidation of Protestantism in Europe, famously dying for that cause in 1596. Described by his contemporaries as “an image of almost impossible perfection”, as a young man he was “the model of perfect courtesy and piety”, and in maturity, “the perfect soldier-statesman”; after his death, Sidney was celebrated as “the supreme literary artist of his time”, his life “the perfect pattern of heroic virtue” (Ringler 1986, 3). For some, the Sidney legend lives on as “the embodiment of every virtue which early-modern Europeans (and, apparently, modern Europeans too) have cherished” (Van Dorsen, Baker-Smith and Kinney 1986, ix).

Such *perfection* and *virtue* contrast with the “bad master” (2001, 91) of *How It Is*, whose pedagogy of Enlightenment humanism colonises mind and body: “left to right and top to bottom as in our civilisation I carve my Roman capitals” (89). The novel’s schema of alternating sado-masochistic encounters implies that the virtuous “Sidney” was previously in the position of the sadistic tyrant. Indeed, Ireland was brought under the control of Queen Elizabeth’s government by Philip Sidney’s father, Sir Henry Sidney (1529-1586), three times lord deputy of Ireland, remembered for his bloody suppression of both Desmond Rebellions (1569-1573 and 1579-1583), campaigns Sidney “modelled upon the standard Roman example of progressive military repression as the quickest route to pacification [...] deliberately wiping out Irish military opposition with maximum carnage” (Brennan 2017, 52-53). Sir Henry imitated Julius Caesar conquering the Gauls (Sidney, *Memoir* 8-10), as well as Agricola, the Roman general and governor of Celtic Britain celebrated by Tacitus. When Sidney defeated the powerful Celtic Ulster chieftain, Shane O’Neill, and displayed O’Neill’s



head atop Dublin Castle, he was “admitting a central axiom of Roman imperialism: brutal and bloody repression was necessary before peaceful colonial governance could be established” (Brennan 2017, 52). The outcome was, of course, hardly “peaceful,” and Bixby (2012) shows how these themes in *How It Is* reverberate with Western colonial violence across the globe, notably in Africa and Latin America.

Yet the landscape of early modern Ireland continues to haunt the text. “I” comments, “my words cause them it’s they cause my words” (57), echoing his earlier, “move my lips [...] that’s the speech I’ve been given” (19), statements reminiscent of Clov’s retort to Hamm in *Endgame*, “I use the words you taught me” (1986, 365), these evoking Caliban’s famous reproach to Prospero in Shakespeare’s *The Tempest*: “You taught me language; and my profit on ‘t / Is, I know how to curse”(I.ii.365-67). Caliban is the paradigm of a colonised subject trapped within the language of its oppressor, and Prospero’s island refracts public discourses about Ireland in the day of Shakespeare, who projects them abstractly onto a phantasmagoria in the Americas. For Elizabethan audiences, this ostensibly universal drama resonated with contemporary representations of Ireland as both colony and feudal fief under British lordship; it echoed debates about education, and the failure to educate Ireland’s “barbaric” population (Baker 1997).

The most notorious example of such rhetoric was Edmund Spenser’s 1596 tract *View of the Present State of Ireland*, which details a program for the cultural genocide of the Celts, whom he presents as an unruly but lazy caste of conniving brutes, and redressing the existing Old English landlords, who descended from Norman conquerors of the twelfth century and who had come to assimilate the Celts into their ranks; they are chided by Spenser for their miscegenation, speaking of Gaelic and degenerate adoption of local customs, to the point that some were “now very much more lawless and licentious than the very wild Irish” (636).<sup>6</sup> The Hamilton planters arrived in Ulster during a new phase of colonisation designed to take control from the Old English and the Celtic chiefs, and implant subjects loyal to the Crown. In Spenser’s extreme plan, they were to preside over a cultural genocide, which would become a real genocide should any fail to bow to the Crown; rebels would be disenfranchised, ostracized and left to starve. Spenser conjured up his fascistic program in full knowledge of the horrific effects of the recent famine that Sir Henry Sidney helped inflict upon sections of the population that supported Fitzgerald, the Earl of Desmond, leader of opposition to the imposition of an English governor in Munster. Spenser recalls when,

Out of every corner of the woodes and glinnes they came creeping foorthe upon their hands, for theyr legges could not bear them; they looked like ghosts crying out of their graves; they did eate of the dead carrions, heppy were they yf they could finde them, yea, and one another soone after, insoemuch as the very carcasses they spared not to scrape out of theyr graves; and yf they founde a plotte of water-cresses or sham-rokes, there they flocked as to a feast for the time, yet not able long to continue therewithal; that in the shorte space there were none almost left, and a most populous and plentifull country suddaynly made voyde of man or beast [.] (654)

This ghoulish spectacle of the starved undead crawling across a depopulated landscape, eating each other’s remains – by far the most evocative and quoted passage in the whole text – left an indelible mark on the Irish consciousness and its famine memory. Its horror is compounded by the cruelty of Spenser’s colonialist logic, which blames this population, many of whom

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<sup>6</sup> *A View* had only limited manuscript circulation until published in James Ware’s *Ancient Irish Chronicles* (1633). It had little impact on Elizabethan debates and has a contested legacy (Read 2000, 115-118), though its subsequent notoriety is undisputed. Entries in Beckett’s “Whoroscope Notebook” display familiarity with *A View* (Morin 2009, 62).

were peasants disenfranchised from their ancestral lands, for the “extremity of famyne, which they themselves had wrought” (654). Spenser exploits this atrocity as proof of the base cannibalism of the Irish, that “by this hard restraint they would quicklie consume them selves and devoure one another” (654).

These markers of Irish history offer various frames through which to view Beckett’s “creatures” in the mud of *How It Is*. They claw ahead, swallowing mouthfuls of mud, like Spenser’s abject figures who “came creeping foorth upon theyr hands” to gorge upon carrion, corpses, and shamrock. “I” remembers the decimated world above, “a few creatures in the light some still standing” (3) and relationships in the mud below conditioned by a history of violence once committed under the cover of the “humanities” (35 *et passim*). Yet early in Part 1, “I” remembers his past life, when he is inside, looking out:

life in the light first image some creature or other I watched him after my fashion  
from afar through my spy-glass sidelong in mirrors through windows at night first  
image

saying to myself he’s better than he was better than yesterday less ugly less stupid  
less cruel less dirty less old less wretched and you saying to myself and you bad to  
worse bad to worse steadily (5)

In *Endgame*, Clov scans the world outside his window with his telescope and declares it “corpsed,” evoking a decimated, depopulated Great Famine landscape (Ulin 2006, 202). He later repeats the gesture, making the surprising discovery of a lone boy outside. Above, “I” rehearses this scene, inspecting the abject body outside with added scientific rigour, for days. He claims to witness improvement in his subject, though any hint of benign humanistic motives is dashed through his Spenserian rhetoric when he derides his “creature” as “less ugly [...] stupid [...] cruel [...] old [...] wretched” (5). The simmering violence of his ratiocination finds its naked correlative in the next image, when he takes sadistic delight in tearing the wings of a butterfly into strips, “first one wing then the other sometimes for a change the two abreast never so good since” (6-7).<sup>7</sup> Echoing *Endgame*’s leitmotif, “I”’s incremental degeneration manifests itself in his atomising “species” (31 *et passim*) and atrophying “humanities.” Just as Clov is trapped within his master’s language and psychology, so his avatar can reproduce only an imperialist pedagogy when he encounters Pim. Indeed, *How It Is* offers a palpable sense that the prodigies of the Anglo-Irish Ascendancy, having been displaced from their Big Houses, find themselves outside, in the Spenserian landscape of their own begetting.

Towards the end of the novel the “creature” observed by the “I” flees a rapacious gaze:

*de soleil nuages terre mer taches bleues nuits claires et d’une créature debout ou  
pouvant l’être encore toujours la même imagination à bout cherchant un trou qu’on  
ne le voie plus au milieu de cette féerie*

sun clouds earth sea patches of blue clear nights and of a creature if not still standing  
still capable of standing always the same imagination spent looking for a hole that he  
may be seen no more in the middle of this faery (171-72)

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<sup>7</sup> Compare Spenser’s mythological poem *Muiopotmos, or The Fate of the Butterflie*, the tale of another violent coupling, in which the butterfly Clarion is preyed upon by the jealous spider Aragnoll.

In both scenes by the “Hamilton wall,” the “I” composed images with these elements; in the second, he had emerged from a hole before remembering himself as a boy, lying in the dust. The fragmented syntax may be parsed such that “I” and/or “creature” seek to escape this landscape where few, if any, are “still standing.” Their destiny is tied within this nightmarish “*féerie*” (from the French *fée*), meaning a piece of theatre or a performance featuring fairies, magic and supernatural characters, or the fairy world itself, a place of fairy magic (and metaphorically any poetic and irrational world). “I”’s term conjures up Prospero’s island, a place of magic, and resonates ironically with the effaced allusion to Hamilton’s fairy tale, *Fleur d’Épine*.<sup>8</sup> The English “faery” signifies accordingly, with the added twist of mocking its homoerotic ‘fairies.’ Yet, this *faery* has a more specific meaning, being the term Spenser introduced into English in the late 16th century as a pseudo-archaic variant of “fairy,” a word that remains strongly associated with the allegorical world of his *The Faerie Queene* (1552-1599) (*OED*, “faery”). Beckett studied this epic six-book poem under Rudmose-Brown at TCD in 1924, and its Book V gives poetic form to the opinions Spenser expressed in *A View*. Stephen Greenblatt resumes a common view when he comments that *The Faerie Queene* is “a passionate worship of imperialism” that sealed Spenser’s reputation as a colonial apologist (174).

Beckett refracts tropes of famine memory within *How It Is* as he narrates the posthuman afterlife to this history of (in)humanity. If the logic of imperialism persists in a wasteland where both victim *and* tormentor resemble Spenser’s famished crawlers, “I” claims that despite his weakness, he will “never die of hunger” (5). Indeed, his food supply is assured by an absent divinity who miraculously replenishes his “sack” with little tins of tunny or sardines. “I” obsesses compulsively over these tins, but having “no appetite” (5) and deriving no pleasure from their consumption, he suffers an historical trauma that relates to food or manifests as a food neurosis. When he declares his indenture to “him to whom we are further indebted for our unfailing rations” (183), Beckett’s parody of clerical rhetoric echoes the bitter reactions of Catholics to Famine-era “souperism,” when evangelical Protestants rationed out their charity in exchange for attendance at their churches, conversions and other such bribes (Hatton 1993, 146-50). Beckett’s victim “of the noble name of Pim” (75) evokes the Quaker family, prominent in Monkstown (owning the manor, Monkstown House), the suburb that neighboured the Becketts’ Foxrock, who rose to prominence in nineteenth-century Dublin as merchants and philanthropists (Boylan 2009). Jonathan Pim, the first Quaker elected as a Dublin MP, was secretary for the Central Relief Committee of the Society of Friends (Hatton 2004).<sup>9</sup> Indeed, Pim exhausted himself leading Quaker Famine relief, which was, unlike evangelical Protestants’ charity, non-sectarian and “entirely free to the destitute” (Hatton 2004, 149). Pim was furthermore “the heart and soul of the Quaker work for the English Encumbered Estates Bill” (Hatton 1993, 257), pushing for land reform to resolve the Irish Land Question, the problem of encumbered Estates, very often owned by absent land lords, which were crippled by debt during the Famine and could not be sold. Beckett therefore replaced one model of the virtuous Protestant, Sir Philip Sidney, with another, Pim. This decision merits more attention than space here permits; of note, however, is the vicious twist in which Pim is “martyris[é]” (126; “torment[ed]” 127) by a sadistic “I” associated through autobiographical and historical allusions with the “dirty low church” Protestants (Beckett 2009, 134) with whom the Beckett family was affiliated. Ultimately, Beckett spares neither “I” nor Pim, both are cast out in the wilderness, enslaved to a degenerate logic of indenture and dependency.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. “All that faerie!” in Beckett’s *Rough for Theatre II* (1986/2006, 244)

<sup>9</sup> Discussing Quaker relief in a different but related context, Kennedy mentions Pim’s “compassionate policy statements about the situation” (2020: 72)

## Conclusion

In the Michaelmas term of 1924, Beckett read Spenser's *Colin Clouts Come Home Again* alongside Sidney's *Apology for Poetry*, Sidney having recognised the younger man's talent and become Spenser's literary patron, the two developing a devoted friendship.<sup>10</sup> This potential "pseudo-couple" haunts the *Comment c'est* manuscript, though if "I" projects a Spenserian world view and Pim once bore the name Sidney, colonial history is echoed rather than allegorized as Beckett evokes the colonialist model of the Anglo-Irish master and indentured subject. The Proustian moment of the "Hamilton wall" scene provoked by "thorns" of memory transports the author back to his youth. His solitary detachment, sitting by his neighbour's wall and dreaming of spiritual transportation, is invested with new meaning, prefiguring Beckett's feeling of alienation from this Anglo-Irish community and his transnational trajectory towards becoming a French author à la Antoine Hamilton. Yet it betokens his connection to the legacy of Protestant Ascendancy, whose recourse to the moral justifications of Elizabethan as much as Enlightenment humanism he rejects as an irrational fairy tale that veils a history of savage and sadistic possession. These glimpses into Beckett's thought processes reveal his conviction that understanding the *how it is* of contemporary life must be grounded in the *longue durée*, *how it was*, despite the perils of memory. In another forum, with more space, I will develop my basic contention sketched here: the intense scrutiny and public debate of colonial violence in late 1950s and early 1960s France renewed in Beckett a reflection upon his own sense of complicity with Anglo-Irish Ascendancy and the history of Ireland's colonization.

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<sup>10</sup> The *Trinity College Dublin Calendar* of 1923–24 details the program Beckett would follow in his honours courses in English. For challenges to the traditional view of the relationship between Sidney and Spenser see Hadfield (2012, see esp. 419-423).

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