DECORATING THE ABYSS: CRAFTING A

POST-HOLOCAUST ETHICS OF THE SELF

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ABSTRACT

Decorating the Abyss: Crafting a Post-Holocaust Ethics of the Self

After the collapse of Soviet communism and the ‘triumph’ of neoliberal capitalism, ideas including ‘the end of history’ proliferated, as did notions of the infinite malleability of identity in a post-modern world. But 9/11 and the wars that followed showed that not only was Frances Fukiyama’s thesis wrong but, paradoxically, so was the notion that after 9/11 everything had changed. Instead, we witnessed a return to arguments including ‘you’re either for us or against us’ and ‘they hate us for our freedoms’, from governments purporting to be spreading freedom and democracy while defending civilisation. These arguments were distributed throughout a media-scape where fundamentalist voices increased their furious diatribes, reminding us there was only one true way, one right and righteous path to redemption.

This thesis argues that these fundamentalisms emerge from the encounter of modern life with modernity and modernisation, posing what Anthony Giddens calls threats to ‘ontological security’. Consequently, citizens are interpellated by discourses that provide security and meaning in a world that can only offer the continual destabilisation of personal identity, stability and institutional refuge. The self becomes attached to universalising, totalising narratives that offer inclusion alongside exclusion, stability via a promised process of chaos and, above all, the sense of certainty and surety.

However, the Western European self has been here before: this thesis shows how such threats, arising from the crises in and failure of the European Enlightenment and imperial powers, abetted the rise of fascism and totalitarianism, literally laying the railway pavers for the train track to the death camps. An analysis of the defining features of pre-Holocaust German and French societies details the processes that excluded, exiled and ultimately led to the execution of the Jew—the language of this othering, its impact on social life, the abysmal response of institutions and academics and the distinct ways that French culture embraced anti-Semitism.

If such an analysis shows the danger of fixing the self in an identity explicitly linked to race, nationality and religion, it also provides us with an entry into the thesis’s core argument: that three writers, key participants in French intellectual and literary history, created works that dealt with these ‘fascisms of the self’. Albert Camus, Michel Foucault and Samuel Beckett crafted texts that, when used together, offer an answer to the fascisms that attempt to interpellate ‘we modern subjects’ through binary oppositions. Each of these writers makes possible a questioning the self and its discursive foundations, in the eventual hope of creating the situations that assist us in becoming someone other than ‘us’ or ‘them’.

Whilst critical work on Albert Camus and the Holocaust has focussed primarily on The Rebel and The Plague, here The Myth of Sisyphus is considered Camus’s work par excellence with regard to modernity and its crises. It is nihilism and the false prophets of its conquest that Camus targets. Anticipating Foucault by forty years, Camus’s work presents here an aestheticised ethical self, exemplified both in Camus’s work and life work. By viewing how Camus’s philosophical concept of the absurd and his later novel The Fall formed a relationship that spoke to each other as much to the surrounding social, ethical and intellectual currents, the thesis repositions Camus as an interpreter and interrogator of Nietzsche. He is therefore an unrecognized progenitor of the work of Michel Foucault on the ethics of the self.

Foucault’s ethical turn sought to challenge the ‘fascisms of the self’ that reside in every one of us. Foucault would take this distinctive turn, from an archaeology of knowledge towards subjectivity and governance, in the late 1970s, culminating in the final volumes of The History of Sexuality in 1984. This was a time when the French government, intellectuals
and the general populace were finally coming to terms with the extent of Vichy wartime collaboration and anti-Semitism. Foucault elucidated a genealogy of the modern confessional self. In the process, he revealed ways in which ancient Greek and Roman techniques of the self had formed an important part in the ethics of the self that influenced later Christian ideas and practices. By reviewing Foucault’s work as an intellectual as well as criticisms of his work and contemporary interpretations of it, this thesis shows how the Western self can work on itself, identifying its similarities with other selves as much as the possibilities of becoming other.

Samuel Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot* offers a final addition to the possibility of a post-Holocaust ethics of the self. The analysis shows how *Waiting for Godot* has been interpreted from a series of positions, including existential, psychoanalytical, post-structuralist and historicist, each in its own way offering a vision of Beckett’s vision. This thesis advocates a return to the actuality of the text and its role in interpellating the reader/audience. Consequently, we come to identify with and bear witness to the central characters and their suffering, an action that facilitates a questioning of one’s own attitude to the self and its isolation in the abyss. The play is shown to be important in terms of its theatrical and textual effect, its performance and its influence on works that similarly interrogate the role of the self in contemporary modernity.

‘Decorating the Abyss’ contributes originally to knowledge in two ways. First, it identifies the connections between the works of Camus, Foucault and Beckett against the French social, cultural and political milieu. Second, it uses these works to offer a unique method of analysing and crafting an ethics of the self. Rather than positioning the liberal individual in a battle against fundamentalisms, the thesis argues for a shifting of the self: a resistance to interpellations through constant self-questioning, an understanding of the genealogical connections of oneself to others and the bearing of witness in an age where the effects of modernity seek to cement identities while ignoring their contexts and contingencies.
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