

The pursuit of compassion

Prof Eoin O'Brien, who was a close friend of Samuel Beckett, wrote *The Beckett Country: Samuel Beckett's Ireland* to celebrate the author's 80th birthday in 1986 and reflects here on Beckett's work in his centenary year

There are many facets to Samuel Beckett's writing – humour, despair, love, poignancy, suffering – but for me there is one dominant characteristic – compassion, compassion for the human condition of existence. It is this compassion, tempered, as it so often is, with humour, that makes the suffering Beckett felt for fellow man bearable for the reader. Beckett fully realised the magnitude of the task he had set for himself:

*who may tell the tale
of the old man?
weigh absence in a scale?
mete want with a span?
the sum assess
of the world's woes?
nothingness
in words enclose?*

The weight of compassion in Beckett's work pervades from earliest memories to the close. Beckett's childhood was a happy one and he cherished its memories which recur in his work, often with greater force and poignancy in his later writing. Such, in fact, was the pastoral tranquillity of Foxrock, nestling at the foothills of the Dublin mountains, that on certain spring evenings it became "a matter of some difficulty to keep God out of one's meditations". But this peaceful harmony between land, sky, and youth was shattered betimes by the suffering that lurked at every corner if one chose to see it. One growing boy saw clearly and was moved by the tragic figures around him; he observed them carefully in their decrepitude and later restored their dignity:

An old beggar woman is fumbling at a big garden gate. Half blind. You know the place well. Stone deaf and not in her right mind the woman of the house is a crows of your mother. She was sure she could fly once in the air. So one day she launched herself from a first floor window. On the way home from kindergarten on your tiny cycle you see the poor old beg-



Samuel Beckett - The deranged in society, whether they be poor, deformed, or mentally ill, are special to Beckett

gar woman trying to get in. You dismount and open the gate for her. She blesses you. What were her words? God reward you little master. Some such words. God save you little master.

When Beckett left the childhood environs of Foxrock to become a student, and later a lecturer, at Trinity College, the characters surrounding him changed but the compassionate eyes continued to observe the tragic vignettes of city life that would later influence much of his writing. Both inside and out, the pain of poverty abounded; the tragedy of life was everywhere – the impending execution of a gardener accused of burning the family which had given him employment:

Why not piety and pity both, even down below? Why not mercy and Godliness together? A little mercy in the stress of sacrifice, a lit-

tle mercy to rejoice against judgement. He thought of Jonah and the gourd and the pity of a jealous God on Nineveh. And poor McCabe, he would get it in the neck at dawn. What was he doing now, how was he feeling? He would relish one more meal, one more night.

The deranged in society, whether they be poor, deformed, or mentally ill, are special to Beckett. As with the poor, he treats the insane with humour, sympathy and admiration, never with disrespect. In madness, the insane sometimes achieve the perfect escape from a chaotic society; no mean feat in Beckett's view. Asylums are sanctuaries, where the dualities that compose the Beckettian personality are permitted expression and dialogue free of the interference that would necessarily stifle their existence in so-called normal society. The inmates of the House of

Saint John of God and the Portrane Lunatic Asylum in Dublin are central to much of Beckett's early prose, always achieving an independence within themselves, if confined by the regulations of the society around them, but it is in the fictitious Magdalen Mental Mercy Seat, stinking of "peraldehyde and truant sphincters" that Beckett creates his "bower of bliss", in which the insane are given a dignified place in the sun.

Beckett's mother, May, died in a nursing home overlooking the Grand Canal in Dublin. The distress of this event was expressed by Beckett with extraordinary power and poignancy in which is captured, not only the profound sense of loss, and relief that his mother's suffering is over, but also the inevitability of death and the timelessness of age, the inexorable cycle of death and birth

and life, the whole business of existence:

...bench by the weir from where I could see her window. There I sat, in the biting wind, wishing she were gone. (Pause) Hardly a soul, just a few regulars, nursemaids, infants, old men, dogs...

...the blind went down, one of those dirty brown roller affairs, throwing a ball for a little white dog as chance would have it. It happened to look up and there it was. All over and done with, at last. I sat on for a few moments with the ball in my hand and the dog yelping and pawing at me. (Pause.) Moments. Her moments, my moments. (Pause.) The dog's moments.

The discipline of medicine demands compassion and feeling. Paradoxically, the practice of medicine makes the exclusion of sentiment a prerequisite for the survival of self, and the process,

begun in early studentship, soon becomes so integral a part of the scientific persona that the dissipated gems of idealism, among which, of course, may be found compassion, become unrecognisable. The years of training, so carefully constructed by our institutions initially blunt and, finally pervert, the purity of avocation and the sensibility of youth, essences to be found in most medical students but so few doctors. It is chastening but not necessarily a balm to existence, to have this protective wall around one annihilated. I can do no better in closing with a great sense of sadness that the Sam I once knew is no more, than quote what I wrote with a much lighter heart for a *Festschrift* for his 80th birthday in 1986:

"The occasion is too great, my ability to express too feeble, other than to gasp in gratitude, to acknowledge the greatness of his sum, to admit that I for one will never be as before. Whether for worse or better I know not. But changed as no other ever could. Possessing now an understanding of and feeling for fellow-man as no other could inculcate in a long apprenticeship designed to do just that. The problem now is feeling too much. Not being able to go on but having to do so, as only Sam knows how. Man unadorned: ugly, decrepit, depraved, laughing, despairing, majestic in his nothingness, not always without hope. A life spent with humanity in the doldrums but only seen from afar. Now terrifyingly close. Can't endure the pain once not felt, necessarily so. What now? Still gratitude for the profundity of realisation. Might not have come from any other. Might never have come. What then?"

Prof Eoin O'Brien, Professor of Cardiovascular Medicine and RCSI Investigator, Royal College of Surgeons in Ireland and Beaumont Hospital