

THE INTERNATIONALISM OF IRISH LITERATURE AND DRAMA

edited by
Joseph McMinn



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OF IRISH LITERATURE
AND DRAMA

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Joseph McMinn

with the assistance of
Anne McMaster and Angela Welch

IRISH LITERARY STUDIES 41



COLIN SMYTHE
Gerrards Cross, 1992

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First published in 1992 by Colin Smythe Limited
Gerrards Cross, Buckinghamshire

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

The internationalism of Irish literature and drama. – (Irish literary studies, 0140–895X, 41).

1. Irish literature

I. McMinn, Joseph II. McMaster, Anne III. Welch, Angela IV. Series
891.6208

ISBN 0–86140–339–8

Produced in Great Britain

Typeset in Palatino by Inforum Typesetting, Portsmouth
Printed and bound by Billing and Sons Ltd., Worcester

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SAMUEL BECKETT AND THE THEATRE OF DECONSTRUCTION: AN EXEGESIS ON FORM

DELE LAYIWOLA

The feeling of the absurd is not, for all that, the notion of the absurd. It lays the foundations for it, and that is all. It is not limited to that notion, except in the brief moment when it passes judgement on the universe.¹

— Albert Camus

I THE CHALLENGE TO SPACE

Samuel Beckett has become too well known for anyone to start articulating a theory for his art now. Nevertheless, I believe that something new can be deduced from both the appearance and implications of his works. It is for the same reason that the present essay prefers the following assumptions. First, that theatrical constructs often take the symbolic notion of re-organizing an absolutist space; that this phenomenon often manifests itself as events of binary oppositions which are constantly intensified or superseded in stage graphs; finally, that this engenders a form of literary discourse which represents a symbolic process of social life and a kind of subjectivity.² Hence its affiliation with literary deconstruction.

A similar conception of literature, although with a different emphasis, is found in the thesis of Terry Eagleton in that European literary criticism arose as an escritorial engagement against the absolutist state.³ The image is one step beyond written literature, nevertheless we affirm that processes of construction, opposition and deconstruction are symbolic representations of the reality of ideas pitched against absolute space. Like Terry

Eagleton, therefore, we are discussing aspects of the same thing but with different degrees of emphasis.

Indeed from the above, we might say that the methodology and theory that often inform Beckett's plays are reflective of chaos. We bear in mind that the bedrock of this chaos lies in the experience of a violent age.⁴ The escorial component is a writing of attenuated comfort, atomistic consciousness echoing one form of holocaust or the other. This, as a form of deconstruction, is in no other place more fully expressed than in the theatrical theory of George II, Duke of Saxe-Meiningen.⁵

George II legislates in his model for the theatre that for art to reflect unending motion of life, for it to depict movement and the continuous unfolding of a story, congruence and symmetry must be always avoided. He is of the opinion that uniformity and symmetry in stage setting leads to monotony, and creates 'a wooden, stiff and boring impression'. The assertion that all uniformity, all congruity, parallel or symmetry must be avoided in artistic representation is reminiscent of textual deconstruction in written script. Derrida, as well as his pupils, eagerly highlights the insight that the written text is full of all kinds of warring forces of signification, antagonistic bits and details.⁶ The text is illuminated by the critic (and the writer) uncovering the various layers of the text as it builds, unbuilds, and re-builds its notions and its forms. Textual deconstruction is analagous with dramatic, scenic, or theatrical deconstruction.

This considerably enhances the rhythmic scope of text, narrative, or stage posture as its interactive potential increases. The collision of concrete elements yields greater meaning and appreciation as a story or a scene unfolds within the totality of a panoramic text or event. This is the basic insight which enables us to analyse the drama of Beckett as intracultural, intercultural, transcultural, and ultimately anticultural scriptograms. The chaotic frontiers of text thus give rise to meaning. Agitation leads to stasis.

In the plays of Beckett, one of the ways by which texts and ideas provoke effect from latent causes is to juxtapose characters of uneven potential. This ensures a degree of confrontation in the sense of dominance versus subservience. This is perhaps what Ben Barnes has in mind when he writes of Beckett's theatre:

It is important to note, by the way, that, as with the vaudeville duo, Beckett conceives of his characters in couples (Pozzo and Lucky, Nagg and Nell, Hamm and Clov etc) and I would always make the point of

exploring in isolation from the play as a whole the degree of interdependence and dominance/subservience in these relationships.⁷

All through the text of *Endgame*,⁸ dialogue and movements are fixed at carefully calculated intervals either to pre-empt symmetry or to break it, thus enhancing the rhythm and tempo of action. Let us examine the following passage:

HAMM: Have you not had enough?

CLOV: Yes! (*Pause*) of what?

HAMM: Of this . . . this . . . thing.

CLOV: I always had. (*Pause*) Not you?

HAMM: (*Gloomily*) Then there's no reason for it to change.

CLOV: It may end. (*Pause*) *All life long the same questions, the same answers.*

HAMM: Get me ready. (*Clov does not move*) Go and get the sheet. (*Clov does not move*) Clov!

(my emphasis), p. 5

Hamm and Clov, probably derivatives of Ham and Clove, are condemned to a vegetative existence. Here they discuss the boredom of life, its monotony and bland symmetry. As a way of deconstructing symmetry, Hamm calls on Clov, his adoptive son, to get him ready and lay his shroud. But as the inevitable is far from actuality, they carry on. However, Ham's complaint against the idea of symmetry in the human condition has become his unrelenting mode of confrontation with chaos. Though he has forfeited his means of locomotion, Clov is to be his pivot. Once again he observes:

HAMM: This is not much fun (*Pause*). But that's always the way at the end of the day, isn't it, Clov?

CLOV: Always.

HAMM: It's the end of the day like any other day, isn't it, Clov?

CLOV: Looks like it. (*Pause*).

HAMM: (*Anguished*) What's happening, what's happening?

CLOV: *Something is taking its course.* (*Pause*)

(my emphasis, p. 13).

It perfectly comes to the situation where a status quo is challenged and at the same time it is left to be.

A variation of the above, but nevertheless supportive of the thesis, is also brought to bear in the ancestral characters Nagg and Nell. These act as a foil to the foregoing pair, Hamm and

Clov. They serve to represent the localization of eternal, universal time. They are aspects of time past, the responsibility of which is fostered by time present. Time future is what Clove anticipates by his telescope and his visual, exploratory foray onto the distant beach and the seas. Towards the end of the play, this emerges as a small boy who, by extrapolation will keep the foil going. The 'secret' conversations of Nagg and Nell, as it were from their graves or coffins (here represented by the ash bins, a place of decay and an agent of putrefaction), reverberate as a spectacular familiar to the dialogue of Hamm and Clov:

NAGG: (Soft) Do you hear him? A heart in his head! (He chuckles continuously).

NELL: One mustn't laugh at those things, Nagg. Why must you always laugh at them?

NAGG: Not so loud!

NELL: (Without lowering her voice) Nothing is funnier than unhappiness, I grant you that. But –

NAGG: (Shocked). Oh!

NELL: Yes, yes, it's the most comical thing in the world. And we laugh, we laugh, with a will in the beginning. But it's always the same thing. Yes, it's like the funny story we have heard too often, we still find it funny, but we don't laugh any more. (Pause). Have you anything else to say to me?

(p. 18, 19).

The climax of the ideas we have outlined is reached when Hamm, against all puposes of locomotion, decides to physicalize the destruction of symmetry and monotony. Hitherto he has toyed with the phenomenon in speech and in fancy. Now he wants to move around the world from the miniature that is his room.

HAMM: Roughly! Roughly! (Clov moves chair slightly)
Bang in the centre

CLOV: There! (pause)

HAMM: I feel a little too far to the left. (Clov moves chair slightly)
Now I feel a little too far to the right.

(Clov moves chair slightly)

I feel a little too far forward.

(Clov moves chair slightly)

Now I feel a little too far back

(Clov moves chair slightly)

Don't stay there,
(i.e. behind the chair).
You give me the shivers.
(Clov returns to his place beside the chair).

(p. 27)

The challenge both to space and gravity subjects them to the test. This, in the above statements, would appear to be a measure for deconstructing space. With this pair it is going back and forth, affirmation and denial, that is the essence of being. Apart from speaking or thinking, it is the only mode for demonstrating functional existence.

It is also relevant to note here that another style by which Beckett breaks his text lines is his use of the stage note 'pause'. This has the characteristic atomization of text and action into guided bits of carefully regulated system. This also imposes a certain ritualistic precision on the psyche of any of the varied Beckett characters of schizophrenes or binates who, as we noted earlier, are in relative degrees of dependence. In *Waiting for Godot* alone, the stage direction 'pause' is used about seventy times, and in *Endgame* about three hundred and fifty times. This penchant for setting in motion and obstructing it is an aspect of the opposition both in concrete space and in the thought patterns of Beckett's characters.

II SUBJECTIVITY AND THE NOTION OF INTERTEXTUALITY

Beckett's conception of space and dialogue in this form brings so much complication into his texts; the notion of presupposition and intertextuality. It will be recalled that at the very beginning, just as the play is about to start, Clov has already announced its ending, and his own death:

CLOV: (Fixed gaze, tonelessly)
Finished, it's finished, nearly finished, it must be nearly finished.
(Pause)
Grain upon grain, one by one, and one day, suddenly, there's a heap, a little heap, the impossible heap.
(Pause)
I can't be punished any more.
(Pause)

I'll go now to my kitchen, ten feet by ten feet by ten feet, and wait for him to whistle me.

(Pause).

There, perhaps, is no other interpretation for Clov's statements than the traditional statement at a christian burial: 'Dust to dust, ashes to ashes', the dimensions of his kitchen too is reflective of the dimensions of a grave. Beckett's characters are always keen to affirm that we are 'born astride a grave'. The important question to ask here is this: are there events before the play begins, which are pre-supposed and which are mutually intelligible to both actors but not the outsider or the audience?

There are even greater disruptions of the mechanics of logic and semantics. Here one is left to hazard whether the characters are just chipping in bits from a longer conversational whole. We note, for instance, this piece of disjointed soliloquy by Hamm:

the bigger a man is the fuller he is.

(Pause. Gloomily)

And the emptier.

(He sniffs)

Clov!

(Pause)

No, alone.

(Pause)

What dreams! These forests!

(Pause)

Enough, it's time it ended, in the shelter too.

(Pause)

And yet I hesitate, I hesitate to . . . to end. Yes, there it is, it's time it ended and yet I hesitate to –

(he yawns)

God, I'm tired, I'd be better off in bed.

(He whistles. Enter Clov immediately. He halts beside the chair).

You pollute the air!

Get me ready, I'm going to bed.

(p. 3)

These statements are like hints from which much is suppressed. The notion of a pre-supposed intertext is even more pronounced in an aspect of the dialogue that ensues later between Hamm and Clov:

HAMM: Why don't you kill me?

CLOV: I don't know the combination of the cupboard.

(Pause)

HAMM: Go and get two bicycle-wheels.

CLOV: Go and get two bicycle-wheels.

HAMM: What have you done with your bicycle?

CLOV: I never had a bicycle.

HAMM: The thing is impossible.

(p. 8)

Beckett's intertexts are full of all kinds of suppositions. Above, for example, what has a cupboard got to do with killing Hamm? or why would Hamm not remember whether his intimate companion, Clov, and with whom he has lived all his life, possesses a bicycle or not? Certainly there is still more to know about these characters. Or it might be that all we know now are just parts of a precursor text and event. Of this David Helsa has rightly written:

Endgame is a difficult text to understand because the author appears to have suppressed evidence which it is important to have. He has obfuscated the causal relationships which support the plot, and he has tucked into the interstices of its structure data which we should very much like to have in the open. In the latter case, he has hidden particular meanings behind the intimacy which has developed between characters over the period of their association, so that the characters know what they mean but the audience does not.⁹

The critical and philosophical consequences of what we affirm therefore is that a Beckett text seems to be always a fragmentary aspect of some unified whole. In other words, it is a reflection from a whole tradition of writing, or from a culture. It is thus the offspring of other fountains of knowledge that establish themselves by deriving meanings from the subjective collisions of other ideas and precursor texts. For this reason the past and future which we refer to in the first part of this paper are the subjective, anonymous areas of prior texts or traditions of which Beckett's own texts become a part.¹⁰ A text thereby becomes the warring ground, and the resolution for a collage of conflicting forces and notions within a whole literary or historical corpus. A linguistic form thus contains the interactions within a culture which in the consciousness of a writer become what is already known; or in his works, what is already read.¹¹ Our formulation thereby goes back to what Julia Kristeva affirmed, that

whatever the semantic context of a text, its condition as a signifying practice presupposes the existence of other discourses . . . This is to say that every text is from the outset under the jurisdiction of other discourses which impose a universe on it.¹²

The encapsulation of a world in the confines of ratiocinative selectivity makes unambiguous the conciliation as well as destruction of various layers of the intertextual space. Meaning derives from other absorbing and renouncing the context of other texts and sub-texts. What I have earlier referred to as aspects of context, trans-text and anti-text or anti-narrative upholds the true structure of a particular text, idea or being. This in itself reflected in social terms is what has pushed Terry Eagleton into affirming that literary criticism is a notion deployed against any form of absolutism in an event or a political situation.¹³

In Samuel Beckett's stagecraft, one symbolic reformulation of this phenomenon is his use of spotlights. In *Krapp's Last Tape*, in reaction to the strong spotlight on him, Krapp reacts:

The new light above my table is a great improvement. With all this darkness round me I feel less alone.¹⁴

But it is true that a creature feels more confident amidst darkness than amidst light? Indeed the paradox is a well known Beckettian strategem. In *Play*, we are confronted by a character, M. with a split psyche. W1 and W2 are the schizoid complementations of M. From the trialogue, it would appear that M is a man affianced to two lovers, each perpetually accusing him of neglect. The stage directions note:

Their speech is provoked by a spotlight projected on faces alone . . . Faint spots simultaneously on three faces . . . The source of light is single and must not be situated outside the ideal space (stage) occupied by *its victims*.¹⁵

(my emphasis)

There is no doubt that the use of light here is to provoke effective response by destroying the symmetrical poise of its subjects. This seems to me to be why the author describes his characters as the 'victims' of light. The character, W1, keeps referring to the spotlight as 'hellish'. It is well to note that the use of lights, particularly in *Play*, haunt rather than highlight characters. W2 speaks up against the lights which the author set up as inquisitor:

When you go out – and I go out. Some day you will tire of me and go out . . . for good. Give me up, as a bad job. Go away and start poking and pecking at someone else. On the other hand –

(p. 152)

And for W1:

Is it that I do not tell the truth, is that it, that some day somehow I may tell the truth at last and then no more light at last, for the truth?

(p. 153)

Beckett's use of light is almost always as a symbol of hell; it binds, and purges. On the contrary, it is theatrical darkness that sets free or fulfils. It certainly is true in *Play* that the lighting device serves a most harrowing but nevertheless a most illuminating purpose. Light here does not consolidate the character but leads it into dissolution. Ben Barnes testifies 'that Beckett conceives of light theatrically and not naturalistically and that as with the other theatrical aspects . . . access to the world of Beckett's characters can be more easily achieved through the actors relating to the meaning of the light in practical rather than poetic terms.'¹⁶

III RITUAL SUBJECTIVITY AND THE TEXT

In Beckett's *Play*, the characters often refer to the blinding spotlight as 'Hellish half-light'. Is this supposed to be an allusion to the subjection of consciousness to purgation? Is not the dilemma of Winnie in *Happy Days* also similar to that of purgatory? The illumination of the character in Beckett's art both enlarges the space of consciousness as well as the inadequacies of existence. This paradox of the use of light amounts, essentially, to 'an incarnation of dissonance' which thereby requires 'a glorious illusion which would spread a veil of beauty over its peculiar nature'.¹⁷ This function represents the true calling of the artist, the true heresiarch, a messenger of Apollo. It is what marks out the true drama of the Absurd as that which 'perverts' or contorts reality to extract its truth. Albert Camus, another vanguard of the Absurdist school represents the matter thus:

It marks both the death of an experience and its multiplication. It is a sort of monotonous and passionate repetition of the themes already orchestrated by the world: the body, inexhaustible images on the pediment of temples, forms or colours, number or grief.¹⁸

The Theatre of the Absurd is thus a ritualized phenomenon, a tragic form of the creative reflex. Beckett's drama inevitably presents the concept of modern tragedy in a new light; his position is somewhere between that of Friedrich Nietzsche and George Steiner.¹⁹ The former elaborated on the birth of tragedy, the latter, on its demise. Beckett is at the confluence of both theorists. It is evident that the grandiosity of form associated with Aristotelian concepts of tragedy has become dated in the atomistic pluralism of modern traditions. A form that will accommodate the tragic vision must of necessity adopt the form best adapted to the appearance of attenuated consciousness that modern traditions and society can offer. Consequently the tragic muse is still very much around; it is only the nature or form of the art that has changed.

There is no doubt whatsoever that the art of Samuel Beckett purveys, with concise exactitude, a mood of the post war years in Europe, a turbulent age. He is quoted to have remarked that *Endgame* is characterized by 'extreme anxiety'. This might well have been so, especially as Harold Bloom has asserted that the main tradition of western poetry since the Renaissance

is a history of anxiety and self-saving caricature, of distortion, of perverse, wilful revisionism from which much modern poetry as such could not exist.²⁰

Bloom's assertion could hardly be truer for the works of Samuel Beckett.

The dreary settings of the plays have a post-holocaust mood. Some of the caricatures are also derived from Beckett's own experience as well. Deirdre Bair records an instance in Beckett's own private life which has greatly influenced the creation of the characters Hamm and Clov. Just before Beckett began work on *Endgame*, or the French version, *Fin de Partie*, an old friend of his, Cissie Sinclair, died. She had become stiffened by rheumatoid arthritis and was confined to the wheel chair. Beckett, like Clov, had taken her for walks on the sea front in her wheel chair. Bair notes further:

One of her prize possessions was a telescope . . . and she used it to watch the ships in Dublin Bay or the antics of the birds as the tides changed along the beach. Cissie died in a dreary country home, a source of great anguish for Beckett; the Beckett relatives find much in the lines spoken by the characters in *Fin de partie* to remind them of the circumstances of Cissie's last home.²¹

All of our observations amount to the fact that the author's metaphoric and textual interpolations have rearranged form into the outlook of a world, a philosophy, and, ultimately a game. Beckett had variously suggested to different persons that in writing *Endgame*, he adopted the analogy of a chess game. Deirdre Bair further quotes Beckett as having once said, 'There are no accidents in *Fin de partie*. Everything is based on analogy and repetition'.²² Further, the various moves and repetitions are finitely composed of sets of binary oppositions and sequences designed as units of meaning. It is this technique that has actually facilitated the point made at the beginning of this paper, that such balanced, finite binary oppositions create alternating sequences of subjective imbalance. These alternating categories of motion and stasis in the same sequence share a similarity with literary deconstruction.

The art of Beckett has affinity with the game of chess; once a move is made, the consequences are inexorable, generating the cycle of consolidation, dissolution and reactivation. Thus stasis generates activity and vice-versa; being is becoming:

Beckett argued and then tried to demonstrate that once the pieces are set up on the board, any move from then on will only weaken one's position, that strength lies only in not moving at all. The ideal game for Beckett was one in which none of the pieces was moved, for from the very first move, failure and loss were inevitable . . . it is, of course, clear that the fate of chessmen is, to Beckett, analogous to the fate of man.²⁴

Thus have we arrived at a universalized version of one single, representative event or phenomenon. The contrastive auxiliaries of ebb and flow or rise and fall become the necessity of philosophic ramification in the pursuit of a part for a whole and the consequent advancement provided by inherent inadequacy or activated failure. Manichean duality is thus neutralized from consequent absolutism. This, as is seen, is the thesis from which we began this essay.

One final point yet emerges as the result of this whole debate of the repetition of structural patterns in works of art. That is the realm of the virtual mode. Beckett's own elucidation of performance events is based on his identification or establishment of what we might term a dramatic leitmotiv. This is what he himself describes as 'analogy and repetition'. Such a scheme endows a narrative or dramatic plot with inbuilt generative or regenerative processes. It comes near to the description of ritual that Victor Turner wrote about,

a transformative self-immolation of order as presently constituted, even sometimes a voluntary *sparagmos* or self-dismemberment of order . . .²⁵

Samuel Beckett's dramatic form has greater ramifications for the history of philosophy as regards modern institutions and societies, but that will take us beyond the frontiers of the present discussion. Suffice, however, to say that Beckett's characters and stage structures are transformational modes of affective ultra-verbal codes and resources. This is a way of sublimating the ritualistic recourse that tragic form foists on the traditional notion of the term. On the modern stage, Beckett has successfully rendered this transition.

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