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Amy Burnside

Queen's University Belfast, aburnside01@qub.ac.uk

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Amy Burnside

'He thinks he's entangled in a net': The web of continental associations in *Waiting for Godot*.

For much of the 19th and early 20th centuries, Ireland was considered to be culturally detached from the rest of Europe, its peripheral location providing the basis for social isolation and insularity. Ireland's national insecurities as an occupied land were expressed in the attempts to revitalise and protect traditional Irish culture through the Irish Literary Revival, a movement which resulted in a body of literature trapped in the cyclical Nationalist discourse, its distinguishing feature a decidedly Irish blend of political patriotism and religious fervour. The classification of Irish literature has, throughout the 20th and 21st centuries, been problematised by the variation in opinion on what it is that renders a given literary work 'Irish'. The denotation itself carries a lingering burden of stereotype, and the expectation that Irish literature must always address issues of nationality and empire; that it is primarily concerned with the rural, and that religious devotion provides the basis for its central characters' ideologies.

It is against the background of such narrow and provincial conceptions of identity that Samuel Beckett, a disillusioned Irishman living and writing in France, created one of the best known works of contemporary theatre, becoming in the process a symbol for the rapidly changing topography of Irish literature, and the culture it depicts. In his iconic work, *Waiting for Godot*, Beckett deals primarily with three chief areas of thought – religion, philosophy, and history – using influences derived from Paris and Dublin, the two metropolitan landscapes which shaped his writing. This essay will seek to examine the nature of these influences, beginning with the impact of European secularity upon the writing of *Godot*, the contrast with Irish cultural Christianity and the importance of Beckett's own religious background. It will then consider the ways in which Beckett incorporates wider European philosophy, in particular, the works of Sartre and Camus, and situates Irish thinkers such as Bishop Berkeley in relation to a larger philosophical movement, reflecting developments in Irish thought, and rejecting provincialized

conceptions of Ireland as an intellectually 'backward' nation. Finally, it will evaluate the significance of the trauma of historical events, and the impact these brought to bear, not only upon Irish and European societies themselves, but also upon their literary representations.

Martin Esslin, in his ground-breaking work *The Theatre of the Absurd*, claims that the plays of Beckett and his contemporaries can be viewed as a reflection of the prevailing European attitude of the time, an attitude characterised by the sense that:

the certitudes and unshakable basic assumptions of former ages have been swept away ... that they have been discredited as cheap and somewhat childish illusions. (Esslin, 23)

It is perhaps true to say that, for intellectuals in mainland Europe at least, theological certainties had been shattered and traditional religion reduced to the status of dissatisfactory ritual. Esslin goes a step further, however, in his suggestion that these writers reject any theological explanation for human existence as obsolete and irrelevant. Such a view fails to consider the subtleties of the relationship between modernism and religion, which can most accurately be described as a binary opposition between mockery and longing, resulting in the rejection of religion as that which cannot fully be attained.

In this respect, Beckett occupies something of a no-man's land, caught between an inherited religious devotion and the secularity of the society in which he chose to live. He reflects a dialectical attitude towards faith, similar to that previously expressed by Joyce in the figure of Stephen Dedalus. At the close of *A Portrait of the Artist*, Dedalus states that he "will not serve that in which [he] no longer believe[s]" (256); in *Ulysses*, he declares himself "a servant...[of] the holy Roman Catholic and apostolic church" (20), revealing himself to be trapped between a rationalised rejection of faith and a stubborn refusal to leave religion behind. Beckett's writing expresses the same sense of "yearning for a void" (Butler, 183); an acknowledgement of the unlikelihood of the existence of God, coupled with an inability to give up the search. In spite of this self-division, it is obvious that Christian discourse and symbolism carried some significance for Beckett, and provided inspiration for

elements of his finest work. Beckett himself appears to confirm these visions of Irish faith; he allowed that a Christian interpretation of Godot could, to a certain extent, be justified, saying: “Christianity is a mythology with which I am perfectly familiar, so naturally I use it” (McCormack, 396). Early in the first act, Vladimir appears to toy with the idea of repentance and the hope of salvation:

Vladimir: One of the thieves was saved. [*Pause.*] It's a reasonable percentage. [*Pause.*] Gogo.

Estragon: What?

Vladimir: Suppose we repented. (3)

The manner in which they discuss salvation is flippant; Estragon, as is typical of his character, cannot think beyond the physical realm, while Vladimir almost instantly moves on to a critique of the gospels, which we sense was his real motivation in broaching the subject. Estragon's response is visceral; Vladimir's approach, on the other hand, is much more intellectual, and reveals his fixation upon the discrepancies in the gospel accounts and his obsession with the arbitrary nature of grace. His concern is in regard to, as Esslin puts it, “the fortuitous bestowal of grace, which...divides mankind into those that will be saved and those that will be damned” (55). Beckett referred to “a wonderful sentence” in the works of St Augustine which considers this binary opposition: “Do not despair; one of the thieves was saved. Do not presume; one of the thieves was damned” (qtd. in Murphy, 154). There is considerable evidence to suggest that Beckett was more concerned with the aesthetic quality of such ideas than with their truth, or value as moral guidance. He famously stated: “I am interested in the shape of ideas even if I do not believe in them” (Murphy, 154), and it seems that Beckett is simply mining the abundant Biblical discourse for its literary merit, rather than for any didactic or moralising purposes.

Estragon and Vladimir's endless wait in a barren landscape becomes a kind of inverted and static pilgrimage, which echoes the Israelites' forty years wandering in the desert, and their wait for the promised land. Godot is envisioned as a transcendent god-like figure, and the two men even refer to their requests to him as: “A kind of prayer... A vague supplication” (10). When Vladimir asks the boy if Godot has a beard, it is clear that

he longs to link this absent figure with the “personal God quaquaquaqua with white beard” (36) of Lucky’s protracted speech. Yet what is *also* clear is that Godot is in many ways distinct from their conception of God. Although Godot is the one who has their future “in his hands” (22), his existence does not preclude the existence of God in the play. As Estragon becomes increasingly desperate, he cries out, “God have pity on me!” (69); according to Pozzo they are made in God’s image, not Godot’s, and as much as they long for Godot to come and save them from their boredom, Christ is still referred to as saviour.

This inchoate collection of religious references seems to be far from an expression of the playwright’s personal belief. Rather, the piecemeal allusions to religion and the Bible can be seen as a reflection upon the shattered coherence of religion in the light of twentieth-century events. According to Ó hÓgáin, Yeats’ relationship with religion presages this shift in Irish cultural attitudes, from dogmatic acceptance of a national faith, to questioning all but the “idealistic impulse of religion” (55). Perhaps a more cynical view of religion in this period would suggest that Christianity had been stripped of the spiritual certainties of its teleology, and reduced to a convenient narrative which could be exploited for political ends. Most would acknowledge that religious belief had, in some way at least, been diminished; Fleischmann, commenting on Canon Sheehan’s depictions of Catholicism in his novel *Luke Delmege*, writes that “religious tradition has fallen: the obedience it still commands is half-blind, the purpose of the ritual but half-understood” (96).

Lucky’s speech enhances this sense of fragmentation, and a breakdown in traditional understandings of God:

Given the existence [...] of a personal God quaquaquaqua with white beard quaquaquaqua outside time without extension who from the heights of divine athambia divine apathia divine aphasia loves us dearly with some exceptions for reasons unknown but time will tell. (36)

Here, God is rendered weak and distant; insensible to the suffering of humanity, imperturbable, and unable to communicate with his creation. This speech is perhaps most useful as a gauge of the progression of belief (or, indeed, unbelief) evident in Irish literary

representations of God. In earlier writing, the subject of divinity was approached with reverence, or at least treated with the same respect as other ancient mythologies. 'The Rebel', a nationalistic poem written by Patrick Pearse in 1915, expresses a respectful and tender view of divinity, describing God as: "the unforgetting, the dear God that loves the peoples / For whom he died naked, suffering shame" (Ó Buachalla, 26). Lucky's speech appears profane by comparison, and his assertion that the "personal God ... loves us dearly" is weighed down by a heavy sense of irony. Although Beckett's formative years were, to an extent, moulded by orthodox Protestant views of God and by his mother's religious devotion, even before he left Ireland he had come to reject these influences, attracted instead to European philosophy and the widespread religious apostasy he subsequently encountered in Paris.

While this play is saturated with religious imagery, *Godot* is perhaps more concerned with philosophical questions relating to the identity of the self, the source of human suffering, and the purpose of humanity's existence. Beckett does not attempt, however, to form a coherent or original philosophy. Rather, he seeks to present the human condition as he sees it, displaying and exhibiting, where a philosopher simply asserts (Cormier, 118).

Sartre, in his seminal work, *L'Être et le Néant* states that: "The first act of bad faith consists in evading what one cannot evade, in evading what one *is*" (111). If, for Beckett as for Sartre, it is essential to recognise that at the heart of existence there is nothingness, then Vladimir and Estragon's continual search for meaning becomes an evasion of their essential identity, and as a result, *Godot* can be seen as an image of 'bad faith'. For these central characters, thinking has become a painful occupation; in an echo of the oft quoted Cartesian maxim, *Cogito ergo sum*, thinking confirms these characters' existence, and forces them to address the pain bound up in it. Their desperation to avoid thought can therefore be seen as nihilistic, as they speak even when they have nothing to say, in order to shield themselves from the reality of their own existence:

Estragon: In the meantime let us try to converse calmly, since we are incapable of keeping silent.

Vladimir: You're right, we're inexhaustible.

Estragon: It's so we won't think. (53)

Although Gogo and Didi are free *not to think*, their need for constant distraction places an immense burden upon them and complicates what was initially a simple choice. The same can be said of their compulsion to return to the same ‘country road’ each evening; it is they who have made the appointment with Godot, but consequently, they are as restricted in their movements as the physically restrained Lucky, a fact amply demonstrated by the following repeated exchange:

Estragon: Let’s go.

Vladimir: We can’t.

Estragon: Why not?

Vladimir: We’re waiting for Godot.

Estragon: [*Despairingly.*] Ah! (6)

Sartre’s conception of freedom carries significance here; the French philosopher suggests that, “it is ... our freedom which constitutes the limits which it will subsequently encounter” (Sartre, 482). While the two men are free to act as they wish, each enactment of will imposes further restrictions upon them. Perhaps unconsciously, Beckett appears to have aligned himself with one of Sartre’s most famous declarations: “man being condemned to be free carries the weight of the whole world on his shoulders” (553). This binary of freedom and responsibility results in a strange dichotomy of emotion for Gogo and Didi. On one hand, Vladimir exhorts his fellow to rejoice with him, in the sense of purpose which waiting provides:

What are we doing here, *that* is the question. And we are blessed in this, that we happen to know the answer [...] We are waiting for Godot to come. (72)

Simultaneously, the responsibility which this ‘appointment’ confers upon them also traps the pair, and results in the overwhelming stasis which consumes the play’s events. This is seen most starkly at the end of each act, through the brief exchanges which encapsulate the tension between restlessness and inaction:

Well, shall we go?

Yes, let's go.'

[*They do not move.*] (47)

The pair remain ensnared in this limbo of mortality, between the light which “gleams an instant” and the bleak night which must always follow (82); a limbo characterised by Camus in *The Myth of Sisyphus* as the struggle to find “any profound reason for living” when faced with the “ridiculous[ness] of ... habit” and “the uselessness of suffering” (13). Although Beckett and Camus share a preoccupation with suicide, their views of the act stand in stark contrast. Whereas Camus ultimately asserts the intrinsic value of life, and discounts suicide as a legitimate action based on the premise that it is “to deny the one irreplaceable possession one has” (Cormier 116), Beckett’s conclusions are more brutally negative. The twosome’s survival of their suicidal inclinations is presented instead as a *failure to die*, and as Cormier has suggested, “there is no indication...that death must be avoided because life itself is worth living” (116). Rather, life *cannot* and yet *must* be endured.

This is not to suggest that Didi and Gogo do not seek meaning in their lives, or confirmation of their existence. Didi’s mounting dread, and his frantic outburst (“You’re sure you saw me, you won’t come and tell me tomorrow that you never saw me”, 85) arise from the fear that if neither Boy nor Godot see him, then under Bishop Berkeley’s theories of reality and perception, his very existence is “rendered precarious” (Graver 51). These and many other complex philosophical ideas are absorbed by their vaudevillian context in the play, and do not, therefore, result in coherent understanding or definitive conclusions. Rather they become another restrictive force, much like Berkeley’s “fine and subtle net of abstract ideas” which has “perplexed” and “entangled” the minds of men, and is represented in the play by Lucky’s aptly named dance, ‘The Net’ (33).

Although Beckett held to the belief that the artist’s life was, “of necessity a life of solitude” (Esslin, 33), seclusion from the outside world must surely have been impossible in an era encompassing two world wars, and some of the most brutal atrocities in

recorded history. According to F.S.L. Lyons, Irish neutrality meant that the nation missed not only “the tensions – and the liberations – of war” but also “the shared experience, the comradeship in suffering [and] the new thinking about the future” (qtd. in Fanning, 226). In *Godot*, Beckett seems to move beyond a limited Irish perspective of these crises, escaping the cloying parochialism which characterised early Irish drama (seen, for instance, in the plays of Boucicault) and offering a unique literary response to the fragmentation and dislocation of society in the wake of World War II.

The brutality of these events is reflected in the play’s preoccupation with human suffering, both corporeal and psychic. Beckett interweaves historical tragedy with the artificial and theatrical sufferings of his protagonists, referring to the pain of prostate trouble and ill-fitting boots, as well as evoking the Great Famine, the Holocaust, and “the material history of enslaved bodies” (McMullan 39). The rope tied around Lucky’s neck is an obvious emblem of slavery in the play, made even more explicit by Pozzo’s remark that he is not “short of slaves!” (24). Beckett appears to refer to the play’s post-Holocaust context more subtly in Estragon’s reference to the death of “billions of others” (53); a similarly indirect link is made to the “the greatest hole in Irish history” (Roach 311), in Lucky’s mention of “the skull in Connemara” (38). McMullan argues that, in his inclusion of these references, Beckett “acknowledges the specificity of corporeal and cultural trauma”, yet does not limit the play by binding it too closely to any real events, “so that traces of other historical catastrophes always haunt the stage” (McMullan 39). These vague allusions to tragic events ensure the play’s continuing cultural relevance as, wherever the play is performed, local analogues to this suffering are sure to exist.

The breadth of allusion within *Godot*, and the lack of any distinctly Irish characters or locations has led some critics to question the ‘Irishness’ of the text; McCormack has gone so far as to say that Beckett’s “background” was, if anything, “French and intellectual, rather than Anglo-Irish and cultural” (385). While Joyce adopted a degree of critical distance in *Ulysses*, through the creation of a protagonist who is both Hungarian and Jewish (rather than Irish and Catholic), he continued to write about Dublin, seeing “the universal” in its physical particularity (qtd. in Power, 64-65). Beckett went further in his

attempts to gain distance from Ireland, presenting a play set on a geographically unspecified 'country road', with protagonists whose names are French and Russian, respectively. In spite of this, there is an unmistakably Irish tone to the play's humour, and it is no accident that the central characters are frequently played with Irish accents. There are many Irish-isms scattered throughout the text; phrases such as 'your man', 'get up till I embrace you' and 'He wants to cod me' are distinctly Irish in tone, as are colloquial exclamations like 'we'd be bollocksed'. Syntactically, too, the language of the play is Irish, as is evident in Vladimir's remark, "I'd like well to hear him think" (32), and the Joycean use of the double-mister: "Mister ... excuse me Mister ..." (O'Brien, 252).

Beckett himself referred to "his feeling for his Irish inheritance", acknowledging the influence of Yeats, Synge and O'Casey on his writing. Of these, it is the work of Yeats which bears perhaps the greatest comparisons with *Godot*; Worth has, for instance, drawn attention to their common use of "the pull between [complementary] opposites" (259), encapsulated in the Yin Yang-like nature of Estragon and Vladimir's relationship. The ironic repetition of the 'luck' motif in Yeats' *At the Hawk's Well* is recalled by the eerie figure of Lucky, and 'The wind in the reeds' heard by Estragon and Vladimir is also an affectionate allusion to Yeats' collection of the same name. In a review of the Irish translation of the play, *Ag Fanacht Le Godot*, Dominic O'Riordáin commented that Beckett very clearly takes hold of the Irish literary heritage: "Because he is the (legendary) clever craftsman of humour ... as ancient as the *Tain* and as fresh as *Finnegan's Wake*". Although his relationship to the Irish canon is less obvious than some, in both his use of humour and his conflicted relationship with religion, Beckett appears unmistakably Irish.

There is some disagreement as to the significance of the myriad religious, philosophical and historical allusions in *Godot*. In a sense, this diverse grouping of cultural references can be read as Beckett's attempt to create a play with profound international significance. This desire has been realised by the successful theatrical staging of *Waiting for Godot* in Paris, New York, London, and Sarajevo, to name but a few, as well as in several prisons. In each place, the play's blunt depiction of mankind's struggle to find meaning and purpose in existence has found local resonance. Yet perhaps the play's most important

achievement has less to do with its universalism, than with its 'Irishness'. *Godot* reveals the progression of Irish writing, from realist depictions of rural Catholic Ireland, to works of modern absurdist theatre; it also renegotiates the boundaries of national literature, broadening our understanding of what it is to be Irish. Ultimately, both Irish and European traditions find their union in Beckett's work, as they did in his life, on such a deep level that to attempt to separate the complex web of associations is a futile task.

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