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Groves of Blarney: Beckett's Academic Reception in Ireland

'We have come all the way from Cork,' said Neary, 'we have torn ourselves away from the groves of Blarney, for the sole purpose of cajoling him in private.'

'We are his very dear friends,' said Miss Couniham, 'and our news is good, what is more.'

'Mr Murphy,' said Wylie, 'the ruins of the ruins of the broth of a boy.'

(Beckett 1973: 126)

The scornful attitudes to Irish cultural nationalism evident in Beckett's novel are well known. Neary causes a public scene through beating his head against the statue of Cuchulain, the Irish mythic hero, erected in the General Post Office. Murphy's will dictates that his ashes are to be flushed down the lavatory of the Abbey theatre, preferably during a performance, an indication, perhaps, of the author's attitudes to that signal institution of the Irish Revival. Murphy's posthumous intentions are thwarted. The bunch of Irish eccentrics who search him out in London do catch up with him, albeit after his death. But the hapless Cooper entrusted with carrying out his last will and testament gives in to the temptations of a nearby pub. Murphy's ashes end up scattered and "swept away with the sand, the beer, the butts, the glass, the matches, the spits, the vomit" (Beckett 1973: 154).

Beckett was often sceptical of nationalist agendas and the erection of national literary traditions. On the other hand one could argue that, like Murphy, his posthumous return to Ireland is, in academic circles at any rate, incomplete. Outside academic Irish studies, he has enjoyed many

revivals in Dublin's Gate Theatre. There were many commemorations of his centenary in Ireland during 2006. But, unlike these popular reclamations, the academic treatment of Beckett in Ireland has often been hesitant and unsteady. This essay strives to identify and account for some notable silences and caesurae. The concern here is with the treatment and often non-treatment of Samuel Beckett by academic Irish studies. It is an assessment of critical trends – a metacritical study – and is only indirectly concerned with how Ireland figures in Beckett's work itself or with Beckett's own attitude to his native land. Nor is it concerned with looking at non-academic representations of Beckett in Ireland. An assessment of Beckett's impact on Irish culture would include the success of *Waiting for Godot* at the Pike Theatre in 1956 or explore the rich relationship between Beckett and the Gate Theatre.¹ But the concern in this essay is mainly with academic and intellectual currents, not with theatrical history or more general issues of reception. Examining this sphere reveals not just prevailing assumptions about Beckett but also exposes some of the habitual grooves around which Irish studies runs. Habits of thought which, perhaps, would benefit from interrogation and overhauling.

I

While there have been lots of intersections between Beckett studies (as a specialization within English and French literature) and many of the other vogues and movements in literary studies of the last thirty years, there has been surprisingly little overlap with Irish studies. The two fields have tended to move tentatively around each other. There are some obvious reasons for the wide berth. For a start, Beckett moved to Paris, switched to writing in French and his remarks on Irish culture and society, such as they are, are often unflattering. "We now feed our pigs on sugarbeet pulp", he remarks in his scarifying essay on Irish censorship, "It is all the same to them" (Beckett 1983: 88). This essay was written in 1935. In 1939, shortly after the outbreak of the Second World War, Beckett

¹ *Waiting for Godot* enjoyed the longest continuous run of any play in Irish history up to that point. Belying "the image of Ireland in the 1950s as an intellectually timid cultural wasteland", it was, in the words of Chris Morash, "that oxymoronic beast, a mainstream avant-garde" (Morash 2002: 206, 208). See also Alan Simpson, *Beckett and Behan and a Theatre in Dublin* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1962).

sought to make his way from Dublin to Paris, declaring his preference for France at war to Ireland at peace.

Furthermore, Beckett scholars often have misgivings about a coercive or reductive squeezing of the metropolitan writer into a straitened national tradition, not least, they insist, because he himself always spurned nationalist categories. Considering treatments of Beckett in relation to his Irishness, his bibliographers warn of “the very real dangers of a simplistic and reductionist approach to a complex question” (Murphy *et al.* 1994: 62). Though a lover of the drama of Synge (who he later acknowledged as his greatest theatrical influence) and the poetry of W.B. Yeats, Beckett was, as already seen, hostile to the idea of a national literature such as that aimed at by Dublin’s Abbey theatre or by the Irish literary revival generally. Beckett often dismisses the particular and the national as distractions from art’s eternal and universal mission. In his 1934 essay “Recent Irish Poetry”, he scorned those poets too concerned with Irish mythology, such as Austin Clarke, immortally recreated as the “pot poet” Austin Ticklepenny in *Murphy*. In another review of a book by his close friend Thomas MacGreevy, Beckett upbraids the more nationalist MacGreevy for over-emphasising the Irish element in Jack B. Yeats’s painting, arguing that the greatness of a painter is not to be sought in his treatment of “the local accident, the local substance”, but rather in the “issueless predicament of existence” (Beckett 1983: 97). In a letter he writes to MacGreevy in December 1938, he apologises for his own “chronic inability to understand as member of a proposition a phrase like ‘the Irish people.’” Though, he tellingly ends the letter with a piquant piece of Hiberno-English, “God love thee Tom, and don’t be minding me. I can’t think of Ireland the way you do. Ever Sam.”²

These remarks scorning of the local and the provincial are in one respect, a common modernist disdain for history and politics. They have also, importantly, fuelled the critical tendency to see Beckett in universal and transcendental terms, to regard his work as primarily concerned with the human condition. There are abiding strains of Beckett criticism of all levels that align the deracination and non-specificity of Beckett’s settings with the universal, the timeless and, by implication, the profound and enduring. To emphasise his historical location, from this point of view, is to diminish his artistic achievement. There are deeply entrenched

² From a manuscript deposited at Trinity College Dublin (TCD MS 10402).

tendencies in Beckett studies that set the international and the national, the universal and the historical, in sclerotic opposition. The embrace of Beckett by deconstruction and postmodernist critics in the eighties, focussing on formal and linguistic questions, tended to leave some of the de-contextualised and humanist assumptions of the first generation of Beckett criticism undisturbed.

A thorough study of Irish aspects to Beckett would need to take account of three categories. First, actual monographs on the topic of Beckett's relationship to Ireland; second, essays or articles by Irish studies experts on Beckett (perhaps as part of a book solely devoted to Irish topics); third, essays or articles by Beckettians on the Irish dimension to his work (within a Beckett journal or as part of a book on Beckett). Of the three categories the third is the thinnest, though the other two are also surprisingly slight. Two accomplished books solely devoted to Beckett and Ireland might have drawn more academic attention to the area: John Harrington's *The Irish Beckett* (1991) and Eoin O'Brien's *The Beckett Country* (1986), the second a coffee-table book with photographs, published by a small Irish press. Beckett studies has only occasionally nodded at Beckett's Irish background and Irish studies, while making gestures towards Beckett as a leading European modernist of Irish provenance, has tended to handle him with as much brevity as reverence. He receives a mention or a nod in Irish studies surveys, but tends not to be given sustained treatment. While early critics, like Vivian Mercier, looked at this work from an Irish tradition, it has never really fitted that well into the accepted syllabi of Irish literature and, for many years, academic attention from his homeland was fairly sluggish. In the 1960s, when Beckett's critical reputation was being consolidated in a number of single-author studies, there was little interest in academic circles in Ireland and little mention of Ireland in academic studies of Beckett. As Anna McMullan points out, "for several decades, Beckett's work was largely ignored by the dominant Irish cultural institutions, though he had a number of individual admirers and supporters in Ireland" (McMullan 2004: 90). It was not until the 1980s that Irish studies journals *Irish University Review* (1984) and *Hermathena* (1986) devoted special issues to Beckett, rather belatedly including him in the Irish canon. Several essays in these collections do address specifically Irish aspects of Beckett, especially in the former. Since then there have been a smattering of articles and the mention of Beckett in various surveys of Irish drama and poetry.

An interesting case in point is the 1992 collection edited by S. E. Wilmer entitled *Beckett in Dublin*. This volume was a spin-off collection from Michael Colgan's 1991 Beckett Festival at the Gate Theatre, theatrical productions which used Irish actors and generally had an Irish inflection. To tie in with the festival, Trinity College Dublin (which was also hosting its 400th anniversary) hosted a series of lectures, seminars and events. Though *Beckett in Dublin* avowedly sought to "recapture some of the highlights from an enterprise which spiritually brought Beckett home after his death" (Wilmer 1992: 1), there is surprisingly little Dublin or Ireland in the volume. There are, certainly, some excellent, beautifully-written essays by some of Beckett's leading academic and theatrical interpreters. The book is divided into three, and the third section is entitled "At Heart a Dubliner", yet, of the three pieces in this section, only one – J.C.C. Mays's essay "Irish Beckett: A Borderline Instance – explicitly addresses the question of Beckett's origins in a sustained way. (Brendan Kennelly's four-page piece on Beckett's prosody is entitled "The Four Per-Center", an allusion to the Irish protestant minority of which Beckett was member. It includes some slightly perplexing judgements – "He has a very sad Protestant face on him" [Kennelly 1992: 132] – but the issue is touched on only briefly).

That Mays's essay effectively stands alone in the collection aiming to bring Beckett spiritually "home" betrays a certain reluctance. The essay is, nonetheless, a key contribution to the area of Beckett's Irishness in so far as it aspires to go beyond the empirical demonstrations of Ireland and an Irish tradition to probe the more elusive though perhaps more important issue of how his mature writing should be understood in terms of his Irish background. In a subtle and complex consideration of the issue across a wide range of texts, he concludes, "In Beckett's early writing, up to and including *Malone Dies*, Irish experience is continuous with the characters who speak or are described as living it. In his later writing, Irish experience appears at a level which is more profound and more remote" (Mays 1992: 143). This is a subtle and sensitive way of handling the dilemma of Beckett and Irishness, avoiding both special pleading for the more obscured Irish elements of Beckett's mature work or a callow insistence that Beckett's has simply "transcended" these origins for cold abstraction. It recognises that the seeming renunciation of language and landscape emerges from a desire to create a formal and distancing theatrical effect through forsaking the blandishments of familiarity. It is a suggestive reading of Beckett's Irishness, posing a challenge that few later critics have answered.

A more recent example of the Janus-faced attitude that is sometimes shown to Beckett is found in *The Cambridge Companion to Modern Irish Culture* (2005). Here, Beckett gets only a few mentions. “Even more than Joyce, Beckett wanted to get away from Ireland”, claim Norman Vance and Pádraigín Riggs in the chapter on “Irish Prose Fiction”. While *Murphy* has some Irish scenes and characters, “[l]ater works such as *Molloy* and *Malone Dies* (1951), originally written in French, have protagonists with Irish names but there is little else which is obviously Irish in either work” (Riggs/Vance 2005: 260). Even the extant work on the issue by Harrington and O’Brien renders this a highly debatable claim about the trilogy. Significantly, however, the other mention of Beckett, occurring in Emer Nolan’s “Modernism and the Irish Revival” makes the opposite claim. Here Beckett’s placement within an Irish tradition is emphatic, his version of modernism explicitly linked with the Irish revival, notwithstanding Beckett’s misgivings about that movement. Beckett’s work, Nolan claims (echoing earlier linkages made by Declan Kiberd) is analogous to the Irish-language, modernist novelist Máirtín Ó Cadhain. Beckett’s decision to write in French is comparable to Ó Cadhain’s decision to write in Irish, because “both were thereby freer to disengage from literary stereotypes of Irishness” (Nolan 2005: 168).

The contrast between Vance’s Beckett and Nolan’s, residing between the same covers but hardly recognisable as the same man, illustrates how divided and contradictory Irish studies can be in handling Beckett. It has long been thus. As I have been arguing, the tendency to avoid Beckett in Irish studies is as strong as the urge to incorporate him. He has often been seen as insufficiently Irish (linked to the claim that he is insufficiently political) or as leaving all Irish interests behind him on his elevation to a transcendent imaginative space. At the same time, in the establishment of indigenous traditions (or in anthologies of Irish writing) Beckett is pervasively located as a “key” figure, not least because of the undoubted influence he has had on future Irish writers and playwrights. But sustained interrogation (outside the occasional synoptic sentence) of Ireland’s role in his writing – and whether this troubles his relationship to indigenous traditions – is rare. Beckett is both absent and present in Irish studies, just as Ireland is absent and present in Beckett’s own work.

The 1985 collection of essays *The Irish Mind: Exploring Intellectual Traditions* was a foundational work of inter-disciplinary Irish studies. It drew sizeable attention and controversy, much of it querying the existence of such a thing as the “Irish mind”. Various figures are treated across

Irish history and a chapter is devoted to Beckett by the volume's editor Richard Kearney. That Beckett is included at all (alongside Joyce and Yeats) indicates that he has indeed been canonized as an Irish writer. However Kearney's chapter, "Beckett the Demythologising Intellect", considers him largely outside the Irish tradition which is the governing concept of the collection. Like in his later work *Transitions: Narratives in Modern Irish Culture* (1988), Kearney looks at Beckett in largely philosophical and (de)mythic terms: "In Beckett we witness an Irish mind less concerned with self-regarding questions of Irish history and tradition than with the universal concerns of Western humanistic culture as a whole" (Kearney 1988: 293). Brief mention is made of his specifically Irish experiences of "exile, marginality and dissent" but, as so often, this is supposedly the starting point for a much more profound and universal investigation into the blurring of the basis of all identity and the dismantling of the Western metaphysical tradition. The humanist discourses of early Beckett criticism may have changed colour with the deconstructive emphasis, but the idea that Beckett sloughs off his early historical location nonetheless persists. It has, as we shall see, inflected a very large strain of his Irish reception.

Harrington's remark at the start of his book that this would be an "initial charting of the territory" (Harrington 1991: 6) seems rather ironic in retrospect. Due to trends both inside and outside Beckett studies, the omission is surprising. Five years after Harrington, Beckett's authorised biography would be produced by James Knowlson, where Beckett asserted that the images of his Irish childhood were "obsessional" in his work (Knowlson 1996: xxi). Knowlson's biography made it far more difficult to understand Beckett's work as emerging simply from some deracinated or de-contextualised site. In the same year as Knowlson's authorized biography, Anthony Cronin's *The Last Modernist*, offered another life of Beckett particularly strong on his Irish background and the Dublin literary milieu of Beckett's early years as a writer. These biographies came at the height of a historicist flux in literary studies generally. The nineties saw a waning of the post-structuralist, linguistic emphasis of the previous decade in favour of a more contextual approach. Historical approaches gained ground in the academy, a tendency that was certainly felt in Beckett studies though seldom in explicitly Irish terms. The rise of post-colonial theory during this period, unlike post-structuralist theory a decade before, tended to bypass Beckett studies. Despite the acknowledged prevalence in Beckett of an uncertain subjectivity, alienation, self-conscious

marginality, slipperiness of voice, repetition and mimicry, few critics have, as yet, undertaken the postcolonial reading of Beckett that has been so influential in Joyce studies. An exception is David Lloyd's specialized post-colonial reading of "First Love", a text inaugurating an *œuvre* that "stands as the most exhaustive dismantling we have of the logic of identity that at every moment structures and maintains the post-colonial moment" (Lloyd 1993: 56). If Lloyd rather over-claims the post-colonial significance of Beckett, even as he asserts his elusiveness, it is perhaps a reaction to decades of eschewal and under-claiming. Declan Kiberd's hugely influential and popular treatment of Ireland's cultural emergence from its colonial past, *Inventing Ireland* (1995), does devote two chapters to Beckett. But apart from Kiberd's work, Lloyd's essay remains (to date) a rather lonely offering in the application of post-colonial theory to Beckett (though there are now some younger scholars working in the area).

The suitability of the post-colonial model to Ireland is itself a contested area within Irish studies.³ It is interesting precisely how absent Beckett is from these debates. Anna McMullan is surely right in remarking:

Beckett's work can be seen to reflect the ambivalences and contradictions not only within the category of "Irish", but within the category "postcolonial" in so far as it can be applied to Ireland. (McMullan 2004: 92)

That Beckett does not figure in the controversy may indicate a polarisation in Irish studies between those who apply the post-colonial model and those who repudiate it. Neither side has sufficiently taken up the opportunity to complicate the binary, to read in his work the troublesome specificity of the Irish condition, both showing many of the symptoms of colonial domination while also itself a participant in the European imperial project.

If one compares just how crucial a role the other leading Irish modernists have played in the field of Irish studies, Beckett's comparative absence is striking. Of course, it might be immediately objected, that though Yeats and Joyce both spent long periods away from Ireland, the country of their upbringing is both a setting and a thematic preoccupation to a far greater extent than could be said of Beckett. Yet this is not so of

³ For a polemical critique of the aptness of the post-colonial model to Ireland, see Stephen Howe, *Ireland and Empire: Colonial Legacies in Irish History and Culture* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2000).

all the writers who have been canonised by Irish studies. Rightly or wrongly, Oscar Wilde has been relocated and re-invented as an Irish writer in recent years.⁴ Yet one will search his work in vain for the Murphys, Molloyes, Morans or Malones. Neither his novel nor any of his plays are set in Ireland and he re-invented himself as an Englishman with much more gusto than Beckett took to being French. It probably has much to do with the perceived concern in Wilde with doubleness and binaries, the truth of masks and self-invention, which were readily factored back into a colonial/Irish frame. Again, one of the reasons for Beckett's relative neglect is the difficulty of absorbing his work into the established grooves along which Irish studies often tends to run.

II

Even if there has been neglect, there are nonetheless some existing treatments within the field of Irish studies. Interpretations of Ireland's relevance and applicability to Beckett (and vice versa) range from the empirical and archival to the theoretically sophisticated, to the dubiously speculative. Those who want to walk on firm ground, with demonstrable evidence, have often chosen a topographical focus. O'Brien's *The Beckett Country* makes the presence of Irish geography its very *raison d'être*. It identifies many of the locales and landscapes in Beckett's texts and includes photographs, old and new, of people and places of relevance to his work. Harrington confines his investigations to the prose and goes no further than the trilogy, where (unlike the later, purgatorial works) Irish landscape and locales can be verifiably identified. He is especially concerned with the literary traditions and influences that Beckett drew on, placing him here (as in a later essay in *The Cambridge Companion to Twentieth-Century Irish Drama* [2004]) as part of a recognisable counter-tradition, opposing the calcified and stringent ideas of culture and identity advanced by the Irish Revival and by the narrow-gauge nationalists.

⁴ See, for instance, Jerusha McCormack (ed.), *Wilde the Irishman* (New Haven and London: Yale U.P., 1998) and Neil Sammels, *Wilde Style: The Plays and Prose of Oscar Wilde* (Harlow: Longman, 2000). Terry Eagleton's play *Saint Oscar* (Derry: Field Day, 1989) and his *Heathcliff and the Great Hunger* (London: Verso, 1995) contributed much to the Irish Wilde. Declan Kiberd has been deploying the figure of Wilde in his analysis of doubleness in Irish culture since at least "Anglo-Irish Attitudes" (Derry: Field Day, 1985), arguments that he developed in *Inventing Ireland* and *Irish Classics* (London: Granta, 2000).

O'Brien and Harrington demonstrate Beckett's memory of Irish geography. The more elusive (but perhaps more fundamental) question concerns the Irish geography of Beckett's memory. Perhaps the Irish intellectual who currently makes the boldest claims for Beckett's Irishness is Declan Kiberd. For Kiberd, the indeterminacy of the Beckettian landscape points towards the colonial *erasure* of history and identity rather than the transcendence of it. He claims of Beckett's characters that "[t]heir surroundings seem decontextualized because they represent a geography which has been deprived of a history" (539) and relates this deprivation to a colonial or post-colonial trauma. Kiberd reads Beckett as, paradoxically, more Irish the less he refers to Irish material because the references have been typically corrupted by colonial mis-apprehensions. He argues that Beckett is "the first truly Irish playwright, because the first utterly free of factitious elements of Irishness" (Kiberd 1995: 531). It is a provocative, perhaps deliberately insolent conclusion but Kiberd is one of the few amongst the leading figures in Irish studies to try to understand the non-geographical, seemingly deracinated Beckett in the context of the country which formed him.

Appeals to factitious elements of Irishness can arise in the most unlikely of places, even amongst those who have based a career on the most scrupulous internationalism. Hugh Kenner was one of the first of Beckett's interpreters and one of the foremost. His late work, *A Colder Eye: The Modern Irish Writers* (1983) constructs a tradition of Irish writing – a tradition partly bound together by spurning official ideas of Ireland – of which Beckett is a part. This, it could be said, is one of the few moments when Beckett studies (or Modernist studies) reached out to Irish studies rather than vice versa. However, Kenner's text is marred by pseudo-Celticist guff about "Irish Bulls" and "Irish Facts". Both the condescending Arnoldian and the sentimental American tourist are flaunted in remarks such as the following: "Providence in creating the Irish (finest of deeds) endowed them with a craving for occasional emphatic assertions, lacking which the most mellifluous discourse would be but as porter poured upon the floor" (Kenner 1983: 3-4). Kenner's is, admittedly, an extreme example, but he illustrates a danger when national affinities are advanced not as an overt influence but as a process of cultural osmosis.

Passing comments about a supposedly Irish feature of a writer like Beckett can often seem suggestive, but they also run the risk of a very unnuanced taxonomy of national characteristics. A certain mordant

attitude, a stylistic bravado, a po-faced scholasticism, a darkly absurd comic sense: all can be placed under the epithet “Irish” by a critic appealing to a shared impression of what that word might mean. It is tempting for many critics, but requires restraint. The problem with this sort of argument is that firstly, its plausibility comes at the expense of verifiability. You can demonstrate an influence, but only suggest an affinity. Secondly, this approach can all too often be coercively and selectively synthetic. The combination of high formality and low farce in Beckett is sometimes regarded as an “Irish” trait, but it is also the very stuff of a Chaplin bow. Where, then, do we locate the influence? This is not to say that assertions of national affinity always fail. As long ago as 1962, in his book *The Irish Comic Tradition*, Vivian Mercier intriguingly identified a continuity between Beckett’s comedy and old Gaelic traditions of the grotesque. The kinship was one that came from the indirect osmosis of Gaelic and Anglo-Irish cultures rather than an influence which Beckett consciously cultivated. “We have the peculiar case here of an Anglo-Irishman who, like Swift, seems to fit comfortably into the Gaelic tradition yet has almost no conscious awareness of what that tradition is” (Mercier 1962: 75-6).

Nonetheless pointing at overt influence (rather than this sort of osmosis) does have the advantage of being, at least to some extent, empirically verifiable. We can see where the bodies are buried, especially if one can find intertextual allusion. Figures from Irish literature that Beckett has been influenced by include Swift, Berkeley, W.B. Yeats, Jack Yeats, Sean O’Casey, and above all, Synge and Joyce. Sometimes theories about actual influence and less certain comparison can blur together to a greater or lesser degree of success. Richard Ellmann’s comparison of four Dubliners makes suggestive links between Wilde, Yeats, Joyce and Beckett in terms both of influence and general similarity. There have been many other scholarly or critical explorations of connections between Beckett and his Irish forebears.⁵ Such scholarly exercises are the building

⁵An earlier collection of essays along similar lines was Kathleen McGrory and John Unterecker (eds.), *Yeats, Joyce, and Beckett: New Light on Three Modern Irish Writers* (Lewisburg PA: Bucknell UP, 1976). The most well-mined of the Irish literary connections is with Joyce, for which see Barbara R. Gluck, *Beckett and Joyce: Friendship and Fiction* (Lewisburg PA: Bucknell UP, 1979), Phyllis Carey and Ed Jewinski (eds.), *Re: Joyce 'n Beckett* (New York: Fordham UP, 1992). For connections between Beckett and Synge, see James Knowlson’s essay ‘Beckett and John Millington Synge’ in James Knowlson and John Pilling, *Frescoes of the Skull: The Later Prose and Drama of Samuel Beckett* (London: Calder, 1979), pp. 269-74. See also Katherine Worth, *The Irish Drama of Europe*

blocks for the meaningful establishment of a tradition based on recognisable affiliation not assertions of selective affinity. That said, to demonstrate an affiliation (a question of choice) is not necessarily to prove a “filiation” (a question of lineage). However useful it has been to demonstrate Beckett’s fondness for or indebtedness to some of his Irish predecessors, this of itself will not close the question of his relationship to the Irish literary tradition nor how Irish studies should approach his work.

Some of the most useful approaches to Beckett from within Irish studies have tended to seek out smaller traditions within the national metanarrative. Notwithstanding the caveat above, demonstrations of individual allegiances can buttress the idea of a strand within the national tapestry. So, for instance, the kinship between Synge and Beckett – made up of overt influence, clear affinity and a remarkable coincidence of biographical experience – is surely a building block for the assertion of an East coast, Anglo-Irish literary tradition. As a member of this minority in a largely Catholic country the young Beckett was something of an “outsider,” an experience which may have fed his later explorations of dislocated or marginal conditions. As the Anglo-Irish critic Vivian Mercier, musing on the similarity between his own background and that of Beckett, discerned:

The typical Anglo-Irish boy... learns that he is not quite Irish almost before he can talk; later he learns that he is far from being English either. The pressure on him to become either wholly English or wholly Irish can erase segments of his individuality for good and all. “Who am I?” is the question that every Anglo-Irishman must answer, even if it takes him a lifetime as it did Yeats (Mercier 1977: 26).

Apart from Beckett’s position as a member of an Anglo-Irish minority within a Catholic Ireland, one of the richest lines of enquiry that has brought together Beckett studies and Irish studies is the examination of him as a Protestant or religious writer. Several other Irish critics have pursued this issue including, W. J. McCormack, Declan Kiberd and others.

Looking at Beckett from the point of view of his Protestant background has the virtue of breaking the implied monolith of Irishness into constituent micro-narratives. There are other such traditions, smaller than the idea of Ireland yet contained within it, which could profitably

from Yeats to Beckett (London: Athlone Press, 1978) and Ronan McDonald, *Tragedy and Irish Drama: Synge, O’Casey, Beckett* (London: Palgrave, 2002).

be explored. For instance the particular social matrix of his Dublin background could be emphasized. Or the idea of Beckett as a member of the middle-classes: an aspect which gave him much in common with Joyce for all the overt differences of their religious backgrounds. One of the features of Beckett's formative years that may have fed the supposed apolitical stances of his later work (and, by extension, the critical tradition of reading him as a universal, timeless visionary) is precisely the middle-class, bourgeois aspect of his upbringing. Beckett is the quintessential suburban writer. Set at one remove from the political strife there was no need for someone of his background to think politically. He tended therefore to see suffering in universal terms. "You might say I had a happy childhood... although I had little talent for happiness. My parents did everything that they could to make a child happy. But I was often lonely" (*apud* Bair 1978: 14). A young man "with little talent for happiness" who enjoyed a loving and cushioned upbringing, but who did not come from a very cultured or Ascendancy background, is not directed to find the causes of his misery in evidently temporal terms. So he finds them more readily in a pessimistic view of the world or in existence itself. Since the sources of unhappiness are not social or political, then, neither are the solutions to it. Hence his later dislike of political argument or discussion when he was a young man (even when he was touring Nazi Germany), such arguments striking him as pointless. "There's man all over for you", exclaims Vladimir in *Waiting for Godot*, "blaming on his boots the faults of his feet" (Beckett 1965: 11). The crucial point is, of course, that the renunciation of politics and of history is itself a symptom of particular social, historical and class configurations – certainly not, simply, a transcendence of them.

III

Irish studies debates in the 1980s and 1990s were often, explicitly or implicitly, fraught with the urgency of the long-standing violence and civil strife in the North. Problems of identity and subjectivity, the unreliability of language and the breakdown in communication, the operations of inscrutable power and the ubiquity of confusion: these staples of artistic and intellectual investigation in Ireland were ones of which, or to which, Beckett's work might have had something to say. His drama has, after all, been resonant at times of war or political crisis elsewhere in the world from Sarajevo to South Africa.

Again, it was not as if Beckett was simply side-lined because he didn't write explicitly about Irish concerns. The most important post-War cultural movement in Ireland, the Field Day Theatre company (set up in 1980 by Stephen Rea and Brian Friel), happily produced plays about Oscar Wilde. Field Day's self-consciously political, intellectual, and international remit produced Chekhov, Fugard and several translations of Greek tragedy – all of which seemed freshly relevant to conditions of social and communal strife. But they never did any Beckett, despite Rea's accomplishments as a Beckettian actor elsewhere.

Field Day went on to publish a pamphlet series by Irish intellectuals like Seamus Deane, Declan Kiberd and Tom Paulin and, later, by leading international figures like Frederic Jameson and Edward Said. The movement developed from a politically-motivated theatre group into an influential intellectual and cultural publisher, culminating in *The Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing* (1991), under the general editorship of one of the directors, Seamus Deane. The anthology was a tremendous scholarly undertaking, gathering together a vast collection of Irish literature (and political writings) in both languages from earliest times. Deane, then Professor of English in University College Dublin, now Keough Professor of Irish Studies in Notre Dame University, is arguably the founding father of modern Irish studies. Admittedly, Beckett is granted – like Joyce, Yeats and the other major Irish writers – a section to himself in the anthology, under the editorship of J.C.C. Mays. But Deane's treatment of Beckett in his own influential critical writing is, I think, one of the key reasons for his comparative neglect in contemporary Irish studies. This becomes apparent when we consider how Deane's interventions in Joyce studies inaugurated the emphasis on the historical, national and Irish dimensions to his work in the 1990s. Deane's essays on Joyce, and his editorship of Penguin Classic series of Joyce's works in 1992, squarely located this metropolitan modernist in the cultural milieu of early twentieth-century Ireland. It encouraged a generation of Joyce scholars to follow suit.⁶

⁶ The key essays by Deane were "Joyce and Stephen: the Provincial Intellectual" and "Joyce and Nationalism" in *Celtic Revivals* (1985) pp. 75-91 and 92-107. Deane was general editor of the Penguin Joyce in 1992, which included Declan Kiberd's "Introduction" to *Ulysses* (London: Penguin 1992), another key text in influencing the new trend. Among the monographs of Joyce heavily influenced by Deane's cultural political approach were Emer Nolan, *James Joyce and Nationalism* (London: Routledge, 1995), Vincent J. Cheng, *Joyce, Race and Empire* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1995) and Andrew Gibson, *Joyce's Revenge: History, Politics, and Aesthetics in Ulysses* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2002).

The rare mentions of Beckett in Deane's work present an image of him which is apolitical and ahistorical. In *Celtic Revivals*, probably the most influential collection of essays in Irish studies of the last thirty years, Deane claims of Beckett that his "repudiation of Ireland is of a piece with his repudiation of history" (Deane 1985: 130), a judgement which exonerates Beckett from consideration in either sphere. Like the first generation of Beckett critics, Deane takes Beckett at face value, accepting his early critical repudiation of the local and provincial in the interests of what he called in the 1930s "the issueless predicament of existence". Beckett is cast free of any ideological constraints and without any sense that the supposed repudiation may itself be understood in social and political terms. In the nineties, Deane's position on Beckett scarcely changed. *Strange Country: Identity and Nationhood in Irish Writing Since 1790* is the published version of Deane's Clarendon lectures, delivered in Oxford in 1995. It devotes only one paragraph to Beckett, in the final chapter on "Boredom and Apocalypse", a topic which one might have thought had a Beckettian application. Deane claims, briefly, that Beckett "transposed the issue [of boredom] from the specifically cultural-social realm to the ontological" (Deane 1997: 170). But he does not give this supposed transposition, its motivation as well as its methods, consideration in socio-cultural terms. Beckett's concerns with boredom and repetition are at once given a provenance in an Irish tradition and then cut loose from it. The departure from context is issued but not explained. There is no sense that "the intent of undoing" (to borrow S.E. Gontarski's phrase) might leave a trace even as it disposes of its inventory. So, while his importance can be canonically recognised his work need not be scrutinized in specifically Irish terms. Hence the challenges he might pose to Irish Studies debates – his complication of the identity of Irishness itself and what constitutes Irish writing – are safely redirected into the politically quarantined realm of ontological disengagement from history.

It is a very telling occlusion and, perhaps, indicates the difficulties of assimilating Beckett into current Irish studies discourse. In a simple respect, this might be a symptom of Beckett's class background. Neither of Catholic Irish nor landed ascendancy but rather of the professional Protestant bourgeoisie this is not a social stratum which receives a great deal of academic attention. Though hardly a politically or socially disenfranchised group, it is not one whose story is told loudly in narratives

of modern Ireland “ be they nationalist or revisionist.⁷ Not least, perhaps, because as discussed earlier it is a rather insulated class that tended not to conceive of itself in political terms. So it tended to slip through the net of orthodox stories of Ireland, landed Anglo-Irish ascendancy yielding power to a burgeoning Catholic middle class, and, at the same time, to be overlooked by the politically motivated efforts to hear marginal, submerged or politically disenfranchised voices.

In a related, but more profound sense, Beckett poses a challenge to both tradition and counter-tradition that neither side in the Irish studies realm has sufficiently absorbed. The debate is often implicitly framed in rather reductive, binary terms between tradition and modernity, bad metanarratives and good micro-narratives, authority and plurality. It is hard not to be familiar with the dubiously messianic narrative of Irish literary history whereby a right-wing and nationalist Yeats gives way to an emancipatory, pluralist and internationalist Joyce. There is no room for the complexities of the Beckettian challenge in this opposition.

It may be precisely the interstitial, liminal, inconclusive, indeterminate nature of Beckett's work that underlies the resistance of Irish studies to engaging with him. For all the valorisation of indeterminate, non-teleological, rhizomatic and schizoid epistemologies in theoretical writings about Irishness, the story of literary history that Irish studies often wants to tell often reads with a reassuring sense of progress and linearity. Beckett confounds both this narrative of progress and the binary nationalist-revisionist debates which have so often characterised the Irish studies field. From Yeats the authoritarian father to Joyce the liberationist son, there is no room for a troublesome third party. So, like a pervasive but scarcely acknowledged holy ghost, Beckett is elevated in the Irish canon at the same time as being abstracted from it.

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⁷ Little mention of Beckett, for instance, in the work of R.F. Foster, Irish historian and Yeats biographer, whose many essays on Irish literary history have attended to the Irish elements of Irish Protestant writers such as Elizabeth Bowen. See his *Paddy and Mr Punch: Connections in Irish and English History* (London: Allen Lane, 1993) and *The Irish Story: Telling Tales and Making it up in Ireland* (London: Oxford UP, 2001).

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