

Zone of Stones: Samuel Beckett's Dublin*

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Traditionally the Arnold K. Henry lecture is devoted to a non-medical subject and though there is an important medical association with Samuel Beckett — namely the role that he played in establishing the Irish Red Cross Hospital in Saint Lô in Normandy in 1945 — I have resisted the temptation to make this the subject of this evening's lecture, preferring to maintain the tradition of selecting a topic devoid of medical content.

Why, one may ask, is this memorial lecture so designated? The answer rests, of course, primarily with the man Arnold Henry but not entirely. Henry was born in Bray in 1886 and so not only is this the sixteenth memorial lecture in his honour but we may also acknowledge the centenary of his birth. He graduated in Trinity in 1911, shortly afterwards becoming a fellow of this College in 1914. He departed Dublin for Serbia to work as an army surgeon, fled the country when the Germans invaded in 1916 and joined the French Army, returning to Dublin to the staff of the Richmond Hospital in 1919. Here we may note not only the maturing influence that his travels must have had upon him, but also a scientific literary interest as he became editor of the *Dublin Journal of Medical Science*. However, the wanderlust was soon at work and in 1925 we find him in Cairo as Professor of Surgery. Here he wrote his *Exposure of the Long Bones* later revised during a seven years period as Reader in Surgery with the British Postgraduate Medical School, and republished as *Extensile Exposure*¹. It remains to this day a classic in anatomy. In 1947 he became Professor of Anatomy in this College where he formed a lasting friendship with Tom Garry, who he elevated to the position with the quaint title — Tutor and Prosector in Anatomy.² Henry died in 1962 and his shade rested in gentle obscurity for eight years until Harry O'Flanagan, who as registrar in 1970 supported by Tom Wilson, proposed to Council

that there should be an annual lecture devoted to a non-medical topic to which spouses and friends of College staff might be invited and in acknowledgement of Henry's stature and well established reputation of giving cultural activity a place of precedence with his students, they named the lecture in his memory.

Samuel Beckett was born in Foxrock in 1906. 1986, the year of his eightieth birthday was the occasion of a series of international seminars and conferences on this Irish writer who is accepted by most to be one of the truly gifted writers of this century and acknowledged by many to be one of the greatest writers of all time.³

My exploration of the Beckett country began a decade ago. There had been a few hints from Beckett scholars, most notably from the late Con Leventhal,⁴ Katharine Worth,⁵ Sighle Kennedy,⁶ and Vivian Mercier,⁷ that an unexplored and exciting terrain awaited discovery in Beckett's homeland.

The geographical extent of *The Beckett Country* is readily identified — it is confined almost entirely to the city of Dublin and the surrounding county, most especially Foxrock, and the coast of Dun Laoghaire, Killiney and Sandycove. The heart of *The Beckett Country* lies in the magic landscape of the Dublin mountains. There are, it is true, references to other parts of Ireland, but for the greater part these serve merely as topographical locations and they are not a creative influence. Easy though it may be to chart the geographic borders of *The Beckett Country*, the same cannot be said of its place in Beckett's writing. When I began my researches I did so in the naive belief that I would have to concentrate only on the early prose works and poetry. *More Pricks Than Kicks*,⁸ *Mercier and Camier*,⁹ *Murphy*,¹⁰ *Watt*,¹¹ and *The Trilogy*¹² together with the pre-war poetry seemed to me to contain all the influences of a place and person that was Irish in Beckett's writing. I was greatly mistaken. The influence of Dublin and its people extends throughout Beckett's work, and though the Irish presence faded a little in the middle period of the fifties when the French influence became dominant, it returned with increasing force in

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the later writings and is at its most powerful and poignant in *Company*,¹³ written in 1980:

Nowhere in particular on the way from A to Z. Or say for verisimilitude the Ballyogan Road. That dear old back road. Somewhere on the Ballyogan Road in lieu of nowhere in particular. Where no truck any more. Somewhere on the Ballyogan Road on the way from A to Z. Head sunk totting up the tally on the verge of the ditch. Foothills to left. Croker's Acres ahead. Father's shade to right and a little to the rear. So many times already round the earth.. Topcoat once green stiff with age and grime from chin to insteps. Battered once buff block hat and quarter boots still a match. No other garments if any to be seen. Out since break of day and night now falling. Reckoning ended on together from nought anew. As if bound for Stepside. When suddenly you cut through the hedge and vanish hobbling east across the gallops.

(*Company*, p.30-31)

This phenomenon is hardly surprising. Ageing man recalls with greater clarity the events of youth rather than those of later years, but it is Beckett's treatment of this biological occurrence that makes his writing in this regard so unique. There is, for those who wish to pursue it, a most profound analysis of the ageing process in Beckett's writing. When I had completed my researches for *The Beckett Country*, I had consulted all of Beckett's criticism, plays, poetry and prose,¹⁴ in all of which an Irish presence was detectable in varying degree.

In identifying the influences of Ireland in the Beckett canon I do so, not from any great sense of national pride, but as a statement of fact. I have no wish to see Samuel Beckett, ignored for so long in his homeland, seized upon by the patriotic purveyors of national character and genius who would have him paraded in the market place for no other purpose than to fatten the national purse. Beckett's nationality, taken at face value is nothing more than an accident, as a consequence of which he was brought up in a small island with a people peculiar to that region. There is, of course, more to it than that. Beckett's confinement to Ireland occurred during a period of his life when influences are formative and lasting; a period when the culture, mannerisms and eccentricities of a particular society are not only fundamental to the development of personality, but may provide also the raw material of creativity should a sensitive talent be among its youth.

It is over fifty years since Beckett's writing was first published, and time has taken a dismal toll on the city he wrote of with such affection. Even the surrounding landscape of mountain and sea has been altered. So-called city planners have seen fit to fill in much of Dublin Bay and if they have their way will continue to destroy this national amenity that has been taken so much for granted by Dubliners. The foothills of the mountains of Dublin have been swallowed up by a rising tide of ugly suburban houses, and even the inhospitable summits so beloved by Bill Beckett and his son have been defaced with pylons and cables.

Nevertheless much that is beautiful remains in Dublin and it is still possible on a spring evening to experience the tranquility of the mountain foothills close to Foxrock:

Leaning now on his stick, between Leopardstown down the hill to the north and the heights of Two Rock and Three Rock to the south, Belacqua regretted the horses of the good old days, for they would have

given to the landscape something that the legions of sheep and lambs could not give. These latter were springing into the world every minute, the grass was spangled with scarlet after-births, the larks were singing, the hedges were breaking, the sun was shining, the sky was Mary's cloak, the daisies were there, everything was in order. Only the cuckoo was wanting. It was one of those Spring evenings when it is a matter of some difficulty to keep God out of one's meditations.

(*More Pricks than Kicks*, p.109)

Foxrock

Foxrock, Samuel Beckett's birth place though more developed than in Beckett's childhood still retains an atmosphere that is rural, elegant and sheltered. Its inhabitants today, as in Bill Beckett's time, are the successful business and professional citizens of Dublin — there is an air of refined affluence about the place:

Belacqua was heartily glad to get back to his parent's comfortable private residence, ineffably detached and situated and so on, and his first act, once spent the passion of greeting after so long and bitter a separation, was to plunge his prodigal head into the bush of verberna that clustered about the old porch (wonderful bush it was to be sure, even making every due allowance for the kind southern aspect it enjoyed, it never had been known to miss a summer since first it was reared from a tiny seedling) and longly to swim and swoon on the rich bosom of its fragrance, a fragrance in which the least of his childish joys and sorrows were and would for ever be embalmed.

(*Dream of Fair to Middling Women*, p.128)

In the family home *Cooldrinagh* on Kerry Mount Avenue, Beckett grew up in an atmosphere of peace and comfort:

None but tranquil sounds, the clicking of mallet and ball, a rake on pebbles, a distant lawn-mower, the bell of my beloved church. And birds of course, blackbird and thrush, their song sadly dying, vanquished by the heat, and leaving dawn's high boughs for the bushes' gloom. Contentedly I inhaled the scent of my lemon-verberna.

In such surroundings slipped away my last moments of peace and happiness.

(*Molloy*, p.93)

Foxrock station, once the focal point of Beckett's childhood village no longer exists:

The entire scene, the hills, the plain, the racecourse with its miles and miles of white rails and three red stands, the pretty little wayside station ...

(*All That Fall*, p.25)

Once the pride of the line,¹⁵ as Beckett acknowledges in *All That Fall*, the station is now a derelict ruin on a weed covered platform astride a trackless way that once carried 'The Slow and Easy' between Foxrock and Harcourt Street Station:

Before you slink away, Mr. Barrell, please, a statement of some kind, I insist. Even the slowest train on this brief line is not ten minutes and more behind its scheduled time without good cause, one imagines. (*Pause*). We all know your station is the best kept of the entire network, but there are times when that is not enough, just not enough. (*Pause*).

Now, Mr. Barrell, leave off chewing your whiskers, we are waiting to hear from you — we the unfortunate ticket-holders nearest if not dearest.

(*All That Fall*, pp.26-27)

I walked this derelict line with difficulty from Harcourt Street enjoying the view of the mountains and the gentle intervening plain with Croker's Acres (now the residence of the British Ambassador), and Leopardstown Racecourse, happily still with us. Angry residents whose garden boundary was once the railway line now regard the land as theirs and my pastoral thoughts were rudely dispersed on more than one occasion. Deep in what might have been the Molloy country in Shankill, a man wild with anger cursing loudly and flaying his blackthorn, broke from the woods of his adjoining patch accompanied by his foaming mastiff to dispatch me on my way.

Cooldrinagh the house in which Beckett was born still stands, only slightly changed,¹⁶ but the summer-house, in which Beckett's father read his *Punch*, has disappeared:

There on summer Sundays after his midday meal your father loved to retreat with *Punch* and a cushion. The waist of his trousers unbuttoned he sat on the one ledge turning the pages. You on the other with your feet dangling. When he chuckled you tried to chuckle too. When his chuckle died yours too.

(*Company*, pp.53-54).

The larches of *Cooldrinagh* live on but in depleted numbers, and one still turns green every year a week before the others. The verbena still scents the entrance porch. Connolly's store that features so prominently in *All That Fall* now boasts formica and dralon and a name that is as far from reality as it is from Beckett — *The Magic Carpet*. Tullow Church and Tully graveyard with its Latin Cross exist much as in Beckett's day:

Some twenty paces from my wicket-gate the lane skirts the graveyard wall. The lane descends, the wall rises, higher and higher. Soon you are faring below the dead. It is there I have my plot in perpetuity. As long as the earth endures that spot is mine, in theory. Sometimes I went and looked at my grave. The stone was up already. It was a simple Latin cross, white. I wanted to have my name put on it, with the here lies and the date of my birth. Then all it would have wanted was the date of my death. They would not let me. Sometimes I smiled, as if I were dead already.

(*Molloy*, p. 135).

Beckett has even gone so far as to write an epitaph, which if not his own serves at least for the narrator of *First Love*:

Mine I composed long since and am still pleased with it, tolerably pleased. My other writings are no sooner dry than they revolt me, but my epitaph still meets with my approval. There is little chance unfortunately of its ever being reared above the skull that conceived it, unless the State takes up the matter. But to be unearthed I must first be found, and I greatly fear those gentlemen will have as much trouble finding me dead as alive. So I hasten to record it here and now, while there is yet time:

Hereunder lies the above who up below

So hourly died that he lived on till now

The second and last or rather latter line limps a little

perhaps, but that is no great matter, I'll be forgiven more than that when I'm forgotten.

(*First Love*, p. 2)

The Foxrock postmen, endearing figures of childhood,¹⁷ are long since dead but not the poignant memories they kindled in a young boy:

But where was the slender one, where was he, that was the question, as thin and fine as the greyhounds he tended, the musical one, a most respectable and industrious young fellow he was, by sheer industry, my dear, plus personal charm, those were the two sides of the ladder on which this man had mounted, had he not raised himself above his station, out of the horrible slum of the cottages, did he not play on the violin, own an evening suit of his own and dance fleetly with the gentry, and, as he lay as a child wide awake long after he should have been fast asleep at the top of the house on a midsummer's night Belacqua would hear him, the light nervous step on the road as he danced home after his rounds the keen loud whistling *The Roses are Blooming in Picardy*. No man had ever whistled like that, and of course women can't. That was the original, the only, the unforgettable banquet of music. There was no music after — only, if one were lucky, the signet of rubies and the pleasant wine. He whistled the *Roses are Blooming* and danced home down the road under the moon, in the light of the moon, with perhaps a greyhound or two to set him off, and the dew descending.

(*Dream of Fair to Middling Women*, p.129).

The identification of place in Beckett's writing is often difficult, an example being a childhood den named Foley's Folly which is central to the novel *Company*. So dominant is this folly that I knew it had to have firm origins in reality but it proved very difficult to locate. I searched the local historical sources, and consulted with a few reliable historians as to its whereabouts — all without success. On the Ordinance Survey Map of the Dublin mountains I located a place bearing the name Taylor's Folly. This ruin on the slopes of Two Rock mountain, once a farmhouse, now houses a herd of pigs, delightful creatures, who consumed my lunch. The view, the overgrown nettles, the solitude (if you ignore the pigs), and the air of tranquility all seemed to suggest Foley's Folly, but it was well out in the country whereas Beckett states that the den was "not in the country":

I see a kind of den littered with empty tins. And yet we are not in the country. Perhaps it's just a ruined folly, on the skirts of the town, in a field, for the fields come right up to our walls, and the cows lie down at night in the lee of the ramparts. I have changed refuge so often, in the course of my rout, that now I can't tell between dens and ruins.

(*The Calmative*, p. 35).

When I showed Beckett photographs of Taylor's Folly, he told me much to my dismay and despite my persuasion concerning the wonderful view, that he had never been there. He remembered however, that the Folly had been originally called Barrington's Tower, but to use his words, there was no music in that name, so he changed it to Foley's Folly.¹⁸ Barrington's Tower no longer exists as the Folly in the field of Beckett's childhood, but is now part of a fine house, which happily sports a large photographic print of the original tower.

Beckett's disregard for the real name of the tower demonstrates that the place of reality in Beckett's work is in kindling the inspirational process whereas the superficial reality of identification is of no relevance once the deeper reality has served its creative purpose.

We may pause to observe here a striking difference in technique between Joyce and Beckett. Whereas Joyce was fastidious in securing every detail for his literary creation from friends or *Thom's Directory*, Beckett does not generally pay attention to the accuracy or otherwise of his creations however realistic their source may be. You will say, what about *Murphy*¹⁹ where there are undoubtedly carefully constructed clues to date the happenings in that novel, and there is of course, the hilarious request from Paris to Con Leventhal in Dublin to betake himself to the General Post Office in O'Connell Street, to measure the height from the ground of the earse of Cuchulain, whose statue stands in that establishment.²⁰ This exercise was requested so that Beckett might determine if it would be possible for Neary from Cork to dash out his brains against the hero's buttocks:

In Dublin a week later, that would be September 19th, Neary minus his whiskers was recognised 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 are.

(*Murphy*, p. 33)

But such instances aside, Beckett unlike Joyce is not concerned with embellishing the reality of his creation. For Beckett the reality fires the creative process and having done so has no further purpose; it can, in fact, become an incumbrance in that it restricts the drama to time and place and is better discarded. Beckett is more concerned with tearing away the reality and leaving the creation to stand as it were unsupported in its own beauty; remarkably, in Beckett's hands it does so whereas the expectation would be for it to disintegrate.

Dublin Bay

The Beckett boys proved to be accomplished sportsmen at school, and Samuel Beckett was particularly successful at swimming.²¹ The sea of Dublin bay provides the city's inhabitants with a selection of coves and beaches for swimming and Samuel Beckett learned to swim in one of the most beautiful and deepest — the Forty Foot at Sandycove.²²

You stand at the tip of the high board. High above the sea. In it your father's upturned face. Upturned to you. You look down to the loved trusted face. He calls to you to jump. He calls. Be a brave boy. The red round face. The thick moustache. The greying hair. The swell sways it under and sways it up again. The far call again. Be a brave boy. Many eyes upon you. From the water and from the bathing place.

(*Company*, pp. 23-24)

Further south the fishing village of Coliemore, and Dalkey island with its Martello Tower and battery give to the coastline a beauty not devoid of interest:

The island. A last effort. The islet. The shore facing the open sea is jagged with creeks. One could live

there, perhaps happy, if life was a possible thing, but nobody lives there. The deep water comes washing into its heart between high walls of rock. One day nothing will remain of it but two islands, separated by a gulf, narrow at first, then wider and wider as the centuries slip by, two islands.

(*Malone Dies*, p. 288)

The Dublin Mountains

Important though Foxrock and the closeby coast are as influences on Beckett, it is the Dublin mountains which exert the most lasting and powerful influences. With his father, he tramped these mountain slopes and summits absorbing a terrain that has a unique magic and charm. The mountain peaks with their bog and furze, from which the city of Dublin, Dublin bay and the Wicklow mountains are visible in the distance, constitute a landscape which Beckett believes to be unique, a landscape which must endure and influence. He has written of this land: "The old haunts were never more present. With closed eyes I walk those dear back-roads";²³

A road still carriageable climbs over the high moorland. It cuts across vast turbogs, a thousand feet above sea-level, two thousand if you prefer. It leads to nothing any more. A few ruined forts, a few ruined dwellings. The sea is not far, just visible beyond the valleys dipping eastward, pale plinth as pale as the pale wall of sky. Tarns lie hidden in the folds of the moor, invisible from the road, reached by faint paths, under high over-hanging crags. All seems flat, or gently undulating, and there at a stone's throw these high crags, all unsuspected by the wayfarer. Of granite what is more. In the west the chain is at its highest, its peaks exalt even the most downcast eyes, peaks commanding the vast campaign land, the celebrated pastures, the golden vale. Before the travellers, as far as eye can reach, the road winds on into the south, uphill, but imperceptibly. None ever pass this way but beauty-spot hogs and fanatical trampers. Under its heather mask the quag allures, with an allurements not all mortals can rest. Then it swallows them up or the mist comes down. The city is not far either, from certain points its lights can be seen by night, its light rather, and by day its haze.

(*Mercier and Camier*, pp. 97-98)

The mountain skies always close to the summit walker vie in their inconstancy of mood with the beauty of the distant views:

Yes, the great cloud was ravelling, discovering here and there a pale and dying sky, and the sun, already down, was manifest in the livid tongues of fire darting towards the zenith, falling and darting again, ever more pale and languid, and doomed no sooner lit to be extinguished. This phenomenon, if I remember rightly was characteristic of my region.

(*Molloy*, p. 65)

The water of the bay of Dublin, speckled with islands and ships and fringed by a coastline of rock, rivers and piers, undulates gently its colour in harmony with the inconstant hue and shade of the sky above:

Even the piers of the harbour can be distinguished, on very clear days, of the two harbours, tiny arms in the glassy sea outflung, known flat, seen raised. And the islands and promontories, one has only to stop and

turn at the right place, and of course by night the beacon lights, both flashing and revolving. It is here one would lie down. In a hollow bedded with dry heather, and fall asleep, for the last time, on an afternoon, in the sun, head down among the minute life of stems and bells, and fast fall asleep, fast farewell to charming things. It's a birdless sky, the odd raptor, no song. End of descriptive passage.

(Mercier and Camier, pp. 97-98)

The stems and bells of the mountain furze and the ringing of the stone cutter's hammers in the granite quarries are lasting evocatory memories:

And on the slopes of the mountain, now rearing its unbroken bulk behind the town, the fires turned from gold to red, from red to gold. I knew what it was, it was the gorse burning. How often I had set a match to it myself, as a child. And hours later, back in my home, before I climbed into bed, I watched from my high window the fires I had lit.

(*The End*, p. 69)

Waiting for Godot is a timeless play. No detail dates the drama or its message to any age. It will adapt to the theatre of the future as readily as it has done to the twentieth century stage. As it is timeless, so too, it is placeless, demanding little more for its setting than a strange tree, a country road and desolation. Beckett removed most, but not quite all, detail that might permit identification of place in *Godot*. He wished to create, as Con Leventhal so aptly put it, "a cosmic state, a world condition in which all humanity is involved."⁴ He sought to free us from the restrictions that a specific location would place on interpretation. Beckett did not wish us to see the tramps as "a pair of Joxers in a limbo of the Dublin Liberties," or a couple of peasants on a country road in Roussillon. Perhaps then one should desist from even suggesting an influence in Beckett's setting for *Godot*. Might it be better to refrain from touching something so precious for fear of damaging it? And yet...! Walking the summits of the Dublin mountains, in certain weathers the mood of *Godot* is so palpable, that though the urge emphatically to locate the drama there might be resisted, a director in search of inspiration for the ideal setting for *Godot* could not find better than the lonely summit of Glencree, with its occasional threatened tree. Here, Estragon and Vladimir might have settled as did Mercier and Camier before them.⁵ The tree defies accurate description:

Vladimir: He said by the tree. (*They look at the tree*).

Do you see any others?

Estragon: What is it?

Vladimir: I don't know. A willow.

Estragon: Where are the leaves?

Vladimir: It must be dead.

Estragon: No more weeping.

Vladimir: Or perhaps it's not the season.

Estragon: Looks to be more like a bush.

Vladimir: A shrub.

(*Waiting for Godot*, p. 14)

Beckett's parents

I have concerned myself hardly at all in *The Beckett Country* with that favourite of pastimes in the Dublin from which Beckett departed — the hurtful tittle-tattle of gossip masquerading as locutory wit. Beckett's interest in humanity does not concentrate on the individual, nor on nationality, his vision is more univer-

sal, he is concerned with the behaviour of mankind, the so-called human condition. Identification of person in Beckett's writing is not generally possible, and if attempted is at best speculative, and not very enlightening. An exception is the important influence of his parents on his writing. Beckett has written, as few others of the profound influence of his parents on his development. He has done so in a manner that is, to say that least, disarming. He saw his parents as they were with their faults and virtues. He portrayed them as he saw them without permitting either their virtues or faults to colour his literary creation. How critical and intolerant we might expect the young intellectual, that was Beckett, to have been of a father who had no interest in literature. Content to tramp his beloved mountains, Bill Beckett's love of nature surpassed, in his son's estimation, any so-called cultural deficiencies. This delightful, tolerant, and affectionate man listened to his son and by listening may have done more to further his development than if he had talked at him incessantly:

Fortunately my father died when I was a boy, otherwise I might have been a professor, he had set his heart on it. A very fair scholar I was too, no thought, but a great memory. One day I told him about Milton's cosmology, away up in the mountains we were, resting against a huge rock looking out to sea, that impressed him greatly.

(*From an Abandoned Work*, p. 131)

How beautiful in its affection is the scene of father reading the story of the son of the lighthouse keeper, Breem:

Yes, this evening it has to be as in the story my father used to read to me, evening after evening, when I was small, and he had all his health, to calm me, evening after evening, year after year it seems to me this evening, which I don't remember much about, except that it was the adventures of one Joe Breem, or Breen, the son of a lighthouse-keeper, a strong muscular lad of fifteen, those were the words, who swam for miles in the night, a knife between his teeth, after a shark, I forget why, out of sheer heroism. He might have simply told me the story, he knew it by heart, so did I, but that wouldn't have calmed me, he had to read it to me, evening after evening, or pretend to read it to me, turning the pages and explaining the pictures that were of me already, evening after evening the same pictures till I dozed off on his shoulder. If he had skipped a single word I would have hit him, with my little fist, in his big belly bursting out of the old cardigan and unbuttoned trousers that rested him from his office canonicals.

(*The Calmative*, p. 37)

The death of Bill Beckett had a profound and lasting effect on his son, who gave expression to his feelings in the poem *Malacoda*.²⁶ His father's burial place, Redford cemetery in Greystones, that "boneyard by the sea"²⁷, was a place of frequent pilgrimage for Samuel Beckett.

I visited, not so long ago, my father's grave, that I do know, and noted the date of his death, of his death alone, for that of his birth had no interest for me, on that particular day. I set out in the morning and was back by night, having lunched lightly in the graveyard. But some days later, wishing to know his age at death, I had to return to the grave, to note the date of his birth.

(*First Love*, p. 1)

Humour and affection, qualities which one suspects endeared young Sam to his father, disguise the sorrow and sadness that must inevitably have affected Beckett on these visits to Greystones:

Personally I have no bone to pick with graveyards, I take the air there willingly, perhaps more willingly than elsewhere, when take the air I must. The smell of corpses, distinctly perceptible under those of grass and humus mingled, I do not find unpleasant, a trifle on the sweet side perhaps, a trifle heady, but how infinitely preferable to what the living emit, their feet, teeth, armpits, arses, sticky foreskins and frustrated ovules. And when my father's remains join in, however modestly, I can almost shed a tear. The living wash in vain, in vain perfume themselves, they stink. Yes, as a place for an outing, when out I must, leave me my graveyards and keep-you-to your public parks and beauty-spots. My sandwich, my banana, taste sweeter when I'm sitting on a tomb, and when the time comes to piss again, as it so often does, I have my pick.

(*First Love*, pp. 1-2)

Beckett's mother, May Beckett, is often depicted by critics, as a soulless, humourless personality typifying the tyrannical and demanding mother so often bestowed on the Irishmen in literature.²⁸ There may, of course, be some truth in this assessment, but on the other hand, May Beckett did earn her son's lasting affection, even if his patience had been wearing somewhat thin:

next another image yet another so soon again the third perhaps they'll soon cease it's me all of me and any mother's face I see it from below it's like nothing I ever saw

we are on a verandah smothered in verbena the scented sun dapples the red tiles yes I assure you

bowed down over my curls the eyes burn with severe love I offer her mine pale upcast to the sky whence cometh our help and which I know perhaps even then with time shall pass away.

in a word bolt upright on a cushion on my knees whelmed in a nightshirt I pray according to her instructions

that's not all she closes her eyes and drones a snatch of the so-called Apostles' Creed I steal a look at her lips

she stops her eyes burn down on me again I cast up mine in haste and repeat awry

the air thrills with the hum of insects
(*How It Is*, pp. 16-17)

In interpreting the attitude of the Beckettian character to motherhood, we must bear in mind that in the Beckett country terms such as, "old bitch"²⁹ and the like, pass for endearment when addressed with affection to the female of the human as well as the canine genus.

Beckett nursed his mother during her last illness in the Merrion Nursing Home close to the Grand Canal.³⁰ After a night's vigil as he sat exhausted on a bench on the bank of the closeby canal and gazed at the window where she

"lay a dying, in the late autumn, after her long vidity,"³² the sign came that she was at peace at least:

— 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. I 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.

(*Krapp's Last Tape*, pp. 59-60)

This expression of desire for his mother's death and relief on her passing reflects Beckett's anguish and despair in the face of human suffering, sentiments all the more acute when such suffering is experienced by a dear one, rather than, as some might have it, indifference for or intolerance of his mother.

That May Beckett was a disciplinarian with Victorian principles is beyond doubt, and that young Sam spent many a summer evening supperless in bed, no doubt deservedly so, is clearly recorded, but not in bitterness. Is there not an air of patient tolerance in the delightful garden scene in *Company*?

You are alone in the garden. Your mother is in the kitchen making ready for afternoon tea with Mrs. Coote. Making the wafer-thin bread and butter. From behind a bush you watch Mrs Coote arrive. A small thin sour woman. Your mother answers her saying. He is playing in the garden. You climb to near the top of a great fir. You sit a little listening to all the sounds. Then throw yourself off. The great boughs break your fall. The needles. You lie a little with your face to the ground. Then climb the tree again. Your mother answers Mrs Coote again saying, He has been a very naughty boy.

(*Company*, p. 28)

We may even go so far as to say that had the mature Sam Beckett had to deal with recalcitrant progeny, he might have applied far stricter criteria of discipline than May Beckett, if Moran's treatment of his son is anything to go by:

The dirty little twister was letting the air escape between the valve and the connection which he had purposely not screwed tight. Hold the bicycle, I said, and give me the pump. The tyre was soon hard. I looked at my son. He began to protest. I soon put a stop to that. Five minutes later I felt the tyre. It was as hard as ever, I cursed him.

(*Molloy*, p. 156)

Whatever the discipline, whatever the exasperation that the young Beckett, in common with all children, may have felt for his parents and perhaps for his mother in particular, the lasting effect was one of a deep affection and a sense of gratitude to which his writing is testimony. There was a I believe, a deeper and more important influence imparted to Samuel Beckett from his parents, and we might for want of a better term, identify this as the Christian ethic. Bill and May Beckett, though devout followers of the Church of Ireland, imparted to their son, not so much a sense of religion, but a truly Christian sense of compassion and charity.



Samuel Beckett at his mother's knee on the porch of "Cooldrinagh." (By courtesy, Carlton Lake, Humanities Research Center, The University of Texas at Austin).

My immersion in the fires of Beckett's writing has not left me unaffected. If I was to identify that quality that most influenced me, it would be compassion. Coming from a discipline, as I do, that demands compassion and feeling, but paradoxically makes the exclusion of sentiment a prerequisite for the survival of self, if is chastening but not necessarily a balm to existence, to have this protective wall around self annihilated. This compassion that I speak of in Beckett's writing is to be found in the earliest works. In his first novel *More Pricks than Kicks*, published in 1934, the theme of much of his future writing is evident in his affection for the down and out, the tramp:

In the ditch on the far side of the road a strange equipage was installed: an old high-wheeled cart, hung with rags. Belacqua looked round for something in the nature of a team, the crazy yoke could scarcely have fallen from the sky, but nothing in the least resembling a draught-beast was to be seen, not even a cow. Squatting under the cart a complete down-and-out was very busy with something or other. The sun beamed down on this as though it were a newborn lamb. Belacqua took in the whole outfit at a glance and felt, the wretched bourgeois, a paroxysm of shame for his capon belly.

(*More Pricks than Kicks*, p. 111)

In the same work, we find the hero Belacqua, alias the young Sam Beckett, running (admittedly into a pub) to escape the self-righteous wrath of Ireland's populace screaming for the blood of the unfortunate murderer McCabe. In 1926 a Georgian farmhouse on an estate in

Malahide in County Dublin was burned to the ground with its seven occupants.³² McCabe, the gardener was arrested, tried, found guilty of the crime and executed on December 9th, 1926. Beckett was disturbed by the attitude of a society prepared to accept without question a judgement that left unanswered enough points of importance to leave at least some doubt as to McCabe's guilt. He asks:

Why not piety and pity both, even down below? Why not mercy and Godliness together? A little mercy in the stress of sacrifice, a little mercy to rejoice against judgement. He thought of Jonah and the gourd and the pity of a jealous God of 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.

(*More Pricks than Kicks*, p. 20)

In that most evocative of Beckett's works, *Company*, there is the childhood scene with the old lady of the roads, so common then in Ireland and perhaps a precursor to the narrator of *Not I*:

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 crony 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 beggar 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.

(*Company*, pp. 21-22)

This passage, searing in its compassion, is as poignant as any prose from the evangelists. In fact, Beckett's writing is, for me, more Christian, more religious in the true sense, than the bible.

I have concentrated on what I have chosen to call the heart of the Beckett country, the reality that was Beckett's childhood because the influences from this period are of greatest relevance to his writing. I have left aside consideration of lesser, though by no means unimportant, influences such as school, Trinity College, the people and the institutes of Dublin, because they lack, or only possess in a small degree, that quality that gives to the childhood memories their remarkable strength — namely evocation.

Evocation

That Dublin is a powerful influence, the point of commencement, in fact, of much of Beckett's writing is I think quite evident, but that influence in itself would be insufficient to explain the genius of Beckett's talent. After all, many fine Irish writers have this common background but have failed to achieve in their writing that 'something' that elevates Beckett's work to an unusual pinnacle in art. If we wish to examine that indefinable essence more closely rather than merely dismissing it as 'genius', I suggest that it is to France we should look. Not for the French language, important influence though that is, but to Marcel Proust, who permitted Beckett to develop the evocatory sense that allowed him to extract, as it were, the essence from his formative period.

The recognisable senses of taste, smell, hearing, sight and touch provided insufficient sensory material for Proust's creative process, which remained impotent

until he recognised in himself a latent other sense, a sense that has either atrophied, or more likely has not developed in most of us into a recognisable sense in the terms we employ to define such physiological entities. Beckett appreciated immediately the importance of Proust's discovery of this extra sense that was not dependent on memory alone and which added a new dimension to the creative process. So fascinated was he by this evocatory technique that he listed the fetishes, as he called them, that fired Proust's process of intellectualised animism — the Madeline steeped in tea, the steeples of Martinville, a musty smell in a public lavatory, three trees, the hedge of hawthorn near Balbec, uneven cobbles in the courtyard of the Guermantes Hotel, and so on.³³

We can, without difficulty, draw up a list of evocatory stimuli for Beckett as he did for Proust — the larch tree, the smell of the lemon verbena, the granite pier of Dun Laoghaire, the tinkle of the stone-cutter's hammer, and most powerful of all the shaving mirror in New Place. The tenuity of existence and the ephemerality of survival are evoked forcibly by Beckett in the contrasting qualities of a shaving-mirror's material durability and the transience of its reflected imagery:

I can see me still, with those of now, sealed this long time, staring with those of then, I must have been twelve, because of the glass, a round shaving-glass, double-faced, faithful and magnifying, staring into one of the others, the true ones true then, and seeing me there, imagining I saw me there, lurking behind the bluey veils, staring back sightlessly, at the age of twelve, or at the age of forty, for the mirror remained, my father went but the mirror remained, in which he had so greatly changed, my mother did her hair in it, with twitching hands, in another house, with no view of the sea, with a view of the mountains, if it was my mother, what a refreshing whiff of life on earth.

(*Texts for Nothing*, pp. 90-91)

Beckett's evocatory sense is developed to such a degree that he can recall the terror of intra-uterine distress, and the moments of light shortly after birth:

You were born on an Easter Friday after long labour. Yes I remember. The sun had not long sunk behind the larches. Yes I remember.

(*Company*, pp. 46-47)

So though we might say that much of Beckett's writing, is autobiographical in that it is dependent on the past — his past — it is elevated above this genre and given an exquisite delicacy through evocation. The achievement of evocation is no easy matter; it does not happen at will; its presence is resented by voluntary memory and the other senses that seek to dispel it; it is, as Beckett called it, "a discordant and frivolous intruder".³³ When it obliges, it may do so at most inopportune moments, and intrude though it may it should be prized for what it is, seized and held for as long as possible to the exclusion of all else. It is the retention of the evocatory state that is so difficult, so draining, but the creative yield from the sensation will, of course, be dependent on the extent of the experience. Evocation permits what science fiction writers dream about, namely a transportation in time, regrettably only within one's own timespan, but this is, nevertheless, a substantial achievement.

Consideration of this phenomenon may modify our interpretation of Beckett's writing. When he writes of the

places, the people, and sensations that the evocatory moment permits him, he writes as he feels and sees in the evocation. If it is a boy writing of an old man, the man is 'old' in the eyes of the boy only; that is he might be no more than thirty or forty or even twenty, but 'old', so old in the eyes of the very youthful observer:

Where then but there see now another. Bit by bit an old man and child. In the dim void bit by bit an old man and child. Any other would do as ill.

Hand in hand with equal plod they go. In the free hands — no. Free empty hands. Backs turned both bowed with equal plod they go. The child hand raised to reach the holding hand. Hold the old holding hand. Hold and be held. Plod on and never recede. Slowly with never a pause plod on and never recede. Backs turned. Both bowed. Joined by held holding hands. Plod on as one. One shade. Another shade.

(*Worstward Ho*, p. 12-13)

Hills of 'extraordinary steepness' to the child are to us adults nothing more than mere inclines. Such indeed is the case in the delightful scene with his mother at the first aviation meeting in Ireland in 1910 at Leopardstown racecourse.³⁴ Here the hill of extraordinary steepness is Cornelscourt Hill Road³⁵ a relatively gentle incline:

But I have heard aeroplanes elsewhere and have even seen them in flight, I saw the very first in flight and then in the end the latest models, oh not the very latest, the very second latest, the very antepenultimate. I was present at one of the first loopings of the loop, so help me God. I was not afraid. It was above a racecourse, my mother held me by the hand. She kept saying, it's a miracle, a miracle. Then I changed my mind. We were not often of the same mind. One day we were walking along the road, up a hill of extraordinary steepness, near home I imagine, my memory is full of steep hills, I get them confused. I said, the sky is further away than you think, is it not, mama? It was without malice, I was simply thinking of all the leagues that separated me from it. She replied, to me her son, it is precisely as far away as it appears to be. She was right. But at the time I was aghast. I can still see the spot, opposite Tyler's gate. A market-gardener, he had only one eye and wore side-whiskers. That's the idea, rattle on. You could see the sea, the islands, the headlands, the isthmuses, the coast stretching away to north and south and the crooked moles of the harbour. We were on our way home from the butcher's.

(*Malone Dies*, pp. 269-270)

It is I think apparent that much, but by no means all of Beckett's writing has its origins in a real world, and that much of the inspirational energy in his writing emanates from the place of his childhood, which happened to be Dublin. He has rendered this world almost unrecognisable by denuding its landscape and its people (while also annihilating time) in his creation of "the unreality of the real".³⁶ Yet like Krapp, who found inspiration on the East Pier of Dun Laoghaire harbour, so too did Beckett find the inspiration for his writing in this intimate world of childhood:

Intellectually a year of profound gloom until that wonderful night in March, at the end of the pier, in the high wind, when suddenly I saw the whole thing. The turning-point, at last. This, I imagine, is what I have chiefly to set down this evening, against the day when

my work will be done and perhaps no place in my memory, and no thankfulness, for the miracle — (pause) — for the fire that set it alight. What I saw was that the assumption I had been going on all my life, namely — (He switches off machine impatiently, winds tape forward, switches on again) — granite rocks the foam flying up in the light of the beacon and the anemometer spinning like a propeller, clear to me at least that the dark I have struggled to keep at bay is in reality my most valuable — (He curses, switches off, winds tape forward, switches on again) — strange association till my dying day of storm and night with the light of understanding and the — (He curses louder, switches off, winds tape forward, switches on again.)³⁷

This inspiration was to direct Beckett towards reduction rather than embellishment, towards poverty and

decrepitude rather than beauty and possession, towards the land he was soon to depart, the land of his childhood, of sea and mountain, that was to continue pulsating within him in a mighty systole destined ultimately to find expression in the art that has so enriched our existence and our understanding of that existence:

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

(Tailpiece, Watt, p. 274)

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16. *Coldrinagh* was built by William Beckett at the junction of Kerry Mount Avenue and Brighton Road in Foxrock and its architectural features were deemed worthy of illustration in the prestigious *Irish Builder* in 1903. O'Brien. *The Beckett Country*. p. 3.
17. Two Foxrock postmen, John Thompson and Bill Shannon feature in Beckett's writing. O'Brien. *The Beckett Country*. pp. 18-19.
18. Beckett changed the name of Barrington's Folly twice, first to Maguire and later to Foley. O'Brien. *The Beckett Country*. p. 350.
19. Events in *Murphy* may be dated by events in the novel and an astronomical dating of events is also possible. O'Brien. *The Beckett Country*. p. 360.
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