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 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 side of the old man? weigh absence in a scale? measure want with a span? the auras of the world won? nothingness in word and line?

The weight of compassion in Beckett’s work pervades from earliest memories to the close of his childhood was a happy one and had cherished its memories which recur in his work, often with greater force and poignancy in his later writing. Such, in fact, was the pastoral tranquility 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 meditation.” But this peaceful harmony between land, sky and youth was shattered forever by the suffering that lurked at every corner if one chose to see it. One growing boy saw clearly and was moved by the regulations of the society around him, whether they be poor, deformed, or mentally ill, are special to Beckett. As with the poor, he feels, necessarily so. What now?

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

Asylums are sanctuaries, places of refuge where the insane are given a dignified survival of self, and the process, in themselves, if confined by the discipline of medicine, is that of healing and recovery. As with the poor, he felt, necessarily so. What now?

Samuel Beckett, Little Master

Men and women who may tell the tale of those dirty brown roller affairs, throwing a ball for a little white dog as chance would have it. He felt, necessarily so. What now?

Tell mercy to rejoice against judge-ment. The thought of Jonah and the gourd and the pity of a just judge 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 mud, one more right.

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 that Beckettian personability is 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 Magdalene Mental Mercy Seat, stinking of “peraldehyde and truant splineters” that Beckett cre-ates his “bower of bliss”, in which the insane are given a dignified place in the sun.

Poignancy

Beckett’s mother, May, died in a nursing home overlooking the Grand Canal in Dublin. The dis-covery 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 inexorable cycle of death and birth and life, the whole business of existence...”

Might never have come...