

Angles of immunity: Beckett's *Film*

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Though Beckett's media works do not readily lend themselves to plot synopses, one way of making sense of *Film* in narrative terms is to say that it tells the story of a chase. In Beckett's reworking of this classic cinematic topos, E (or Eye) is the pursuer, O (or Object) the pursued. The key conceptual device in this chase, and in *Film* as a whole, is that of the 'angle of immunity' (Beckett, 1972, 11), the 45-degree angle that the camera (which takes on the role of E) must not exceed lest O, who flees from perception and being, be perceived and recoil in horror. As Beckett scholars have amply discussed, Beckett uses the device of the 'angle of immunity' for a playful yet serious engagement with the idealist eighteenth-century philosopher George Berkeley's dictum that 'esse est percipi (aut percipere)', that 'to be is to be perceived (or to perceive)'. In Beckett's take on Berkeley, O is a naive, literal reader of the Irish philosopher who flees from perception in a quest for non-being only to realise the impossibility of that quest when, at the end of the film, he finds that the persistence of self-perception rules out any true escape from perceivedness. In this conceit, which the beginning of Beckett's script introduces clearly and succinctly, the angle of immunity marks the limit of O's flight from (external) perception:

Esse est percipi.

All extraneous perception suppressed, animal, human, divine, self-perception maintains in being.

Search of non-being in flight from extraneous perception breaking down in inescapability of self-perception.

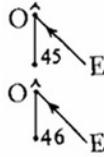
No truth value attaches to above, regarded as of merely structural and dramatic convenience.

In order to be figured in this situation the protagonist is sundered into object (O) and eye (E), the former in flight, the latter in pursuit.

It will not be clear until the end of film that pursuing perceiver is not extraneous, but self.

Until end of film O is perceived by E from behind and at an angle not exceeding 45°.

Convention: O enters *percipi*=experiences anguish of perceivedness, only when this angle is exceeded



(Beckett, 1972, 11)

Beckett's irreverence toward Berkeley shows itself clearly when he declares that neither the philosopher's statement nor his own development of it possess any 'truth value'. To be sure, this does not amount to Beckett denying the value of his own enterprise. That value just does not reside in the statement's truth content but in its use for 'structural and dramatic convenience', which is no mean thing for a writer like Beckett. The philosopher serves the writer as a springboard for artistic experimentation in a medium that was new to him. Hence also the self-reflexive title of the film: *Film*.¹

These introductory remarks may serve as a word of warning for scholars setting out to probe the philosophical import of the work. But this should not keep us from asking about the kind of conceptual work Beckett does in *Film*. After all, in his quest for an aesthetics of 'impoverishment' (Beckett, qtd. in Knowlson, 2014, 352), every single word counts (even if the fact that we are dealing with a film script gives this text a status different from Beckett's novels and plays). With this in mind, I ask why Beckett chose the concept of the 'angle of immunity' for his exploration of perception and being.

We may start by stating that 'angle of immunity' is a technical term in neither cinematography nor in film studies. Moreover, to name the threshold at which O's face remains invisible to E, Beckett could have chosen a number of terms other than 'angle of immunity', for instance 'angle of freedom', 'angle of amnesty' or 'angle of release'. Thus, Beckett's choice calls for comment.

'Immunity' belongs to a wide variety of semantic fields. There are several forms of legal immunity – diplomatic, parliamentary and ecclesiastical – that partially protect individuals from legal prosecution and, in the religious realm, also exempt church property from secular jurisdiction. In the moral sphere, the English 'immunity' refers to licence or freedom from moral restraints, while the French *immunité* means something quite different, namely invulnerability to moral corruption.² In medicine, 'immunity' refers to a body's insusceptibility or resistance to pathogens or diseases. Finally, in one nineteenth-century anthropologist's usage, 'immunity' is

the opposite of 'community', referring to 'the [Indo-Aryan] Household, considered as a corporate body, without any relation to other Households [...] a Household, either wholly or in part, not included in any commune' (Hearn, 1878, 232, 234).

What unites this social usage of the term with other usages is the most basic meaning of 'immunity' as 'exemption from'. This corresponds to the first recorded sense of the word in the *Oxford English Dictionary*: 'Exemption from a service, obligation, or duty; freedom from liability to taxation, jurisdiction, etc.; privilege granted to an individual or a corporation conferring exemption from certain taxes, burdens, or duties (in later use esp. from prosecution or arrest)' (*OED*). For an analysis of Beckett's *Film*, it is, I believe, the medical and social senses of the term that are most relevant.

As far as the medical notion of 'immunity' is concerned, we may start by noting that *Film*'s narrative repeatedly references the issue of health. In his flight from E, O checks his pulse three times as if trying to determine whether he is still alive. In the room of eyes that O retreats to in the film's final act, the pillow on the cot is soiled and the bed as a whole looks messy and shabby – a potential source of germs. When O removes the dog and cat from the room in the film's one true slapstick scene, he of course does this primarily to escape their stares. But he also seems to seek to immunise himself further from contagion by another (which is more difficult to achieve for the cat and the dog than for the parrot and the fish, who are confined to their cage and fishbowl, respectively, and which he can easily cover with his coat). The room itself may have become available to O due to a health issue. As Beckett suggests in his notes, 'This obviously cannot be O's room. It may be supposed it is his mother's room, which he has not visited for many years and is now to occupy momentarily, to look after the pets, until she comes out of hospital' (Beckett, 1972, 59). O himself is, of course, a damaged figure: old, exhausted, and with a patch over his left eye. He is, moreover, wearing a '[l]ong dark overcoat' while all the other characters, including those in the deleted street scene, are dressed in 'light summer dress' (12). We may, of course, interpret O's dress as an additional protective layer that exempts him from any external intrusions but we can also read it as an index of his body's fragility.

Health was also a significant issue in the production of *Film*. As is well known, while directing the movie in New York in the summer of 1964, Beckett suffered from blurred and clouded vision caused by cataracts in both of his eyes, which were operated upon only in the early 1970s – a fact that adds an autobiographical dimension to O's blurred vision in *Film* (Knowlson, 2014, 579; Paraskeva, 2017, 58).

Buster Keaton, who was sixty-seven years old at the time of the shooting, was worse off. In a conversation with Shannon Kelley recorded at UCLA's

Billy Wilder Theater almost fifty years after the shooting of *Film*, Keaton's friend James Karen, who plays the man in the couple that O bumps into near the beginning of the film, is still upset about Keaton's treatment on the set:³

You can see all the bricks that poor Buster had to wade through. By the way, it was, I think, July 1 we started shooting and it was about 110 degrees in the shade, and there was no shade. It was just murder for Buster who was not at the top of his health game at the time. He was, I think, 69 and he was dead a year and a half later. And he just was such a trooper. And they were curiously insensitive to actors. [...] It wasn't meanness on their part. They just simply did not know that an elderly man running on rusty nails and bricks for two days needed a chair. [...] Shooting was hell. (Kelley, 2011)

Given the prominent roles that health and disease play within *Film* and in the context of its production, Beckett's decision to label the key device of that film 'angle of immunity' makes added sense. However, before exploring the medical sense of 'immunity' further, we need to consider another sense of the term.

For understanding *Film*, the social sense of 'immunity' is of equal importance. Here, the anthropological definition of the term that I cite above becomes relevant. The *Oxford English Dictionary* marks Australian anthropologist William Edward Hearn's definition of 'immunity' as 'the household as a discrete, self-contained entity in early Indo-European society' (*OED*) as an obsolete, 'isolated use', indicating that it is an idiosyncratic usage (by one anthropologist) that is, moreover, no longer employed. At first sight, then, this sense of 'immunity' is of limited significance at best. Yet more recent philosophical reflections on community, immunity and autoimmunity, most notably by Jacques Derrida and Roberto Esposito, make Hearn's nineteenth-century nonce-use appear less marginal than the *OED* suggests (Derrida, 1998, 2003, 2005; Esposito, 2008, 2010, 2011, 2013b). Esposito shows that earliest usages of *immunitas* in ancient Rome denoted an exemption from services or duties in the juridicopolitical realm. In the Middle Ages, the semantic range of the term was expanded to cover some clergymen's as well as church property's exemption from secular law. *Immunitas*, then, first functioned not as a medical term but as a concept in the social realms of politics, religion, and the law.⁴

Zooming in on the relation between *communitas* and *immunitas*, Esposito notes that, on the face of it, they refer to diametrically opposed movements within social space. Highlighting the common core of both terms – Latin *munus* (debt, obligation, duty, office, function, post, gift, sacrifice, service, tribute, offering) – Esposito notes,

If the members of the *communitas* are bound by the same law, by the same duty, or gift to give (the meanings of *munus*), *immunis* is he or she who is

exempt or exonerated from these. *Immunis* is he or she who has no obligations toward the other and can therefore conserve his or her own essence intact as a subject and owner of himself or herself. (Esposito, 2013b, 39)

Esposito is a political philosopher who seeks ways out of a range of contemporary sociopolitical predicaments including right-wing identitarian movements, states' obsession with security and public health, the privatisation of water and corporate resistance to energy transition. It is with these current developments in view that he stresses the urgent need to balance out the competing claims of *communitas* and *immunitas*:

By overlaying the legal and medical semantic fields, one may well conclude that if community breaks down the barriers of individual identity, immunity is the way to rebuild them, in defensive and offensive forms, against any external element that threatens it. This applies to individuals, but also to particular communities, which also tend to be immunized against any foreign element that appears to threaten them from outside. [...] Although immunity is necessary to the preservation of our life, when driven beyond a certain threshold it forces life into a sort of cage where not only our freedom gets lost but also the very meaning of our existence – that opening of existence outside itself that takes the name of *communitas*. This is the contradiction that I have sought to bring to attention in my work: that which protects the body (the individual body, the social body, and the body politic) is at the same time that which impedes its development. It is also that which, beyond a certain threshold, is likely to destroy it. (Esposito, 2013a, 85)

Esposito's exploration of convergences between the social and the medical senses of 'immunity' has obvious relevance for Beckett's *Film*, a movie that tells the story of a damaged character obsessively seeking to immunise himself against contagion – particularly against contagion by the social. Already the initial close-up on Buster Keaton's opening and shutting eye announces the film's oscillation between openness to, and withdrawal from, the external world or, to rephrase this in Esposito's terms, the oscillation between *communitas* and *immunitas*. Yet while the eye remains open at the end of both the opening shot and the final shot (which returns us to Keaton's eye), O's trajectory is one of closure and withdrawal, suggesting that the eye we see at the beginning and ending of *Film* is E's rather than O's – though the distinction between the two of course collapses as the film ends.

To be sure, perhaps as a result of the lasting influence of early humanist and existentialist readings of Beckett,⁵ clearly also because of Beckett's own perceived longing for silence and reclusion, and most certainly owing to the abstractness of his work, social or political readings of his work are still relatively scarce.⁶ Yet if we take into consideration Beckett's script and, equally importantly, the initial street scene that was cut from *Film* due to its technical flaws but partially restored by Ross Lipman (2015), we can

supplement philosophical and psychological readings of the film with a reading that seeks to do justice to its social dimension. The street scene is the only scene in *Film* that forcefully moves beyond dyadic configurations such as those between O and E, between the couple that O runs into when hurrying alongside the wall, and the cat and dog in the room of eyes. In the restored opening scene, we see six couples strolling across a square. In his script, Beckett stresses the most obvious difference between these couples and O: while they are ‘shown in some way perceiving – one another, an object, a shop window, a poster, etc., i.e., all contentedly in *percipere* and *percipi*’ (Beckett, 1972, 12), O frantically seeks to avoid perceiving and being perceived. What Lipman’s restoration of the deleted scene helps us understand is that O’s flight from perception is also a flight from community, a flight from the community of couples strolling across the square, a flight from contagion by the social.

Lipman’s restoration of the street scene invites us to reconsider O’s encounter with the bespectacled couple as he runs into them while hurrying alongside the wall. For O, the encounter is unpleasant for at least two reasons: first, because he is perceived by them and, second, because his interrupted flight would give E the opportunity to move in on O, breaching the angle of immunity a second time. Of course, the main purpose of this scene is to showcase, for the first out of three occasions in the film, the ‘anguish of perceivedness’ (Beckett, 1972, 11) as the couple faces E and responds with horror. But if we take the street scene into account, O’s encounter with the couple is also a source of anguish to him because it threatens to thwart his flight from contagion by community. Two details of the encounter corroborate such a reading. In the script, Beckett writes, ‘In his blind haste O jostles an elderly couple of shabby genteel aspect, standing on sidewalk, peering together at a newspaper’ (15). But in the film, they are looking at a map, not a newspaper, suggesting that they are strangers to this place. The couple is, in other words, not part of the initial community either. A monad bumps into a dyad and no new community emerges. Moreover, when the couple’s expression changes to the ‘agony of perceivedness’ (1972, 16), they are not only looking at E. Like the old lady in the vestibule, and like O in *Film*’s epiphanic scene, they are also looking at *us*, recoiling from the ‘savage eyes’ of the film’s community of spectators.⁷

A second look at the restored street scene helps us understand what kind of community we encounter there. When we see them first, five of the six couples are moving down the street, two on the pavement (a middle-aged man pushing a wheelchair with an older man in it; a prim elderly couple) and three on the street itself (two female friends, one white, one black; an old man holding onto a walking stick with his right hand and onto the shoulder of the adolescent boy who accompanies him with his left; a woman

pushing a stroller with a boy in it as she holds on to a balloon). The sixth couple, a heterosexual pair of lovers, is approaching the street sideways, from a 90-degree angle. Again, the film diverts from the script in significant ways. At least three of these couples are not 'going unhurriedly to work' (Beckett, 1972, 12), as the script suggests. The mother and the boy are on a day out and both the old man with the walking stick and the old man in the wheelchair are beyond working age. Out of the other three couples, the young lovers may or may not accompany each other on the way to work, the prim elderly couple seems dressed for a day out rather than labour, and the two women friends may just as well be dressed for shopping. The community in the street scene is, then, a community that is not united by a shared purpose. It is, moreover, a community in which there is social interaction (with varying degrees of intimacy and friendliness) within the couples but not between them. What we get, in other words, is an urban street scene in which individuals and, in this case, couples go about their own business. This still qualifies as a community but it is the kind of loose community characteristic of cities.

If we include the street scene in our analysis of *Film*, the social dimension of O's behaviour moves into focus, turning O into a figure that seeks to escape both perception and community – even the kind of loose urban community that affords its members a great deal of protective distance and anonymity. Here is where a psychological and a social reading converge: O's frantic search for immunity from community assumes pathological proportions. He is a figure who validates Esposito's concern that 'immunization in high doses means sacrificing every form of qualified life, for reasons of simple survival: the reduction of life to its bare biological layer, of *bios* and *zoē*' (Esposito, 2013b, 61). Now reduction is, of course, one of Beckett's core aesthetic principles, which he developed in contradistinction to Joyce. As he put it in a 1989 conversation with his biographer James Knowlson,

I realised that Joyce had gone as far as one could in the direction of knowing more, [being] in control of one's material. He was always adding to it; you only have to look at his proofs to see that. I realised that my own way was in impoverishment, in lack of knowledge and in taking away, in subtracting rather than in adding. (Beckett qtd. in Knowlson, 2014, 318)

But in many of his media works, including *Film*, reduction also means reduction of life in the sense that his characters are damaged subjects that move through impoverished spaces such as the prison-like rooms of *Eh Joe* and *Ghost Trio* or, indeed, *Film*'s dilapidated setting at the Manhattan end of Brooklyn Bridge.

In my social-immunological reading of *Film*, O is a figure for what both Derrida and Esposito label autoimmunity: the most radical manifestation

of immunity in which the quest for self-protection turns against the self itself. In immunological terms, autoimmunity is ‘a destructive reaction of the immune system against one or another of the body’s own constituents’ (Mackay, 2001, A252). In Derrida’s words, it is ‘that strange behavior where a living being, in a quasi-suicidal fashion, ‘itself’ works to destroy its own protection, to immunize itself against its ‘own’ immunity’ (2003, 94). For both Derrida and Esposito, autoimmunity is a figure that allows them to diagnose a range of contemporary social and political pathologies, including public health scares, xenophobic responses to mass migration, the effects of the war on terror on the US citizenry, and Western states’ as well as citizens’ increasing obsession with security measures that manifests itself, for instance, in extended emergency legislation. Yet while Derrida stresses that ‘autoimmunity is not an absolute ill or evil’ – since ‘[i]t enables an exposure to the other, to what and to who comes’ (Derrida, 2005, 152)⁸ – Esposito more persistently emphasises the deleterious effects of autoimmunisation:

Normally the immune system is limited to a role of preservation, without turning against the body that houses it. But when this does happen, it is not provoked by an external cause but rather by the immune mechanism itself, which is intensified to an intolerable degree. A similar dynamic is also recognizable in the body politic, when the protective barriers against the outside begin to represent a greater risk than what they are intended to prevent. As we know, one of our society’s greatest risks today lies in an excessive demand for protection, which in some cases tends to produce an impression of danger, whether real or imagined, for the sole purpose of setting up increasingly powerful preventive defense weapons against it. (Esposito, 2013a, 86)

While Esposito and Derrida zoom in on late twentieth and early twenty-first century pathologies, the origins of the immunitary logic they theorise about can be traced back to the decade in which Beckett made his only film. Beckett wrote the script for *Film* in April–May 1963, shot the film with Alan Schneider in New York in July 1964, and it was first screened at the Venice Film Festival on 4 September 1965. Crucially, Beckett’s staging of O’s movement away from community in the 1960s coincides with a key shift in immunological knowledge. This is the decade in which the immunological revolution took place, the decade in which serology-centred immunology was displaced by immunobiology. For the first half of the twentieth century, immunology was dominated by chemists who considered the antibodies circulating in the body’s humours (primarily blood and lymph) the only active agents in the immune response and focused exclusively on antibody-antigen interactions.

Starting in the mid-1950s, this paradigm was forcefully challenged by biologists such as the Danish immunologist Niels Kaj Jerne and the Australian virologist Frank Macfarlane Burnet. These researchers took a more holistic

approach that emphasised the complexity of human immunity, stressed the central role in the immune response played by those cells we now know as B and T lymphocytes (or B and T cells for short), and discovered the key links between humoral and cellular immunity. This and related research provided the study of cell-mediated immunity with a firm foundation and laid the ground for immunological research today.⁹ Appropriately, the journal *Cellular Immunology* was founded in 1970.

The most influential and enduring contribution to the immunological revolution was Burnet's publication of *The Clonal Selection Theory of Acquired Immunity* in 1959. In immunologist Zoltan A. Nagy's words,

If immunologists were asked to name one single element that marks the beginning of the immunological revolution, most of us would vote for the appearance of 'The Clonal Selection Theory of Acquired Immunity' by Macfarlane Burnet in 1959. This theory provided, for the first time, a biology-based conceptual framework for the development of immune responses, and its main theses have remained valid to date, so it has rightly become the alphabet of immunological thinking, and it is now 'in the blood' of every immunologist. (Nagy, 2014, 4–5)

Burnet's clonal selection theory of acquired immunity explains how the immune system can respond to a wide variety of antigens. When a foreign substance enters the human body, it encounters a vast diversity of highly specialised B lymphocytes. Burnet proposed that specific antigens select and activate specific B cells equipped with receptors specific to these antigens. When an antigen attaches to the corresponding B cell's receptor, the B cell is activated and produces clones for the generation of antibodies. These antibodies bind to the surface of the antigens, marking them for destruction by other players in the immune system such as phagocytes (Burnet, 1959a). Burnet's theory decisively strengthened biological explanations of immunity at the expense of chemical accounts, allowing him 'to lead the charge against the old [immunochemical] regime and its outmoded paradigm' (Silverstein, 2009, 358) and turned out to provide the foundation of molecular immunology.

Drawing on Jerne's pioneering work, Burnet also formulated a theory of fetal clonal deletion, arguing that the lymphocytes occurring in the body of children and adults are those that were singled out for survival at the fetal stages because they did not respond to the body's own tissue (and therefore pose no threat to the body itself). In this account, autoimmunity is the original condition that is checked by fetal clonal deletion, which enables the body to develop immunological tolerance, that is, tolerance of the self: 'Clones with unwanted reactivity can be eliminated in the late embryonic period with the concomitant development of immune tolerance'

(Burnet, [1957] 1976, 121).¹⁰ Both Derrida and Esposito make much of this, arguing that, in Esposito's words,

it is not autoimmunity, with all its lethal consequences, that requires explanation, but rather its absence. [...] [A]utoimmunity is what would occur under *any* circumstance in the event the tolerance mechanism fails to block it. Here we arrive at the key point of the argument: the destructive rebellion against the self is not a temporary dysfunction, but the natural impulse of every immune system. In countering all that it 'sees', it is naturally led to *first* attack its own self. (2011, 164; emphasis in original)

Only through clonal deletion and the concomitant development of immunological tolerance does the self learn to 'tolerate' itself. Paradoxically, autoimmunity is both the original condition and marks the breakdown of acquired self-tolerance.

With this in mind, we may return to Beckett's *Film* to note that O indeed engages in a form of autoimmunitary response when he destroys the seven photographs of himself and significant others, starting with the one that shows only his current, aged self – only to realise, as the movie ends, that the threatening agent (E) is indeed, again in autoimmunitary fashion, the self. O here engages in a twisted form of clonal deletion that, unlike Burnet's fetal clonal deletion, exemplifies not the creation of self-tolerance but its collapse. Yet it is a related facet of the immunological revolution that provides the key to the immunitary logic of Beckett's *Film*. No matter our scientific, let alone immunological expertise, we have gotten used to talk about the human 'immune system'. But the very notion of a human immune *system* only came into being with the immunological revolution,¹¹ which brought about an awareness that the human immune response is systemic in the sense that it involves a complex interplay of immunitary agents. One major corollary of immunologists' growing awareness of the systemic nature of the immune response was their strict distinction between self and not-self. In fact, this distinction between self and not-self is so central that immunology has until fairly recently been known as 'the science of self-nonsel self discrimination'.¹² Again, it was Burnet who crucially shaped immunological discourse through another seminal publication: *Self and Not-self: Cellular Immunology, Book One* (1969).¹³ For Burnet and much of the immunobiological research that followed him, 'self-nonsel self discrimination' was an article of faith, one that, he professed in 1959, 'I shall always regard as crucial to all immunological theory' (Burnet, 1959b, 14). On this foundation, autoimmunity is a major conundrum since it violates precisely the self/nonsel self dichotomy that founds post-1950s immunology: autoimmunity marks the moment at which the self misrecognises the self as nonself, the moment at which the immune system attacks its own host.¹⁴

Beckett's *Film* explores precisely the moment at which the self's protection against the not-self, visualised in *Film* as O's frantic flight from contagion by the social – is turned back against the self itself. Produced in the midst of the immunological revolution, *Film* explores one subject's autoimmunitary response – a response that involves not merely flight from community and flight from the self but also a turning of the self against the self that manifests itself most prominently in O's destruction of the seven photographs – media that are, if we follow Roland Barthes, themselves 'figuration[s] of the motionless and made-up face beneath which we see the dead' (Barthes, 1982, 323) – and in O's intense horror at his final perception of the self. While in Barthes, photography registers the traumatic separation from others, in Beckett, O's tearing up of images of himself exposes a morbid rift within the self, constituting an instantiation of the death drive. O appears to fall asleep as the film ends, but death would be the most consequential resolution of this fictional subject's autoimmunitary response to itself – a resolution also suggested by the doppelgänger theme that emerges when O recognises himself in E in the film's epiphanic scene. A doppelgänger is, after all, an omen of impending death, an ominous clone.

If my immunological reading of *Film* makes sense, Beckett's setting of the movie in 1929 assumes added significance. Several studies on *Film* stress that its setting in this specific year is significant because it marks a watershed in the history of cinematography (Maude, 2014, 46–7; Lawrence, 2018, 60–1; Paraskeva, 2017, 37–9). That same year saw not only the premiere of Luis Buñuel and Salvador Dalí's pathbreaking surrealist *Un chien andalou* but also marked the almost complete displacement of silent film by talkies. Beckett references both these moments in the history of cinematography: the most notorious scene of *Un chien andalou* through its opening close-up on Buster Keaton's eye; the rise to dominance of talkies by creating a sound film whose only audible sound is a woman's 'sssh!' (Beckett, 1972, 16). Yet a close look at *Film*'s most prominent device – that of the 'angle of immunity' – suggest that the history of immunology is relevant not only to the film's production in the early 1960s but also to its historical setting in 1929.

There were two major discoveries in the life sciences in 1929: in the June 1929 issue of *The British Journal of Experimental Pathology*, Alexander Fleming published an article that reported on his finding of a powerful antibacterial substance. Fleming's discovery of penicillin would revolutionise the treatment of bacterial infections that cause a variety of diseases including gonorrhoea, syphilis, tuberculosis and bacterial meningitis. It earned him a knighthood in 1944 and the 1945 Nobel Prize in Physiology or Medicine.

Also in 1929, a less famous Hungarian bacteriologist named Louis L. Dienes published a series of articles in *The Journal of Immunology* that

detailed his discovery that the injection of egg white into the tubercles (the small projections produced by tuberculosis) of tubercular animals led to the same effects as the injection of tuberculin. In both cases, the result was a delayed inflammation of the skin. Today, the phenomenon is labelled 'delayed-type hypersensitivity' (Nagy, 2014, 3–4; Swartz and Dvorak, 1974, 89–90) because it occurs only between twenty-four and forty-eight hours after injection (Cruse and Lewis, 2005, 140; Silverstein, 2009, 140). Before Dienes's findings, it was assumed that delayed-type hypersensitivity was caused only by antigens of bacterial origin. Dienes's research showed that they could also be triggered by simple proteins, which means that delayed hypersensitivity is a more general phenomenon than previous researchers had assumed – one that was not caused by specific antigens but involved as yet unexplored dimensions of human immunity.

Dienes's research did not garner much attention in the scientific community around 1929 since the vast majority of researchers followed the reigning humoralist dogma according to which 'circulating antibody would provide all essential answers to the problems of immunity and immunopathology' (Silverstein, 2009, 39). But Dienes's research helped prepare the ground for the explosion of cellular immunology and the turn to immunobiology in the 1960s. As Nagy explains, '[t]he earliest 'heretical' phenomenon' that did not fit the humoralist paradigm 'was delayed-type (or tuberculin-type) hypersensitivity' (Nagy, 2014, 44). It would take another thirty years before a range of such heretical phenomena – including, next to delayed hypersensitivity, skin-graft rejection, autoallergic diseases and immunological tolerance – began to make sense to biologists who recognised the full, systemic complexity of the human immune response. As Arthur M. Silverstein puts it, 'The study of delayed hypersensitivity only attained respectability and became an appropriate topic for immunologic symposia and books in the early 1960s, in conjunction with a shift in immunology from a chemical to a more biological approach' (Silverstein, 2009, 39). And thus, we have returned from the setting of *Film* in 1929 to its production in the decade of the immunological revolution.

Film is a movie that explores the destructive, autoimmunitary logic of the self/nonself dichotomy that the immunological revolution succeeded in placing at the heart of immunology as Beckett was shooting his film. A final look at Beckett's naming of his film's key device suggests that he may have indeed opened up his film to such an immunological reading. The 'angle' in 'angle of immunity' may refer to more than the 45-degree angle that the camera must not exceed. The earliest meaning of 'angle' recorded in the *Oxford English Dictionary* is '[a] corner of a room or other enclosed space, esp. viewed internally or as a retreating space; a recess, a nook'. Interestingly, while this definition of 'angle' may appear to stress the

benign, perhaps even cosy nature of this space ('a retreating space; a recess, a nook'), most of the quotations given share an ominous note. To give but three examples:

a1475 (þ?a1430) J. Lydgate tr. G. Deguileville *Pilgrimage Life Man* (Vitell.) l. 15300 (MED) Lych a wolff..Shep in a folde for to strangle And to devoure hem in som Angle.

1509 Bp. J. Fisher *Wks.* (1876) 171 We be thraste downe into a very streyght angyll.

1843 H. W. Herbert *Marmaduke Wyvil* vii. 36. The..door..was placed in a dark angle of the room.

And so it is in Beckett's *Film*, where the angle of immunity that O retreats to is anything but a safe space. *Film*, then, is less the story of a chase than the story of a life driven into a corner by an excessive immunisation against both perception and community. In *Film*, Beckett explores the deleterious consequences of a vision of life that the immunological revolution of his time brought into being. As the literary scholar Johannes Türk puts it in his book *Die Immunität der Literatur*, it was in the 1960s that 'the contours of a new existential topology were emerging in immunology, one in which the human is no longer characterized by openness to the world but by selective closure and the possibility to resist participation' (Türk, 2011, 161; my translation). As a result, the human becomes what Türk calls *homo immunis* – a figure that, I have argued, Beckett's O already is.

Notes

- 1 Consider also Alice Gavin's reading of the title: 'It seems appropriate at this point to note Beckett's choice of title for his one and only foray into film – that of simply *Film*: *Film* in this sense is a manifestation of the nature of film itself; or, as Crichtley puts it, "Beckett is concerned with the *generic* nature of *Film*, or *Film* as giving character to the generic". *Film*, then, is a kind of perspective on the bare, pared-down being of the filmic medium itself' (Gavin, 2008, 80).
- 2 This corresponds to sense II.B in the *Trésor de la langue française informatisé*: 'Fait d'offrir une résistance morale à (toute atteinte)'.
- 3 Beckett's own account in an interview with Kevin Brownlow chimes with Karen's: 'One of the first things we did was to find the location – driving all over New York, looking for the wall – which we eventually found at the (Fulton Street) Fush [*sic*] Market – near Brooklyn Bridge. It was a building site – the wall was demolished shortly after that. The heat was terrible – while I was staggering in the humidity, Keaton was galloping up and down and doing whatever we asked of him. He had great endurance, he was very tough and, yes, reliable' (Brownlow, 1995, n.p.).

- 4 See Silverstein (2009, 33) and Cohen (2017, 31–2) for good brief accounts of the etymology of ‘immunity’.
- 5 Hugh Kenner’s *Samuel Beckett: A Critical Study* (1961), Ruby Cohn’s *Samuel Beckett: The Comic Gamut* (1962), Michael Robinson’s *The Long Sonata of the Dead: A Study of Samuel Beckett* (1969), and Andrew K. Kennedy’s *Samuel Beckett* (1989) are examples of widely read humanist readings of Beckett. Martin Esslin’s *The Theatre of the Absurd* (1961) also strongly shaped Beckett’s early, existentialist reception.
- 6 See Peter Boxall’s ‘Samuel Beckett: Towards a Political Reading’ (2002) and Christopher Devenney’s essay collection *Engagement and Indifference: Beckett and the Political* (2001) for political readings of Beckett’s work that place it in various Irish historical and political contexts. Another, recent and notable exception to the dearth of political readings of the writer is Emilie Morin’s *Beckett’s Political Imagination* (2017), which sets out ‘[t]o reinscribe Beckett’s career into its political milieu’ (2), tracing the influence on Beckett’s work of his association with various international political causes, from the Scottsboro Boys to the struggle against Apartheid. Note also a scattered group of major theorists and literary critics that have engaged with the political in Beckett’s oeuvre, most notably Terry Eagleton, Alain Badiou and Slavoj Žižek.
- 7 This adds a third meaning to Beckett’s famous labelling of the related medium of television as ‘the savage eye’. Elizabeth Klaver discusses the other two meanings: ‘It is unclear whether by this ambiguous remark he meant the probing camera eye that records the scene or the backlit screen of the television set that delivers the image. Both may be understood as “savage”: the camera as a focused, spindling gaze, and the screen as an uncompromising glare’ (Klaver, 2000, 324).
- 8 Michelle Jamieson provides a helpful paraphrase of Derrida’s overall argument: ‘Derrida’s reading of autoimmunity suggests that the nature of the self is to be betrayed – that identity is established through this founding transgression. In this sense, autoimmunity exemplifies the confounding of other-as-self as a necessary and inescapable condition of identity. From this viewpoint, the organism is as authentically and faithfully represented by its capacity for self-harm and misrecognition because this potential is what grounds identity in the first place’ (Jamieson, 2017, 13).
- 9 For good accounts of the ‘immunological revolution’, see Szentivanyi and Friedman (1994) and the first chapter of Nagy (2014). Arthur M. Silverstein’s magisterial *A History of Immunology* (2009) ends in the early 1960s, just at the beginning of the revolution.
- 10 Again in Burnet’s words, ‘Self-not-self recognition means simply that all those clones which would recognize (that is, produce antibody against) a self component have been eliminated in embryonic life. All the rest are retained’ (Burnet, 1959a, 59).
- 11 As Ed Cohen notes, it was Niels Jerne who won ‘the [1984] Nobel prize for characterizing immune response as a function of the “immune system”’ (Cohen, 2017, 34).

- 12 This is the subtitle of a major 1980s textbook in the field, Jan Klein's *Immunology: The Science of Self-Nonself Discrimination* (1982), which was issued with the same title in a second, revised edition in 1997. See Jamieson and Cohen for cultural critiques of this paradigm that rely on recent immunological research in Cohen's case and a forgotten immunological tradition in Jamieson's.
- 13 See Alfred I. Tauber's *The Immune Self: Theory or Metaphor?* (1997) for a superb account of Burnet's key role in establishing the self/nonself dichotomy.
- 14 Resistance to the very idea of autoimmunity can be traced back to the beginnings of immunology. First proposed in 1901, Paul Ehrlich formulated the concept of *horror autotoxicus*, which ruled out the very possibility of immunological reactions against the self: '[O]ne might be justified in speaking of a "horror autotoxicus" of the organism. These contrivances are naturally of the highest importance for the existence of the individual. During the individual's life, even under physiological though especially under pathological conditions, the absorption of all material of its own body can and must occur very frequently. The formation of tissue autotoxins would therefore constitute a danger threatening the organism more frequently and much more severely than all exogenous injuries' (Ehrlich, 1910, 82–3). See Silverstein (2009, 153–76), Jamieson (2017, 12–13), Cohen (2004, 29) and Nagy (2014, 12–13) for good accounts of the lasting influence of Ehrlich's doctrine.

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