

‘...scrap of an ancient voice in me not mine...’:

## Similarities in the plays of Yeats and Beckett

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SINCE Samuel Beckett has lived for so long in France, much of his work first appeared in French, and his most celebrated play was first produced on a French stage as *En Attendant Godot*, it is very easy to think of his work mainly in terms of its place among that of French and other European *avant-garde* writers. His well-known connections with Joyce, it is true, remind us of his position as Irish writer in exile, an image strengthened too by the way Beckett's work is so Irish in its humour, in its concern with sin, guilt and redemption, and yet is so irreverent as to be shocking to the more conventional sections of the Irish public. Such seem to be the credentials of good Anglo-Irish writing. But Beckett's Irishness has another interesting aspect — one which deserves more emphasis — and that is his position as inheritor of an Anglo-Irish dramatic legacy left by Lady Gregory, Synge and particularly Yeats.

When Murphy consigns his ashes to be flushed down the lavatory of the Abbey Theatre ‘if possible during the performance of a piece’<sup>1</sup> he is doubtless planning his revenge for wearisome times spent watching Abbey plays. Beckett was an undergraduate at Trinity College, Dublin from 1923 to 1927, and taught there in 1930 until December 1931 after his two years in Paris lecturing at the *École Normale Supérieure*. In the 1920's it was the naturalistic Irish playwrights who dominated the Abbey, although Beckett could have seen there Yeats's *Words Upon the Window-Pane* in November 1930, and *The Cat and the Moon* and *The Dreaming of the Bones* in September and December of 1931. By this time Yeats

<sup>1</sup> Samuel Beckett, *Murphy*, New York, n.d., p. 269.

had already expressed his disappointment at the way the Irish dramatic movement had developed and his own theatre of beauty had failed to achieve a lasting and widespread popularity;<sup>1</sup> he had therefore written his anti-realistic dance-plays, those highly stylized and intense lyric dramas carefully designed to be played very simply before a screen in a large room. By making Murphy so mischievously irreverent towards the Abbey and perhaps the enormous shadow of Yeats, Beckett seems to suggest something of his similar dislike of Abbey realism, for his own plays are firmly non-realistic. Moreover, some of their striking features have clear affinities with some of Yeats's plays.

There are few direct allusions to Yeats's work in Beckett's plays, but they are significant. One example is when Winnie in Act II of *Happy Days* quotes the fragment, 'I call to the eye of the mind . . .'<sup>2</sup> from Yeats's opening chorus for *At the Hawk's Well*. Why should Beckett make her do this? He is giving to Yeats's play something of the status of a 'classic', for the quotation is not solitary but is one of several of Winnie's fondly half-remembered scraps of culture. The allusion also draws attention to similarities of situation and theme between the two plays. In Yeats's play a garrulous Old Man and the warrior Cuchulain climb a barren hill to the young girl who does not speak. Their quest for the water of immortality fails. In Beckett's play, Willie climbs Winnie's mound in an attempt to reach her. He fails. But so far as garrulousness is concerned, the situation is reversed for it is the female Winnie who talks compulsively. The plays are both concerned with youth and age, barrenness and fertility.

It is possible that there may be further recollections of Yeats in Beckett's use of the bare space or simple set and the tree symbol of *Waiting for Godot* which recalls the symbolic tree of *Purgatory*. Lucky's dance, it has been suggested,<sup>3</sup> may be a parody of Noh dancing and the dance of the lame beggar in *The Cat and the Moon*. Yeats, of course, adapted some of the Noh play conventions with great artistic tact for use in his dance-plays. A convention Yeats invented specially to open and close these plays was the ritual unfolding and folding of an emblematic

<sup>1</sup> In the open letter to Lady Gregory, *A People's Theatre*, 1919, reprinted in *Explorations*, 1962, pp. 244-59.

<sup>2</sup> Samuel Beckett, *Happy Days*, 1963, p. 43.

<sup>3</sup> See Hugh Kenner, *Samuel Beckett*, 1962, p. 137.

cloth, a practice also observed by Kathakali dancers. Beckett perhaps parodies this by having Clov gather up dust sheets at the beginning of *Endgame*. Furthermore, Beckett's use of tramps or people in harshly reduced circumstances is clearly indebted to the universal vagrants of Synge, Lady Gregory and Yeats as well as to the poor of Ireland and the ragged figures of music-hall clowning and early movies.

Such playful allusion and parody is in itself interesting and a very Irish talent. It seems to have further significance, though, if we notice that Beckett alludes in his work not to the great poetry of the lyrics, but instead cuts across our expectations by references to the far less widely acclaimed plays. Yeats the playwright, then, seems to hold a very special interest for Beckett. We can quite easily detect those features of Yeats's plays of the theatre's anti-self which would appeal to him. There is intensity and density of meaning packed into brief plays the poetry of which has been purged of ornament because '... there's more enterprise / In walking naked'.<sup>1</sup> Yeats's post-1914 drama tends to present situations capable of symbolizing a deeper than surface meaning, situations which hang in the memory like a vivid dream and can be accepted at face value or interpreted. The characters are archetypal and sometimes paired in opposites — the Old and Young Man in *At the Hawk's Well*, the beautiful Queen and filthy Swineherd in *A Full Moon in March*. Similarly, the tramps Vladimir and Estragon, and the master/slave couple Pozzo and Lucky are symmetrically opposed and universalized personages rather than finished psychological studies in character. The Blind and Lame Beggars of Yeats's *The Cat and the Moon* are thoroughly comic figures who lack the very vicious sadism of the Pozzo/Lucky relationship, and yet they anticipate these later characters in that the weak, lame man must carry and guide the other, one is clearly blessed while the other is not, and the relationship between them is among other things symbolic of the uneasy conjunction of body and soul. Lucky's dance recalls that of the lame man. Perhaps in the earlier Blind Man and Fool of Yeats's *On Baile's Strand* there is a further variant. Indeed, the bitter Old Man who provides a prologue to Yeats's last play *The Death of*

<sup>1</sup> W. B. Yeats, *Collected Poems*, 1950, p. 142.

*Cuchulain* and the sinister Blind Man who returns finally to slaughter the great warrior for a few pennies also find their successors in Beckett's wild and lonely old men.

There is one particularly striking detail of great theatrical power in the characterization of Lucky which could also be a direct reference to the Irish dramatic background to Beckett's work. The running sore which the rope around his neck has made recalls Yeats's brilliant scene in *The King's Threshold* when the true meaning of the King's power is revealed by a *coup de théâtre*. Seanchan the chief poet is dying from a hunger strike in protest against his demotion from a place of prime importance at court. The King tries all means of persuasion to make Seanchan eat, but the bard's pupils go to the King confidently to request a reconciliation. Next time they enter they all wear halters around their necks, and the King threatens to have them killed. But they prefer to die rather than defeat their leader. Their halters are thus heroic and defiant, whereas Lucky's is a mark of servitude and defeat. Furthermore, another Abbey play, Lord Dunsany's *The Glittering Gate*, presents two ragged criminals, one with a scarred neck, the result of having been hanged, who inhabit a limbo of empty beer bottles rather like the place of *Act Without Words*, Beckett's Pavlovian mime. These two await the opening of heaven's huge gates. One becomes impatient, picks the lock and the gates swing open to reveal — Nothingness. There is laughter off which is

'... cruel and violent... It grows louder and louder... The Curtain falls and the laughter still howls on.'<sup>1</sup>

Despite the embarrassing pseudo-cockney dialogue, the play anticipates in setting and theme the Beckett of *Waiting for Godot*.

Although in the majority of his plays Yeats's heroes are defeated, a victory of the heroic spirit is usually in some way asserted: 'Hector is dead and there's a light in Troy; / We that look on but laugh in tragic joy.'<sup>2</sup> There is, though, in the profound darkness of *Purgatory*, *The Death of Cuchulain* and *At the Hawk's Well* some of the same savage gloom of the spirit that

<sup>1</sup> Lord Dunsany, *Five Plays*, 1914. Mr Liam Miller of the Dolmen Press, Dublin, first brought the Dunsany/Beckett parallel to my notice.

<sup>2</sup> W. B. Yeats, *Collected Poems*, p. 337.

we find in *Endgame* and amid the jokes of *Waiting for Godot*. Indeed, the situation and action of the latter play is clearly anticipated by the ending of one of the drafts of *At the Hawk's Well*:

'Accursed the life of man. Between passion and  
emptiness what he longs for never comes. All  
his days are a preparation for what never comes.'<sup>1</sup>

The beautiful closing lyric of the finished play as it now stands sums up the futility of the heroic quest by those paired opposites, the Old Man, crafty, weary and fearful, and the Young Man, magnanimous, full of restless energy and utterly fearless: 'Wisdom must live a bitter life.'<sup>2</sup> But while Yeats manages to evoke heroic values and an assertion of spiritual life in his defeated heroes, Beckett remains stubbornly anti-heroic — and this explains partly his parodies of Yeatsian ideas. Beckett reduces Yeats's preoccupations back to the ragbag of the heart: while the cloths of the Yeatsian dance-plays are magical appurtenances of a noble and dignified ceremony, those of *Endgame* are merely dust sheets. Both are theatrically functional, being devices to conceal actors and open the actions of the plays. Yet in *Endgame* the cloths emphasize that the characters are reduced to the status of abandoned objects, human litter in storage, who await some sort of disposal, or the return of a departed master.

*Endgame* also contains adaptations of other ideas out of Yeats which are given savage mutation. Yeats had seen the need for non-realistic stylized movement as part of his theatre of ritual — he stressed that actors first should lose the fussiness he found on the commercial stage at the turn of the century, and tried to limit movement to essentials only. This became a remarkable feature of the Abbey style of acting. Yeats even suggested putting actors in barrels on castors so that a director could push them into position with his stick. Beckett immobilizes Nag and Nell, the old parents, by placing them, horrifyingly, in dustbins — bitter staging of an all too common attitude to senile old people. Blind Hamm is confined to his chair on castors. Clov's movement is stylized by his curious stiff-legged gait, though not to create a formal dance-like beauty. It is rather, perhaps, to suggest the ugly

<sup>1</sup> In MS. 8773, National Library of Ireland.

<sup>2</sup> W. B. Yeats, *Collected Plays*, 1952, p. 219.

and painful symptoms of some disease or the asymmetrical movement of the knight in chess.<sup>1</sup> The chess analogy which provides a framework and metaphor of the action as well as the play's title has, of course, been used before in literature: notably, in recent times, by Yeats. In *Deirdre*, Yeats's version of the most famous of Irish love stories, a crucial scene is that in which Naoise and Deirdre play chess in an attempt to achieve stoic calm as they await their inevitable deaths in the confines of a little hut in the forest. Deirdre at the end achieves her mask of tragic joy; Beckett's Hamm simply covers his face again with his 'stancher', the blood-stained handkerchief.

The immobility of the actor is further exploited in *Happy Days*, where Winnie is trapped in her growing mound of sand, and in *Play*, where the three personages are in urns so that only their expressionless faces are visible. While movement is restricted in Beckett's plays, wherever it occurs it is carefully planned and modulated — often for comic effect — as in Clov's perambulations with the ladder at the beginning of *Endgame* which reveal his abnormal lack of memory. The comedy often stresses the mechanical, reflex functionings of a human machine and its use of rudimentary reasoning power, facts which are clear from a consideration of the carefully directed mime of *Act Without Words* and the sequence of the eviction of the cat and dog in *Film*.<sup>2</sup>

Parody, though, is often born from a regard for the original. It is also a very Irish talent. Certainly, Beckett has dealt with some of the same themes which haunted Yeats in his plays, and has done so in a way which suggests a serious and profound influence. The idea of child murder which was the basis of the tragedy in *On Baile's Strand* and was enacted upon the stage itself in *Purgatory* is hinted at in Clov's desire to take the gaff out to a boy, potential procreator, he has sighted. The tension between generations is a pervasive theme in *Endgame* as in the Yeats plays. Similarly, the crisis of old Mr Rooney's life in *All That Fall* is the death of a child.

In *Waiting for Godot*, Beckett exploits the theme of pilgrimage to the holy by two tramps, and touches upon the two thieves crucified with Christ, the one damned, the other saved; both these

<sup>1</sup> Cf. Kenner, *op. cit.*, p. 156.

<sup>2</sup> See Samuel Beckett, *Essays and Other Writings*, 1967, pp. 42-3.

themes had been worked out with delightful comic effect in Yeats's *The Cat and the Moon*, and the earlier *The Well of the Saints* by Synge. The most important theme, though, which Beckett has in common with Yeats is the obsessive reliving of the past.

Here again, the fact that Beckett wrote an excellent monograph, *Proust*, might encourage us to attribute his concern with memories exclusively to the obvious French influence on his work. But Yeats had also found some of his most vivid and powerful dramatic effects as a result of embodying in plays his doctrine of the 'dreaming-back', a period when the newly dead are caught in a reliving of their most intense life-time experiences over and again until they contemplate their lives from a standpoint devoid of passion. This idea is clearly an extension beyond the grave of a well-known tendency in old people to remember the past in vivid detail. In Yeats's play *Calvary*, Christ dreams back over the events leading to his crucifixion; in a play Beckett could have seen at the Abbey in 1930, *The Words Upon the Window-Pane*, Yeats depicts the ghosts of Swift, Vanessa and Stella caught in the unhappiness and anguish of their love; in *Purgatory*, the Old Man's mother is a ghost dreaming through her sordid wedding night. Save for the example of *Calvary*, all these dreamings-back are attempts at a purgation of sexual experience tainted by some sort of guilt. They also provide a strong feature central to the construction of the plays.

Beckett's plays — not to mention his other writings — abound too with structurally important memory patterns. Blind Mr Rooney's retreat into memory takes over the last section of the piece when he suggests:

. . . Shall we go on backwards now a little? . . . Or you forwards and I backwards. The perfect pair. Like Dante's damned, with their faces arsy-versy. Our tears will water our bottoms.<sup>1</sup>

He could also have suggested the analogy of Yeats's interpenetrating opposites, the cones or gyres, one winding, the other unwinding. When Mr Rooney groans at the end of the play, it is presumably with pain or remorse at the memory of what seems to have been his sexual crime, the killing of a little girl by pushing her from the train.

<sup>1</sup> Samuel Beckett, *All That Fall*, 1957, pp. 28-9.

In *Waiting for Godot* and *Endgame* there are significant and sometimes painful memories which become important dramatic points in the text, but in other plays Beckett has made of memory patterns his main structural device. *Krapp's Last Tape* is built entirely out of the device of an old man playing back the tapes on which he has recorded the events and thoughts of his life. Krapp, though, is more of a clown than an unquiet ghost; he discards his philosophies like his banana skins and gloats with senile relish on his past amours. In *Embers*, the restless mind of Henry is evoked mainly by his memories of Addie, his daughter, Ada, his wife, an unfinished story he was composing, and of his father whom he has perhaps killed in the sea and whose ghost he tries to contact. Such concerns are decidedly Yeatsian, and significantly, the sound of hoof beats recurs in the play like a drumming of conscience, as it did in *Purgatory*, where it heralded the Old Man's obsession with what he sees as the crime of a great stock run dry. Similarly, the sounds of surf, shingle and hooves become perfect emblems of Henry's state of mind, a device cleverly suited to the medium of sound radio for which Beckett's *Embers* was specially written.

When working in the visual media of films and television (*Film* and *Eh Joe* respectively) Beckett very appropriately made the camera itself the nagging goad of conscience. Similarly, in his short work for the stage, *Play*, it is the relentless spotlight which elicits the interweaving monologues from the three heads. These three works are all structured on the mainly guilt-ridden memories of their characters. In *Eh Joe* the monologue comes from a voice within Joe's head and speaks with Beckett's characteristic terse use of the common idiom to make a very typical colloquial poetry out of the dead father and an unhappy lover driven to her suicide. As Yeats had discovered, the strength of poetry lies in its use of the common idiom. But it is in *Play* that Yeats's situation of the ghostly purgatory of the dreaming-back is used most fully by Beckett. The three identical grey urns containing the archetypal personages of the eternal triangle emerge from and return to almost complete darkness. The action, it seems, occurs in some purgatory of restless mental examination of the most intense experience the three had lived through. The repeat of the play, which Beckett's directions suggest,



enforces the analogy with the Yeatsian dreaming-back, a process repeated until the purgation of the soul was complete.

Yeats's use of the dreaming-back tended towards a paring down of plot and characterization. *Purgatory* is almost a monologue and needs only two characters. Its verse is the barest of all Yeats's dramatic verse. These tendencies Beckett has followed in his work, reducing the dramatic situations to essentials even more strictly than did Yeats. In the dramaticule *Come and Go* the process has gone so far that the work has a degree of slightness unworthy of Beckett.

This economy in the use of words does not, however, mean that voices become less significant. Indeed, the speeches of *Play* are meticulously arranged so that voices are set one against another to make a choric effect. At the beginning, the three voices are directed to speak their different speeches simultaneously. This device is, of course, common in opera singing and other musical forms; it is less common in stage plays, and it is a device Yeats had used as early as *On Baile's Strand*. Yeats had gained a quasi-operatic effect in Cuchulain's oath-taking scene by having the three Women sing their spell while Cuchulain and Conchubar swear their oaths in turn before thrusting the swords into the flames. The device was a most fitting part of a very Wagnerian ritual; at the same time the counterpoint of voices suggested the duplicity of Conchubar's methods. In Beckett, though, it is a device for marking the starting point of a play that could begin almost anywhere, since, like *Finnegan's Wake*, it is virtually circular; at the same time it emphasizes the eternal separateness of these people who have yet impinged upon one another so violently in life.

It is fairly well known that Yeats for some years experimented with the speaking of poetry on musical notes, developing with Florence Farr a technique they called 'cantillation'. Moreover, most of his plays, particularly those for dancers, make use of song and poetry set to music. Beckett, in his own way, has also explored this aspect of his Celtic heritage. In *Words and Music*, Croak, a careworn lord of words and music (whom he calls Joe and Bob) tries to get the pair to soothe him with an expression of the theme of love. Their feeble efforts elicit groans and shouts and percussive thumps of his club from Croak. Eventually, two short lyrical

pieces are evolved which words tries to sing and which music finally accompanies. After these efforts Croak, the master, simply shuffles away, having apparently lost interest. *Cascando* follows the same basic pattern, save that Croak is replaced by the cool and controlled Opener, and words are now the Voice striving unsuccessfully towards coherent and finished narrative in prose rather than lyric poetry. Where Yeats had experimented with words and music in search of a method of verse-speaking both bardic and beautiful, Beckett shows incoherence gradually struggling towards order. Yeats evolved great choruses which when sung to appropriate music have a very powerful theatrical impact and serve to comment upon and extend the meanings of the dramatic actions. Beckett in *Words and Music* and *Cascando* has made out of wittily arranged demonstrations of the difficulties of marrying the two arts the nearest thing in dramatic literature to the abstract in painting. Beckett has invented the abstract play.

By exploring the limits of anti-realist theatre and extending its borders in these ways, Beckett has been following what has become a tradition not only in twentieth-century European drama but also in that Anglo-Irish tradition of which Yeats's dramatic achievement is an important part. It is to be hoped that audiences who have learned to appreciate the plays of Beckett might also respond to the exciting works of his great predecessor. Beckett himself, at least, has learned much from that Yeatsian voice within his very Irish mind.

## *The Virgin Rock, Ballybunion*

In Ballybunion the Virgin Rock  
Spreads its dripping legs to brace  
Itself for the strong Atlantic shock.  
Climbing seaweed greens the face  
Of the only virgin in the place.

BRENDAN KENNELLY