

THE IRISHNESS OF SAMUEL BECKETT

MICHAEL SMITH
Trinity College, Dublin

Is it to say any more or less about Samuel Beckett to describe him as an Irish writer than one says by so describing James Joyce? For James Joyce was a Catholic by upbringing while Samuel Beckett was a Protestant; Joyce was a Parnellite nationalist while Beckett was reared in the West British milieu of south county Dublin. Although the formative influence of the Catholic Church and Parnellite nationalism has been thoroughly traced by Richard Ellmann and other Joyce scholars, Beckett's Protestant and West British background has been comparatively neglected. Hugh Kenner, for example, essentially says little more than that Beckett 'had come from an atypical Irish family - Protestant in a Catholic country, modestly affluent in a poor country'¹. The impression one receives from those Beckett scholars and commentators who even refer to Beckett's Irish background is that that background has little or no relevance to the work of the artist.

Of course, it is generally acknowledged that Beckett's work contains many allusions to Ireland, and even that his use of English registers the presence of Irish speech patterns; but little is made of this, as though Beckett's Irishness is really of no significance. Joyce's Irishness, on the other hand, is allowed major significance. Why should this be so? Is it, indeed, true that Beckett's Irishness is of little consequence, incapable of throwing any light on Beckett's writings? And in what, if anything, does Beckett's Irishness consist?

¹ Hugh Kenner, *A Reader's Guide to Samuel Beckett*, Thames & Hudson, London, 1973, p. 40.

This is no easy question to attempt to answer. It is fraught with dangers and misunderstandings. I recall that some years ago a distinguished Irish painter said to me in the course of a discussion on the Irish tradition, that I should not concern myself with Beckett as an *Irish* writer since he 'was not one of us'. What I knew he meant was that Beckett's upbringing was Protestant in religion and West British in politics and that therefore he was not truly Irish, that is to say, Catholic and nationalist (in any sense). I must confess that I was greatly surprised, for the painter was no fool, and I had always considered Beckett an Irish writer of international stature. The inescapable conclusion was that the painter and I had different notions of Irishness.

Irishness², not least for the Irish themselves, has long been a problematic quality. Leaving aside the largely mythic 'Celtic' factor, the explanation for this may be sought in the confused and confusing history of the country, in the country's centuries of subjection to English colonialism and English efforts at cultural, religious and even (arguably) physical genocide. Throughout all this, by and large, Irishness for the native Irish consisted essentially in being not-English: not being Protestant, not being English-speaking, not being (like the English in Ireland) possessed of economic power. Stated less negatively, it meant being Catholic, dispossessed, oppressed and socially and culturally inferior. While other European peoples evolved from tribalism to nationalism, the Irish were prevented from this development by the interference of English colonial influence. Then, relatively late in the day in the nineteenth century, the Irish undertook the formulation of their national identity in a process of cultural rearmament as part of an overall struggle to win political emancipation from England. The theoreticians of this nationalism (chiefly the Young Irelanders) dug deep into the rag-bag of the national past for the materials they needed. What they could not find, they did not scruple to invent or improvise according to the principle that the end justifies the means. The result was the other, preferable face of the odious English Janus: whereas the English were mean and cunning, the Irish were found to be generous and trusting; whereas the English were cold and calculating, the Irish were warm and impulsive; whereas the English were rational and commonsensical, the Irish were intuitive and imaginative; the English pragmatic and expedient, the Irish faithful and principled.

² *The Irish* by Sean O'Faolain, first published by Penguin Books in 1947, is still one of the best accounts of Irishness.

As these devised antinomies were expounded later, at the end of the last century, by the Gaelic League, the religious antinomy of Catholic and Protestant was deliberately suppressed. The Gaelic League described itself as non-sectarian. Douglas Hyde, one of its founders and its principal propagandist, was a Protestant. Religious difference, it was felt, was the greatest hindrance to Irish national unity, so the less said about it the better: a cultural Irishness could be formulated that could transcend the religious impediment. What was ignored, however, was that this religious barrier was also a social and cultural one for most Catholics and Protestants. The Protestantly reared Oscar Wilde, for example, could reply when asked about his religion, 'I have none. I am an Irish Protestant'. It was only exceptionally dedicated individuals like Hyde himself (who paradoxically pressed his non-sectarian Irishness with Protestant zeal) who could surmount the religious barrier. For the majority of the people, both Catholic and Protestant, Catholicism would always be an essential ingredient of Irish nationalism. The great Parnell himself had tried and failed to keep religion out of Irish nationalism. James Joyce you may remember, did not blame Parnell for that failure, but rather the bigoted Irish nationalism of which he fell foul.

What was Beckett's Irish social background?³ By the opening decades of the century, Beckett's social class of Anglo-Irish Protestants was a class in decline, though this was far from evident to many members of that class. In the countryside land was being lost to the rising Catholic bourgeoisie; in the towns, however, and particularly in Dublin, the Protestant middle class were continuing to hold on in professional and business life, in medicine, law, banking and at the higher levels of business proprietorship and management. By and large they were cushioned from the popular nationalism that had been given a new impetus, especially in the towns, by the executions of the leaders of the 1916 rebellion.

A few paragraphs from Deirdre Bair's unofficial biography provide a fairly accurate picture of the state of Beckett's immediate society at the time:

Each day Sam and Frank rode their bicycles to the Foxrock Station, where they boarded the Dublin and Southeastern Railway (dubbed by all the boys 'The Dublin Slow and Easy') into Harcourt Street Station. The Protestants of Dublin

³ See J. C. Mays, 'Young Beckett's Roots', *Irish University Review*, 1984, Vol. 14, No. 1, pp. 18-23; and Vivian Mercier, *Beckett/Beckett*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1977, pp. 20-45.

comprised the greater part of the population of the southern suburbs so that this train was filled with prosperous business and professional men on their way to work and their sons on their way to school. The riders of the Dublin Slow and Easy were proud of the saying that one could ride from the south end of the line into the heart of the city without having to speak to a Catholic except for the train conductors, who did not count. This is no doubt an exaggeration, but it gives some idea of the character of the community in which the Becketts were brought up. 'West Briton' was how most of their acquaintances described themselves, and it was always said with pride.

.....

The [Easter Rebellion of 1916] seems to have touched the Beckett family as something akin to an irritating wildcat strike. Less violently loyal to the crown than some of the Dublin Anglo-Irish, May and Bill looked to their neighbours or whatever newspapers found their way to Foxrock for information about events in Dublin. The fact that a Free State Was about to be created did not cause them to worry as much as some of their neighbours, who feared instant rebellion and insurrection from their Catholic cooks, gardeners and chambermaids, and a general disruption of their life-style. In fact, except for political changes in Dublin itself, very little was altered in the day-to-day existence of most Foxrock families⁴.

Now while it is true to say that there was little immediate change after 1916 in the day-to-day existence of the Protestant Anglo-Irish bourgeoisie, a process of major social change was in fact about to affect the country as a whole, and that class, like it or not, would inevitably be affected in due course. A new Ireland was about to emerge, a new Catholic bourgeois state was in process of being created, to the utter abhorrence of W. B. Yeats and other members of the Irish Revival Movement who had fondly hoped, instead, for an alliance of the Catholic peasantry and the remnants of the Protestant Anglo-Irish aristocracy.

The process by which the Catholic bourgeois state, which is the Ireland of today, came into existence, was a long and complicated one. It is even arguable, appearances to the contrary, that that process has not yet been concluded. Suffice it here to sum up the situation by saying that when Beckett reached adulthood in Dublin in the early 1930's, the Protestant Anglo-Irish hold on the higher levels of professional and business life was noticeably weakening and the new Catholic bourgeoisie was energetically and avidly claiming its inheritance. In this new situation, West Britonism would sooner or later be forced to go underground or abandoned, emigration to Protestant England would have to be considered, or for those who stayed, a coming to terms with a new national identity that eschewed loyalty to the British crown and held Protestantism to be, at best, a doubtfully Irish attribute (despite Wolfe Tone), at worst, intrinsically non-

⁴ Deirdre Bair, *Samuel Beckett, A Biography*, Jonathan Cape, London, 1978, pp. 26-27.

Irish. The key question facing those who stayed and who were aware of what was happening, was whether the new state could honourably accommodate them with their religious and cultural differences from the majority?.

It seems to me instructive at this point to take a brief look at the life of John Millington Synge⁵ whose options, if not decisions, as an Irishman, seem, in a remarkable way, to anticipate those of Samuel Beckett.

Synge was born into a Protestant Anglo-Irish family, grander than Beckett's, though somewhat diminished in its financial resources (and for that reason it was perhaps all the more acutely conscious of its elitist standing in Irish society). It was a strictly conventional family, intolerant of any deviations from the norms of its class. Synge's mother, like Beckett's, was a forcible personality, deeply religious or at least devout within the narrow evangelical scope of the Irish Protestantism of the time. As soon as he began to develop his own individuality, Synge found himself at loggerheads with his mother and the values she represented. The two main difficulties were his atheism (manifested at an early age) and his artistic tendencies and ambitions (he wanted to be a professional violinist). Well into adulthood, perhaps even to the end of his short life, these two deviations from the orthodoxy of his class were to be a constant source of friction between Synge and his family.

Yeats described Synge as a deeply serious and passionate man. The restraints imposed on him by his social background were a source of frustration to him throughout his life. In a sense, the whole tendency of Synge's life was in defiance of these restraints. After Trinity College, he went to Germany to study, and thence to Paris. Samuel Beckett did the same. Synge was a highly sophisticated man, well read in European literature. Having failed to become a professional musician, he turned to writing, hoping to make a career for himself in it.

It is often the function of bourgeois conventions to rationalize things until reality is reduced to the decorous and mechanical, and life becomes a kind of comfortable shell. Languishing inarticulately in Paris, viewed by his family as a failure and a disgrace to his class, Synge had the good fortune to encounter Yeats who perceptively realized that part of Synge's trouble was that he was socially displaced (Yeats had already discovered Irish nationalism and saw a role for himself in a new Ireland). Synge's creative

5 Edward Stephens, *My Uncle John*, Oxford University Press, 1974.

energies, Yeats saw, needed a society through which they could be expressed. That society, he guessed, could be the Aran Islands, and to there, with genius, Yeats directed Synge. And, indeed, on the Aran Islands Synge found the society that corresponded to his needs. It was the opposite to that in which he had been brought up: a society living in physical intimacy with nature.

Beyond these similarities between Synge and Beckett we need not go here (the role of dominant mothers in the lives of both writers, it seems to me, could be profitably explored). Thanks to Yeats, Synge discovered an Irishness that worked for him, that facilitated his development as a writer. That Irishness keeps Synge in the main Anglo-Irish literary tradition. A similar Irishness was not discovered by Beckett because the Ireland of the Thirties was different from the Ireland at the turn of the century, and, besides, as we shall see, Beckett's background on his father's side was different from Synge's. That distinction is between the French-Huguenot stock (Becquet) from which Beckett's father came, and the Anglo-Irish proper, so to speak, which was Synge's stock. Beckett's father prospered from being an ethnic (French) poor Protestant to well-to-do merchant status by hard work, cunning and adaptability among the natives, not by class or religious privilege (Balzac has the prototype for this). Beckett's mother, however, was properly Anglo-Irish and exerted the dominant influence in the home (to Beckett's discomfort, let it be said). Being Irish for Beckett posed some difficulties which were not easy of resolution, and his having to cope with these difficulties is a factor of some importance in his development as a writer.

It has for many years been a matter of some curiosity for me that a number of Irish writers who were from a Catholic background became associated with Beckett. Three of these writers were Thomas MacGreevy, Denis Devlin and Brian Coffey. Although MacGreevy eventually became an establishment figure as Director of the National Gallery, and Denis Devlin became a professional diplomat in the service of the Irish government, MacGreevy's route to that position was long and tortuous, and Denis Devlin once confided to his friend, the Irish novelist Mervyn Wall, that 'the only good thing about the Diplomatic Corps is that it enables you to get out of Ireland'; as for Brian Coffey, he has lived outside Ireland to the present day. Displacement in Ireland during the Thirties was the common lot of all four writers.

When Beckett went to Paris in 1928 it was Thomas MacGreevy who acted as his mentor and introduced him to James Joyce and the Joyce circle. Yet, as Deirdre Bair has noted, 'Beckett's first response upon meeting MacGreevy was to retreat behind the barrier of Foxrock behaviour his Anglo-Irish upbringing had instilled and to adopt the natural reticence normally shown towards Irish Catholics. But MacGreevy would have none of this: they were both *Irishmen* - in all that the word implied now that independence was an established political fact.' What the word implied at the time is not at all clear to me, nor could it have been to Mrs Bair when she wrote that. MacGreevy, being Catholic and nationalist, may have felt sure he knew what it was to be an Irishman, but Beckett at the time could not have been so certain. In *That Time* Beckett looked back and recalled:

when you started not knowing who you were from Adam trying how that would work for a change not knowing who you were from Adam no notion who it was saying what you were saying whose skull you were clapped up in whose moan had you the way you were was that the time or was that another time there alone with the portraits of the dead black with dirt and antiquity and the dates on the frames in case you might get the century wrong not believing it could be till they put you out in the rain at closing-time⁶.

Regarding Beckett's relationship with Joyce, Mrs Bair speculates that

Besides Beckett's intelligence and wit, one of the reasons Joyce was so eager to establish him in the role of amanuensis was the snobbish pleasure it gave. All the other young Irishmen who helped him were, like himself, Catholics educated at University College, lower middle class, strangers to the world of tennis parties, men's clubs, Trinity Week and the Horse Show. Their families seldom spoke to a Protestant, let alone entertained one. Joyce had been shabbily poor for most of his life, ashamed of his own socially impoverished background at the same time as he was fiercely proud of it⁷.

Yet, for all that, it was through the Catholic MacGreevy and the ex-Catholic Joyce that Beckett in Paris found Irishness acceptable or at least non-problematic. In the context of bohemian, cosmopolitan Paris, the very fact of coming from Ireland was enough to confer Irishness. Brian Coffey recalled being with Beckett in Paris: 'When we used to meet in Paris, Beckett and I ate always in an Italian restaurant which was to be found not far from the Boulevard St. Michel, opposite a Hachette's bookshop which stood on the site of the Eglise St. Benoit-le-bien-tourné so well known to François Villon. We could always order

6 Samuel Beckett, *That Time*, Faber & Faber, London, 19, p. 12.

7 Bair, p. 70.

the same kind of meal: plain omelette with spinach, and a glass of pale rose wine. And so we could drink our wine, far from Ireland, with the Irish flag on our plates⁸. But to be Irish in Paris in the company of MacGreevy and Joyce and Coffey, was not the same thing as being Irish back in Dublin. Mervyn Wall in an interview with me in 1970 described the Dublin to which Beckett returned in 1930 after his two years in Paris:

In Ireland at the time there was the inevitable reaction to the heroism and high sentiments of the War of Independence period. One saw patriots become placehunters... We heard our greatest soldier say from an election platform that in all his battles he had never lost a single man. All the greater credit to him, of course, and to his companions who achieved so much with relatively such little effusion of blood, but the statement sounded comic opera all the same... We saw public figures laying ceremonial wreaths, in effect in honour of themselves, and listened to boastful freedom fighters than whom one slum-born Dublin Fusilier had more experience of warfare in one afternoon than the whole of them put together... There was the Censorship Act of 1927, not imposed from above, but by the will of the people... In the Thirties the last surviving nude was removed from the Dublin Municipal Gallery by Dublin Corporation with the agreement of the Arts Advisory Committee on the ground that it was 'somewhat indecent'... Obscurantism had settled on the country like a fog⁹...

From 1930 to 1937 Beckett spent a great deal of his time in Dublin where, from 1931 to 1932, he was employed as a Lecturer in French in Trinity College. This was a crucial period for Beckett. As well as the major difficulties of his relationship with his mother, Beckett found it extremely painful and depressing to be in Dublin. Years later he was to recall: 'I didn't like living in Ireland. You know the kind of thing - theocracy, censorship of books, that kind of thing. I preferred to live abroad'¹⁰. Here is how Deirdre Bair describes Beckett's response to being back in Dublin at the time:

It was as if, returning to Dublin after two years in Paris, Beckett saw his native land for the first time, and what he saw horrified him. Dublin was nationalistic in the extreme, and politics dominated almost every conversation, leading Beckett, in despair, to declare that if all the people who claimed to have been in the General Post Office during the uprising had really been there, the building would have burst at the seams. He deplored the insularity of Irish literature and was caustic in his ridicule of writers who wrote in Gaelic. Most of all he hated gossip, wherein fifty-year-old incidents were dredged up as if they had just occurred moments before, and where family feuds were remembered and recounted until they had lost all vestiges of reality¹¹.

8 Brian Coffey, *Threshold*, No. 17, Belfast, no date, p. 33.

9 *The Lace Curtain*, edited by Michael Smith, Dublin, 1971, p. 81.

10 Bair, p. 269.

11 Bair, pp. 115-116.

That Beckett was not alone in this alienation from the Dublin social scene is attested by my earlier quotation from Mervyn Wall. Beckett's alienation, however, was no doubt aggravated by his Protestant and Anglo-Irish upbringing. He always deplored politics, and by this time he had abandoned his Protestantism. Unlike Yeats and his 'indomitable Irishry', Beckett had eschewed his Anglo-Irishness after his two years in Paris. But in the bigoted and provincial Dublin of the time, being Protestant and Anglo-Irish in background was enough to create problems among the nationalist 'natives'. On top of all this, Beckett still had his problems with his mother.

The desperation of Beckett's plight and his dejected alienation during his Dublin period in the early Thirties is highlighted by an incident related by Mrs Bair. Beckett was present during a discussion on the work of a rising Irish realist painter. Effusive praise was being lavished on this artist. Beckett reached breaking-point and savagely remarked that the painter was 'a Veronicist who would wipe the face of Christ with a sanitary towel'¹² and then stormed out of the studio. The mainly Catholic group in the studio was horrified.

The culmination or, rather, the lowest point of Beckett's alienation from Ireland was reached in the notorious courtcase of 1937. A relative of Beckett (by marriage), Harry Sinclair, was suing St. John Gogarty for libel. Beckett had agreed to act as literary witness for Sinclair. In the course of the trial Beckett was publicly vilified. The following quotation from the *Irish Times*' report gives some idea of what took place: [The defence barrister, J. M. Fitzgerald, K.C., dismissing Beckett's testimony, stated that he]

would pass from Mr. Beckett, the 'bawd and blasphemer from Paris'. He might well have stayed in Paris, because they would like to know why, of all the respectable people he knew, Mr Sinclair should select that 'bawd and blasphemer' from Paris to make an affidavit in the case to lead to the belief that any ordinary reasonable man reading the book would have identified Mr Sinclair. Could they imagine 'that wretched creature' making representation to the High Court as an ordinary reasonable man?¹³

The clever barrister Fitzgerald was deliberately exploiting the pervasive prejudices of the Catholic nationalism of the time. For his part, Beckett seemingly perversely did little to help things by being so condescendingly aloof. One may be permitted to wonder if Beckett might not have been consciously endeavouring to irritate his mother and her genteel circle.

¹² Bair, p. 116.

¹³ Bair, p. 268.

When Beckett left Ireland in 1937, it was effectively for good.

perhaps fear of ejection having clearly no warrant in the place to say nothing of the loathsome appearance so this look round for once at your fellow bastards thanking God for once bad and all as you were you were not as they till it dawned that for all the loathing you were getting you might as well not have been there at all the eyes passing over you and through you like so much thin air was that the time or was that another time another place another time¹⁴.

Although he continued to visit Ireland until the death of his mother in 1950, these visits were really a matter of often distressing familial duty. Yet, Beckett was not finished with Irishness, whatever about being finished with Ireland. The Protestant and Anglo-Irish Beckett was as marked, some might say, as scarred, by his Irishness as any 'native' Catholic. Like Joyce before him, Beckett escaped from Ireland into exile, and that exile has been no less painful for him, it seems, than it was for James Joyce.

The question of nationality constitutes an especial problem for the Irish writer in English. Joyce focussed that problem in what is sometimes referred to as the 'tundish passage' of *The Portrait*. In that passage, the Irish Stephen Dedalus is debating aesthetics with the English Dean of Studies. Stephen uses the word 'tundish' to describe a funnel. It is a word new to the Dean who tries it out with satisfaction. Stephen's response is described by Joyce as follows:

The little word seemed to have turned a rapier point of his sensitiveness against his courteous and vigilant foe. He felt with a smart of dejection that the man to whom he was speaking was a countryman of Ben Jonson. he thought:

—The language in which we are speaking is his before it is mine. How different are the words *home, Christ, ale, master*, on his lips and on mine! I cannot speak or write these words without unrest of spirit. His language, so familiar and so foreign, will always be for me an acquired speech, I have not made or accepted its words. My voice holds them at bay. My soul frets in the shadow of his language¹⁵.

In an essay by the great Argentinian storyteller, Jorge Luis Borges, there is intriguing corroboration of Stephen Dedalus' reflection on Irishness. The Borges' essay is entitled 'The Argentinian Writer and Tradition'. It sets out, you may recall, to answer the question of what it means to be an Argentinian writer. It has always struck me as ironical that the usually perceptive Borges does not remark anywhere in the essay that the very nature of

14 Samuel Beckett, *That Time*, p. 15.

15 *The Essential James Joyce*, edited by Harry Levin, Jonathan Cape, London, 1956, pp. 316-317.

his enterprise declares something Argentinian. One could not easily imagine a French writer, Gide, for example, undertaking such an enterprise, if only for the reason that Gide as a Frenchman had no problems with national identity: Gide could presume his Frenchness. In this regard, Borges is not unlike the American poet, William Carlos Williams. Throughout his long life Williams was obsessed with Americanness and yet he never seemed to notice that it was the very nature of his obsession, his need to demonstrate his Americanness, that perhaps most characterized him as an American.

In the case of the Irish [Borges writes], we have no reason to suppose that the profusion of Irish names in British literature and philosophy is due to any racial pre-eminence, for many of those illustrious Irishmen (Shaw, Berkeley, Swift) were the descendants of Englishmen, were people who had no Celtic blood; however, it was sufficient for them to feel Irish, to feel different, in order to be innovators in English culture¹⁶.

This difference shows itself most acutely in the matter of language. For instance, there is no standardized Irish accent in the way that there is a standardized English (BBC) accent. Instead, there is a great profusion of different accents some of which are so different from one another that the people of one region have trouble understanding those of another. Furthermore, all Irish people who do not anglicize their accent, will be considered by English people to have a brogue, that is to say, to have an accent that marks them out as Irish. This holds true for Yeats, Shaw and indeed Beckett. Recordings of their voices surprise even the Irish themselves because they are so distinctly Irish.

Although for the Irish, religion was a major difference from the English, the English language itself was also a major demarcation. In Ireland the English language was promoted officially as an instrument of colonization. Thus compelled by economic necessity to learn English, the Irish masses were bound to have an ambivalent attitude towards it. In consequence, the Irish have tended not so much to speak English as a straightforward means of communication, as in normal usage, as to *manage* the language, to manipulate it consciously to create, by a kind of linguistic simulation and dissimulation, desired impressions. Out of all this manipulation of language, the Irish created a profusion of characteristic linguistic forms.

¹⁶ Jorge Luis Borges, *Labyrinths*, edited by Donald A. Yates and James E. Irby, Penguin Books, England, 1971, p. 218.

No one really knows why Beckett decided to write in French. Hugh Kenner has reported Beckett as saying 'I just felt like it. It was a different experience from writing in English'¹⁷. Beckett's friend, Brian Coffey, has written that 'It was, as I believe, when he did not find an English publisher for *Watt* that he finally accepted the necessity of writing in French'¹⁸. Others have speculated on Beckett's need to escape from the prolixity of Hiberno-English. Mindful of Conrad as another major writer who wrote creatively in a language not his from the cradle, one may be permitted to wonder if Beckett, like Conrad, was not also escaping from a problematic nationality.

Before proceeding further, it would perhaps be useful to sum up now what, so far, I take to be Beckett's Irishness. It is neither the nationalist Irishness of republican ideologies nor a concept of Irishness which seems to prevail among the Protestant Unionists of Northern Ireland, that is to say, an Irishness that is not exclusive of Britishness. It is an Irishness that has, at its core, alienation from what is established, a deviation or dissent from the status quo; it is an attitude of defiant scepticism towards imposed order and authority, even towards language; it is individualist to the point of anti-socialness; it borders on anarchy.

I readily admit that all this may seem arbitrary and even fanciful. It is my contention, however, that such a concept of Irishness is historically derivable and has been historically active in Irish society for a very long time. Its specific ideological forms have varied from time to time. It has taken the form of anti-Englishness and anti-Protestantism and anti-clericalism. Oddly enough, it has even taken the form of anti-Irish-nationalism.

Needless to say, such Irishness, or, more cautiously phrased, such *an* Irishness, has not always been the option of a majority of the Irish people; for that would have been contradictory. It has been such, nonetheless, when there was the need to resist the dominance of the English and Protestant presence; in that context, it was not conformist, since power was overwhelmingly in the hands of 'the enemy'.

The absurdity of Beckett's world has been traced by academic scholars to Cartesianism and its offshoot, Occasionalism. Hugh Kenner, for instance, has justifiably made much of Arnold Geulincx's theory of congruence to throw light on Beckett's profoundly disturbing incongruence. I am not in disagreement

17 Hugh Kenner, *Samuel Beckett*, University of California Press, 1968, p. 24.

18 Brian Coffey, *Threshold*, p. 35.

with these scholarly endeavours. Beckett is an extremely difficult writer to interpret and all help is welcome to the struggling commentator. What I am proposing, rather, is to add, from the peculiarly Irish resources I have been describing, a small modicum of my own to the Beckettian critical store. It is my thesis, if I may be so bold as to put it that way, that the absurdity of Beckett's world and the alienation of his characters are intimately connected with, have their fictional concretization, in what I have been referring to as Beckett's Irishness.

James Joyce rebelled against the nationalist Ireland of the Gaelic League. Beckett rebelled against the nationalist, Catholic, post-Treaty Ireland of the late Twenties and Thirties; and he rebelled at the same time against his own Anglo-Irish Protestant class. In the character of Leopold Bloom, Joyce created an alternative Irishness more acceptable to himself; but while Bloom is different from the Citizen and many of the other 'more Irish' characters of *Ulysses*, he still fits, in his own odd way, into the Dublin society in which Joyce locates him. By contrast, Beckett's Belacqua, Murphy, Watt, Malone or Molloy, are thoroughly alienated from society which impinges on their consciousness only as a set of contingent problems. As I shall try to show later, Beckett's settings are generally Irish in source, but the worlds of his characters are acknowledged by Beckett to be mediated by their consciousness, and thereby grotesquely distorted. It is in *that* that Beckett's characters can be said to have an Irish dimension - in their alienation from the Irish social reality, both Catholic and Protestant, in which Beckett grew up. 'I am', Beckett says somewhere in *Texts for Nothing*, 'because I am not as other men'.

Let us take a look at Beckett's first anti-hero, the indomitable Belacqua. Throughout the stories of *More Pricks Than Kicks*¹⁹, Belacqua winds his way indefatigably through the streets of Dublin, not registering the ordinary mundane humanity that so absorbed that other great Dublin peripatetic, Leopold Bloom, but rather a society that is grotesque, distorted by Belacqua's own alienated consciousness. In the first and most famous story, 'Dante and the Lobster', the grocer who serves Belacqua his Gongonzola, the fishmonger who supplies the 'lepping' lobster, the Italian teacher, Signorina Adriana Ottolenghi, the French instructress, Mlle Glain, and Belacqua's aunt, are all more or less

¹⁹ Samuel Beckett, *More Pricks Than Kicks*, Calder & Boyars, London, 1970 (1st ed. 1934).

grotesque; so, too, Winnie in 'Fingal', Mr and Mrs Tough and their daughter Ruby in 'Love and Lethe', Mr and Mrs Otto Olaf bboogs and their daughter Thelma in 'What a Misfortune', to mention a few others. They are all grotesque. But of all the stories in *More Pricks Than Kciks*, it is 'A Wet Night' that is most revealing of Beckett's attitude towards Dublin society of the Thirties and his alienation from it.

At the beginning of the story, Belacqua is in College Green beside Trinity College. He looks across the street and sees 'beneath the arcade, the blind paralytic... in position... well tucked up in his coverings,... lashing into his dinner like an proletarian. Soon his man would come and wheel him home. No one had ever seen him come or go, he was there one minute and gone next. He went and returned'. Belacqua ponders what to do next, where to go. 'To what licensed premises?. To where the porter was well up, first; and the solitary shawly like a cloud of latter rain in a waste of poets and politicians, second; and he neither know nor was known, third'. Belacqua sets off for a pub in Lincoln Place having mentally rejected another because it was 'a home from home for jarveys' and Belacqua 'shrank from jarveys'.

He makes his way to the Alba, his 'current one and only'. They are to attend a salon at the house of one Frica who is described as follows:

Behold the Frica, she visits talent in the Service Flats. In she lands, singing Havelock Ellis in a deep voice, frank itching to work that which is not seemly. Open upon her concave breasts as on a lectern lies Portgliotti's Penombre Claus-trali, bound in tawed caul... A septic pudding hoodwinks her, a stodgy turban of pain it laps her horse face. The eyehole is clogged with the bulbous, the round globe goggles exposed²⁰.

After many more pages devoted to the human circus, Belacqua finally makes his exit from Casa Frica, and here Beckett parodies Joyce's 'The Dead':

...the wind dropped, as it so often does in Dublin when all the respectable men and women whom it delights to annoy have gone to bed, and the rain fell in a uniform untroubled manner. It fell upon the bay, the littoral, the mountains and the plains, and notably upon the Central Bog it fell with a rather desolate uniformity²¹.

At the end of this horror story, Belacqua finds himself alone in the early hours of the morning, doubled up with pain on the

²⁰ Samuel Beckett, *ibid.*, 56.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 87.

pavement (his pain, needless to remark, is more than physical in origin):

What was that? He shook off his glasses and stooped his head to see. That was his hands. Now who would have thought that? He began to try would they work, clenching them and unclenching, keeping them moving for the wonder of his weak eyes. Finally he opened them in unison, finger by finger together, till there they were, wide open, face upward, rancid, an inch from his squint, which however slowly righted itself as he began to lose interest in them as a spectacle. Scarcely had he made to empty them on his face than a voice, slightly more in sorrow than in anger this time, enjoined him to move on, which, the pain being so much better, he was only too happy to do²².

And indeed Beckett did move on. But Murphy in London shares a great deal with Belacqua in Dublin; and Watt, Malone, Molloy, Moran, Krapp and the other Beckettian protagonists also have a great deal in common with Belacqua. It seems to me that Beckett's alienation from society persists as he goes it mercilessly with his savage humour. The social world of his fiction, never substantially present, diminishes as his narrators shrink in horror into the shell of their solipsism, into the womb of their memories, emerging only from time to time to remind themselves of the awful shambles from which they are, if only temporarily, in flight. Murphy in his rocking chair rocks himself into a state of transcendent reverie. Molloy, Malone, Moran and Krapp hypnotize themselves with their unending stories and games, burrowing away into the depths of memory, hoping to find, and it will only be by chance, can only be by chance, that involuntary memory, the Proustian miracle, that revivifies the real from the death of habit.

It is worthwhile, however, to dwell a little on the difference between Belacqua's world of freaks, which is recognizably Dublin, and the worlds of Murphy and Watt, to take the two succeeding Beckettian protagonists. For, Belacqua's alienation is from a society recognizably Irish, while that of Murphy and Watt has become more generalized. Murphy's London, for instance, despite the naming of its streets, is not a socialized city; it does not constitute a society. Here is the opening of *Murphy*, placing the 'seedy solipsist' in his London setting:

The sun shone, having no alternative, on the nothing new. Murphy sat out of it, as though he were free, in a mew in West Brompton. Here for what might have been six months he had eaten, drunk, slept, and put his clothes on and off, in a medium-sized cage of north-western aspect commanding an unbroken view of

22 Ibid., 88.

medium-sized cages of south-eastern aspect. Soon he would have to make other arrangements, for the mew had been condemned. Soon he would have to buckle to and start eating, drinking, sleepin and putting his clothes on and off, in quite alien surroundings²³.

Murphy has withdrawn in self-defence not only from the society of Belacqua's Dublin, but from human society in general. Of course, only as best he could; for like most mortals, he, too, is subject to 'the pangs of hopeless sexual inclination'. The world of Murphy is peopled not by London characters but rather by the dehumanized fall-out of Belacqua's Dublin - Neary, Wylie, Mr Kelly, Miss Counihan, Ticklepenny, etc.

As a matter of some personal interest, I would like to dwell a little on the character of Ticklepenny. This character has been identified as the late, distinguished Irish poet Austin Clarke. You may recall Murphy's response on meeting Ticklepenny: "Didn't I have the dishonour once in Dublin". He is described by Beckett as 'a distinguished indigent drunken Irish bard'. In 1970, when I was in communication with Austin Clarke, my curiosity prompted me to ask him quite frankly what he made of this portrayal of himself in Beckett's novel. He wrote back to me:

Re *Murphy*: I never heard about a five pound note. It sounds mysterious. Am I supposed to have pinched it? Oliver Gogarty came out to tell me that there was an obvious reference to me in the book and wanted me to take a libel action, but I declined. I have never read the book so I have only a vague memory that I was supposed to be mentally deficient. The reason for the attack, I think, was this. Beckett had reviewed a book of poems by some friend of his in superlative terms in the *Dublin Magazine*, and Seamus O'Sullivan asked my advice about printing it. I suggested that he ask Beckett to include some quotations so that the reader could judge for himself. S.O.S. mentioned this to Beckett and, as far as I know, the review never appeared.

PS I don't know the date of *Murphy*, but some time in the late Thirties, I met Beckett at a party and he was quite friendly and drove me home. On the way I mentioned the literary crowd here and he said he had no time for Dublin coteries. As he belonged to the Joyce coterie, I thought this rather much. However, as he was giving me a lift, I made no comment²⁴.

Austin Clarke was a dedicated and quite definitely not notoriously alcoholic Irish poet. Beckett's Ticklepenny has little in common with the real man. But Beckett's alienation from the Dublin scene of the Thirties was so wide-sweeping that it was careless. Even the innocent Clarke was included because he loosely represented things nationalist, things distinctly Irish.

23 Samuel Beckett, *Murphy*, Calder & Boyars, London, 1969, p. 5.

24 Letter to Michael Smith.

And here is the occasion of Neary's encounter with his past pupil Wylie; the location, the holiest of places to all Irish nationalists, the General Post Office:

In Dublin a week later, that would be September 19th, Neary minus his whiskers was recognized by a former pupil called Wylie, in the General Post Office, contemplating from behind the statue of Cuchulain. Neary had bared his head, as though the holy ground meant something to him. Suddenly he flung aside his hat, sprang forward, seized the dying hero by the thighs and began to dash his head against his buttocks, such as they are²⁵.

Beckett would never forget the Irish world of his childhood, youth and early adulthood. It surfaces again and again throughout most of his works, both in fiction and in drama. But the world rejected by Beckett's protagonists progressively loses its recognizably Irish externalities. Here, for example, is Watt toying with the external world, in this instance the changing glow of ashes in a grate, playing 'an innocent game, to while away the time':

Here then was something again that Watt would never know, for want of paying due attention to what was going on about him. Not that it was a knowledge that could be of any help to Watt, or any hurt, or cause him any pleasure, or cause him any pain, for it was not. But he found it strange to think, of these little changes, of scene, the little gains, the little losses, the thing brought, the thing removed, the light given, the light taken, and all the vain offerings to the hour, strange to think of all these little things that cluster round the comings, and the stayings, and the goings, that he would know nothing of them, nothing of what they had been, as long as he lived, nothing of when they came, of how they came, and how it was then, compared with before, nothing of how long they stayed, and what difference that made, nothing of when they went, of how they went, and how it was then, compared with before, before they came, before they went²⁶.

If the world is unknowable, it matters little whether it is Irish or not. Beckett's Irish world, however, can and does continue to be a source of material for games of the mind.

It has been no part of my intention throughout this paper to claim that a knowledge of Beckett's Irishness, whatever it may be, is in any way essential to one's appreciation of him as a writer. Beckett, as the phrase has it, belongs to the world; or, as the adage has it, 'Clothes do not make the man'. 'Irishness', Beckett's friend, the poet Brian Coffey, recently wrote to me, 'belongs to the set of temporally signed terms which state nothing essential but only the casual. I imagine that Beckett himself would probably agree with that comment. No one should go looking for leprechauns, of any colour, in the work of Samuel Beckett. They are simply not there.

25 Samuel Beckett, *Murphy*, p. 33.

26 Samuel Beckett, *Watt*, John Calder, London, 1976, p. 36.

It has been my argument, however, that Beckett's alienation is derivable from the circumstances of his Irish background, in much the same sense that Borges' uneasy relationship with Argentinian nationalists is derivable from his Anglo-Argentinian background and his adolescent sojourn in Europe. But in the sphere of art, the understanding of origins does not of itself lead to the appreciation of achievement. Beckett's alienation, it may well be, has as much to do with his inability to resolve the Cartesian mind/matter dichotomy as to his inability in the past to find a decent place for himself in the country and the city he grew up in. Beckett's Cartesianism, however, has already been well explored; his Irishness, less so.

While not essential, Beckett's Irish background is important not only because it throws light on the alienation of the Beckettian characters, but also because the world from which these try to withdraw is Irish in its substance. And the process itself of alienation is conveyed in the manner in which Beckett strips away the Irishness of his material to reach what is basic or elemental, non-localized: Dublin becomes the world; the Dubliner, the human condition²⁷.

This latter point I consider of some importance. A couple of quotations from *That Time* will illustrate what I mean. The first evokes the General Post Office in central Dublin:

always winter then endless winter year after year as if it couldn't end the old year never end like time could go no further that time in the Post Office all bustle Christmas bustle in off the street when no one was looking out of the cold and rain pushed open the doorlike anyone else and straight for the table neither right nor left with all the forms and the pens on their chains sat down first vacant seat and were taking a look round for a change before drowsing away²⁸.

This refuge is temporary. The voice of C goes on to describe the alienation it feels, and that alienation, while having an Irish setting, extends and becomes generalized, so that finally it is humanity itself from which C withdraws, not merely the people in the General Post Office.

The other quotation finds C recalling a visit to the Library:

Not a sound only the old breath and the leaves turning and then suddenly this dust whole place suddenly full of dust when you opened your eyes from floor to ceiling nothing only dust and not a sound only what was it said come and gone

27 'The Deterioration of Outside Reality in Samuel Beckett's Fiction' in *Yeats, Joyce & Beckett, New Light on Three Modern Irish Writers*, eds. Kathleen McGrory and John Unterrecker, Bucknell Univ. Press, Lewisburg, USA, 1976, p. 168.

28 Samuel Beckett, *That Time*, p. 14.

was that it something like that come and gone come and gone no one come and gone in no time gone in no time²⁹.

I could hardly finish speaking about the Irishness of Samuel Beckett without saying at least something about Jonathan Swift, Beckett's great compatriot. There is a lot of Swift in Beckett as Vivian Mercier, Hugh Kenner and others have noted; above all, the *saeva indignatio* at the human condition. Yet the source and implications of that indignation have not been so well noted. I am referring to the sense that human existence is absurdly worse than it should be, that human beings deserve better than their allotted fate. Without that feeling, never explicitly expressed in Beckett, or in Swift for that matter, yet unquestionably deducible, the ruthless nihilism would be merely depressing. It is there, however, as it is in Swift's savage 'Modest Proposal': a compassion, even a love, that clings to the black humour, like gout of blood on a knife-blade, that gives the humour its human resonance, its Lear-like quality. Has that anything to do with Irishness?. Essentially not, I think. Yet in a sense, Beckett's refusal to become acceptably Irish to his fellow countrymen, saw him through to a more profound vision of human life.

I would like to conclude by giving the last words to Beckett's friend and my own, the Irish poet Brian Coffey. Brian Coffey and Beckett had met again after years, in London, in the Seventies:

We were on a bridge, lake waters each side. A mother was placing bread crumbs on her about-five-year old daughter's head, above which the birds, gulls and pigeons planed and hovered. The child was awaiting the alighting of airborne feet, webbed or scratching, the small face an expectation and a concern. I heard Sam exclaim: 'Look, Brian, look!'. And I looked to see the scarred, wrecked and still beautiful features declaring his delight, his happiness at another like human sharing the feelings that had been his own much more than fifty years ago. *Ever the same anew*. The real Beckett... who has discovered compassion and loving in the night of agony, in the man-made midden of malice³⁰.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank my friends, Brian Coffey, Niall Montgomery, Fr. Luis Huerga, CM, James Hogan, Trevor Joyce and Patricia Coghlan, for their help with clarifying some of my ideas concerning Beckett's Irishness. Needless to say, they are not to be held in any way responsible for the views expressed in this paper. I would also like to thank my wife Irene whose many helpful discussions contributed a good deal to whatever merit the paper has.

29 *Ibid.*, p. 16.

30 *Write-In*, ed. by David Benedictus, Southampton, England, p. 5.

