

**“SO IT GOES IN THE WORLD”:
THE POLITICS OF SAMUEL BECKETT’S *MORE PRICKS THAN KICKS*¹**

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More Pricks than Kicks, Samuel Beckett’s only book of short stories, has baffled even the most determined readers since its publication in 1934. Apart from having a fragmented nature, the volume is characterized by the protagonist’s eccentric behaviour, his isolation as regards his fellow countrymen and his absurd pursuits. Although the main character, Belacqua, appears in all the pieces, their lack of cohesion demands a comprehensive explanation in order to provide a general framework of interpretation. The approach offered in the present paper counts on a contextualized view of Beckett’s politics in the 1930s. It is here argued that the author’s feeling of estrangement from the ruling class in Ireland at the time may account for the uncanny atmosphere in the stories of the collection.

Keywords: Samuel Beckett, politics, *More Pricks than Kicks*, short stories.

The remarkable complexity of *More Pricks than Kicks*, Samuel Beckett’s first and only collection of short stories, has been of special interest to critics since its publication in 1934 because of its idiosyncrasy. In the words of an early reviewer:

More Pricks than Kicks is a book very difficult to describe. It consists of a number of what may be called short stories about Belacqua, a young Dublin man. The incidents themselves do not matter much, though one of them concerns Belacqua’s death. The point of the story is in the style of presentation, which is witty, extravagant and excessive. (Muir 1934: 42)

Contemporary critics have also stressed the lack of definition of the volume, making of it “as much a novel as a collection of stories” (Gontarski 1995: xiii).

An approach that may prove perceptive for the understanding of this collection is to connect it to the new openings in Beckett’s work that have been made possible thanks to the publication of archive material, including the first volume of Beckett’s letters (2009). Recent studies, too, which have considered the shift in power relations that took place in Ireland in the 1920s and 1930s (Morin, 2009; Kennedy, 2010), have placed Beckett’s early work in an appropriate historical context.

Following these two lines of enquiry it is possible and perhaps fruitful to consider *More Pricks than Kicks* as the result of a process by which a young writer trapped in a suffocating environment exorcised his hatred and fears. The anxieties caused by a set of diminished personal circumstances and by the feeling of estrangement from the political direction of the country might have contributed to Beckett’s writing of the stories in the collection as a way of venting his frustration. The consideration of these narratives as an uneasy gathering of fragments is further highlighted by the fact that two of the stories were rescued from a previous novel, *Dream of Fair to Middling Women*, that Beckett did not publish during his lifetime. The

reader thus gets the impression that the links between the stories are sometimes forcefully made, and that the result is an irregular and rather ad hoc collection.

In any case, despite its fragmented nature, the sequence achieves a certain sense of progression thanks to the unifying force represented by the protagonist, Belacqua Shuah, a character based on the indolent luthier in Dante’s *Divina Commedia*. In the first part of the book he is, in his own peculiar way, living the life of a conventional single male student, who seeks intimacy with girls and goes to parties. He later initiates more serious relationships with women, marrying twice, and near the end goes through the lengthy proceedings of a third wedding. He dies due to medical malpractice in the last but one story of the book and the final episode deals with his funeral.

Belacqua is an eccentric character whose main feature is his willingness to perform a moderate kind of subversion, a lukewarm resistance to social uniformity. He would probably be an outcast, a vagrant, were it not for the social class he belongs to, the Protestant Ascendancy, a privileged group who had held the reins of power in Ireland for centuries. At the time the stories of the collection are set in, in the first years after the traumatic events that marked the beginning of the Irish Free State (Anglo-Irish War, partition of the state, Civil War), this social class is coming to terms with a new situation: they are no longer the dominant force in Irish public affairs and have to grudgingly accept the irruption into political and economic life of an increasingly powerful Catholic middle class. The Protestants in the recently created nation secluded themselves in residential areas, frequented their own exclusive clubs and strengthened their positions in a few influential professions. The only way to manifest that they would staunchly resist any curtailment of their former privileges was reduced to the sphere of public behaviour, what Seán Kennedy has termed “the performance of ascendancy”:

Protestants continued to behave in a manner that suited them, but they were always also looking over their shoulder to ensure that the correct impression was being made on their somewhat presumptuous Catholic equivalents. The performance of ascendancy was not just a way of behaving, it was a signifier of difference, the assertion of a boundary. (Kennedy 2005: 179)

In the ten stories that constitute *More Pricks than Kicks* Belacqua reacts against the imposition of what should be considered proper behaviour. In the first story, “Dante and the Lobster”, he gets angry with the shopkeeper because the Gorgonzola cheese he has bought for his lunch is not rotten enough. The grocer, we are told, “felt sympathy and pity for this queer customer who always looked ill and dejected” (Beckett 1970: 15). In the second story, “Fingal”, Belacqua leaves his girlfriend in the middle of the countryside and goes off happily to a pub on a bicycle he has found by the side of the road. In the third story, “Ding-Dong”, he is conned into buying four seats in heaven from a beggar woman in a pub. These episodes also have the function of showing the reader the protagonist’s antics. In the pub the locals are already familiar with his weird demeanour and have learnt to accept him as he is: “Here he was known, in the sense that his grotesque exterior had long ceased to alienate the curates and make them giggle” (Beckett 1970: 43). Every story is thus marked by a minor transgression of social norms, making Belacqua an atypical rebel, lost in the absurd pursuit of an ineffectual differentiation of his own. In many ways this rebellious attitude, coupled with the impotence of knowing that nothing can be changed just by making meaningless gestures, reflected the personal circumstances of the author himself. Back in Dublin, in a job he loathed after two years in Paris, where he had experienced a stimulating intellectual environment, he occupied his days looking back and yearning for a life

elsewhere. The years of his return to Ireland, from late 1930 onwards, were characterized by a “marked sense of displacement” (Mooney 2003: 125), as he wrote in his letters from Dublin to his friend Tom McGreevy, still in Paris: “Looking vaguely round college I know there is nothing but loneliness, and perhaps that is the most satisfactory conclusion I have reached since coming back to Ireland –although God knows it was sufficiently clear & necessary in abstracto in Paris” (in Fehsenfeld 2009: 49). Since his return he felt increasingly at odds with those in a position of power, a new ruling class which had implemented an increasingly conservative policy on Ireland, imposing a repressive nationalism in all spheres of life, including the creation of a Censorship Board. His own book of stories, *More Pricks than Kicks*, would appear in the Index of Forbidden Books in Ireland soon after its publication. In one of the few articles that he wrote during this period, “Censorship in the Saorstát” (written in 1934) Beckett heavily attacked not just a piece of legislation, but a whole policy of control of the population that put peaceful coexistence in jeopardy:

Protestants, North and South, subsequently saw the creation of the Censorship Board in 1930 as further evidence of the Catholicization of the public sphere in the Free State. This and the state’s commitment to the creation of a ‘Gaelic Civilization’ ... would do little to help the realization of the first objective of its party programme: ‘To secure the unity of Ireland and to unify the diverse elements of the Nation in a common bond of citizenship’. (Patterson 2007: 16)

In the sarcastic “Censorship in the Saorstát”, that was not finally published by *The Bookman*, the magazine which had commissioned it, Beckett in fact linked together such diverse items as the prohibition of birth control and the censorship of books: “Sterilization of the mind and apotheosis of the litter suit well together. Paradise peopled with virgins and the earth with decorticated multiparas” (Beckett 1984: 87). Emilie Morin has noticed that Beckett did not criticise similar measures regarding the ban on contraceptives in countries like France: “The difference, it seems, lies in the attempts of the Free State government to promote racial and spiritual purity by controlling modes of literary representation” (2009: 41). If there was something that provoked Beckett’s disgust was the emphasis that the new government placed in an idyllic vision of Ireland and the part that most members of the literary establishment of its day played in transmitting those same values. “Beckett”, Sinéad Mooney reminds us, “was an urban Irish Protestant, intellectual, atheistic and bohemian by inclination, and his early journalism demonstrates a sharp consciousness of being athwart the agenda of the increasingly theocratic and philistine Irish Free State, with its enthusiastic celebration of the Catholic peasantry” (2003: 128).

In the stories of *More Pricks...* Beckett frequently joins together representatives of three of the groups that supported the government’s set of reforms and who had to be avoided at all costs. When, for example, he considers a particular itinerary in Dublin in the story “A Wet Night”, Belacqua thinks: “From Moore to Merrion Row, moreover, was a perilous way, beset at this hour with poets and peasants and politicians” (Beckett 1970: 54). Later on, in the same story, Belacqua will meet one of the most derided characters in the whole collection, the homespun Poet, who is accompanied by “a little saphophile of an anonymous politico-ploughboy” (Beckett 1970: 57). Belacqua feels in the stories of *More Pricks...* a kind of disaffection as regards the figures of authority but also towards the people he encounters in the different episodes: “Belacqua took in the whole outfit at a glance” describes the narrator when Belacqua meets a tinker on a country road “and felt, the wretched bourgeois, a paroxysm of shame for his capon belly” (Beckett 1970: 111). The animosity so far described should be considered under

the prism of the antipathy felt by the author himself before what he considered the provincialism of the Irish people at large, a particularly limited view of the world that was fostered by those who were supposed to guide them towards higher aims. A few years later Beckett would write to his friend Tom McGreevy about his

chronic inability to understand as member of any proposition a phrase like ‘the Irish people’, or to imagine that it ever gave a fart in its corduroys for any form of art whatsoever ... or that it was ever capable of any thought or act other than the rudimentary thoughts and acts belted into it by the priests and by the demagogues in service of the priests ... (in Fehsenfeld 2009: 599)

The most poignant result of the apparent normality that has settled down in the Free State is the presence of death, lurking in the margins in many of the stories, which creates an uncanny element of disquiet. As David Pattie has pointed out, “The characters in the collection are constantly under threat from an uncaring, unfeeling, brutally yet comically dangerous world” (2000: 55). The first death takes place in the initial story, “Dante and the Lobster”, and concerns the animal in the title that is boiled to death to the surprise of the protagonist. It is at this moment when the narrator interrupts the flow of discourse to arrest the clichés that are pronounced in these cases (“it’s a quick death”) with a grave sentence which has become the best known locution in the whole collection: “It is not”. In that same story Belacqua has read in the paper that the murderer Henry McCabe will be executed the following day. In the third story, “Ding-Dong”, a girl is brutally run over by a bus in a busy street in Dublin. In the fifth story, “Love and Lethe”, Belacqua and his girlfriend plan a joint suicide that finally does not take place. In the sixth story, “Walking Out”, Belacqua’s first wife, Lucy, has an accident that cripples her and Belacqua receives a severe thrashing because of his spying on a couple in the forest. In the ninth story, “Yellow”, Belacqua himself is the one who dies on the operating table and in the final one, “Druff”, readers are informed that Belacqua’s second wife died during their honeymoon. When Belacqua’s third wife, the Smeraldina, arrives home after Belacqua’s funeral, she and her late husband’s best friend learn that while they were out the gardener “had ravished the servant girl and then set the premises on fire” (Beckett 1970: 202).

The most striking element in this succession of violent events is the nonchalant tone in which they are related. When the girl is knocked over by the bus, the passers-by and those waiting to enter the cinema do not show any concern for the poor victim: “The queue standing for the Palace Cinema was torn between conflicting desires: to keep their places and to see the excitement” (Beckett 1970: 43). When Lucy’s horse is struck by the limousine of a “drunken lord” and as a consequence she falls under the animal, the conclusion is equally shocking for its telegraphic brevity: “Lucy however was not so fortunate, being crippled for life and her beauty dreadfully marred” (Beckett 1970: 118). When Belacqua dies near the end of the book, this information is transmitted only in the last two lines of the story, almost as an addendum to the narration: “By Christ! He did die! They had clean forgotten to auscultate him!” (Beckett 1970: 186). Equally casual is the remark that Thelma bboggs (sic), Belacqua’s second wife, “perished of sunset and honeymoon that time in Connemara” (Beckett 1970: 189). Even the weather, as representing the indifference of a superior level of conscience, is consistently good during most of the time, in a city famous for its untempered climate: “All these little encounters and contretemps take place in a Dublin flooded with sunshine” (Beckett 1970: 145). A concomitant factor that builds the whole picture is the importance given in the stories to trivia, despite the grave events that are interspersed throughout the narratives. For John Pilling, Beckett’s interest in little things “may also

have been a way of dramatizing, and at the same time tacitly disparaging, what he took to be the small-mindedness of Dublin” (2011: 20).

According to James McNaughton Beckett felt depressed by the weariness of political life in the Irish Free State and its outcome of uniformity and monotony that had impregnated public life: “In his stories, historical outcomes appear less as a result of nationalist and imperialistic politics, than as the expansion of state power unchallenged by a national populace subdued by commodity appetites, newspaper circulations, and sensational spectacles” (2010: 58-59). The gratuitous violence that abounds in all the narratives, together with the preference for trivia and with the sentence with which the last story ends, “So it goes in the world”, can be interpreted thus as the false insouciance of an author who harboured a deep sense of dissatisfaction with the general state of apathy and conformity exhibited by the people of Ireland at the time. Like his main character in the volume, Beckett did not feel at ease with the Catholic ruling class nor with the Protestant minority he belonged to. The only solution was exile and three years after the publication of *More Pricks than Kicks* he abandoned Ireland definitively, only returning to his native country in a sporadic manner. The bitterness towards Irish society as he had experienced it in the mid-1930s would not abandon him completely in later life, but this is something that must be expanded in a different occasion.

Notes

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