



Homewards to the Centre of Nowhere

Ross Ciaran

Pour citer cet article

Ross Ciaran, « *Homewards to the Centre of Nowhere* », *Cycnos*, vol. 10.2 (À quoi jouent les Irlandais ?), 1993, mis en ligne en juin 2008.

<http://epi-revel.univ-cotedazur.fr/publication/item/494>

Lien vers la notice <http://epi-revel.univ-cotedazur.fr/publication/item/494>

Lien du document <http://epi-revel.univ-cotedazur.fr/cycnos/494.pdf>

Cycnos, études anglophones

revue électronique éditée sur épi-Revel à Nice

ISSN 1765-3118 ISSN papier 0992-1893

AVERTISSEMENT

Les publications déposées sur la plate-forme épi-revel sont protégées par les dispositions générales du Code de la propriété intellectuelle. Conditions d'utilisation : respect du droit d'auteur et de la propriété intellectuelle.

L'accès aux références bibliographiques, au texte intégral, aux outils de recherche, au feuilletage de l'ensemble des revues est libre, cependant article, recension et autre contribution sont couvertes par le droit d'auteur et sont la propriété de leurs auteurs. Les utilisateurs doivent toujours associer à toute unité documentaire les éléments bibliographiques permettant de l'identifier correctement, notamment toujours faire mention du nom de l'auteur, du titre de l'article, de la revue et du site épi-revel. Ces mentions apparaissent sur la page de garde des documents sauvegardés ou imprimés par les utilisateurs. L'université Côte d'Azur est l'éditeur du portail épi-revel et à ce titre détient la propriété intellectuelle et les droits d'exploitation du site. L'exploitation du site à des fins commerciales ou publicitaires est interdite ainsi que toute diffusion massive du contenu ou modification des données sans l'accord des auteurs et de l'équipe d'épi-revel.

EPI-REVEL

Revue électronique de l'Université Côte d'Azur

Homewards to the Centre of Nowhere:

Difference and (Irish) identity at play in Samuel Beckett's theatre

Ciaran Ross

Université de Strasbourg

“The artist who plays his being is from nowhere. And he has no brothers.”¹

Samuel Beckett's Ireland or Ireland's Samuel Beckett?

Explaining his decision to emigrate to Paris in 1937, Samuel Beckett said he preferred France at war to Ireland at peace. As a French critic once noted, it is indeed difficult not to imagine Beckett's apparent rootlessness in terms other than exile and cultural alienation.² Similarly, as more and more vastly sophisticated post-structuralist accounts of Beckett's writings continue to appear,³ it has also become just as difficult to think back towards Beckett's origins and see him in the light of the country he definitively left in 1939.

In critical literature and up to almost the Seventies, it was unfashionable and deemed very parochial to think of Beckett in terms of any Irish context other than a purely literary one or philosophical one - Swift, Berkeley, Yeats, Joyce, etc.⁴ That trend is slowly changing, particularly with Deirdre Bair's 1978 biography and Vivian Mercier's emphasis in *Beckett / Beckett*, (1977)⁵ on Beckett's Anglo-Irish Protestant socio-cultural background. This Irish revival of critical interest in Beckett, despite the inevitable reductionist and recuperative tendencies, had at least the merit of seeing Beckett in terms other than the earlier clichéd European conceptions of Beckett as an obscure absurd dramatist with existentialist leanings.⁶ In the Eighties, Irish critics took an even greater step to reappropriate Beckett's radical literary status. Sean O Mordha's film documentary on Beckett's life, *Silence to Silence* (1984) certainly familiarised and popularised Beckett for a wider audience. The re-readings of Beckett's Irish heritage in the pamphlets published by the Derry-based Field Day Theatre Company (1984)⁷ and Richard Kearney's philosophical reinterpretations of Beckett's Irishness,⁸ opened up a more radical perspective on the links between Beckett's modernism and his Irish background. Eoin O'Brien's book of photographs, *The Beckett Country* (1986)⁹ illustrating and representing the world of Beckett's childhood, together with the increasing number of Irish productions of the plays,¹⁰ equally testified to Beckett's gradual integration into modern Irish literary culture. Finally, the major success of Walter Asmus's Dublin

¹ Quoted in *The Irish Mind*, Richard Kearney ed. (Dublin: Wolfhound Press, 1985) p.269.

² Dominique Iogna-Prat, “L’Erin Voyageuse”, *Critique*, 420, mai 1982, p.491.

³ Among the most recent post-structuralist writings on Beckett, see what is probably one of the best Derridian-inspired readings of Beckett's Trilogy: Thomas Trezise, *Into the Breach: Samuel Beckett and The Ends of Literature* (Princeton: Princeton U.P., 1990).

⁴Cf. Hugh Kenner, *The Stoic Comedians* (Boston: Beacon, 1962); Vivian Mercier, *The Irish Comic Tradition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969).

⁵ Deirdre Bair, *Samuel Beckett* (London: Picador, 1980); Vivian Mercier, *Beckett / Beckett* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977)

⁶ Cf. Martin Esslin, *The Theatre of the Absurd* (London: Eyre Spottiswoode, 1964) which is the most well-known existentialist study of Beckett and probably the one which has been the most instrumental in shaping popular conceptions of Beckett's theatre.

⁷ See Seamus Deane's presentation of the Field Day Company movement, its critical positions and strategies in: Terry Eagleton (et al.), *Nationalism, Colonialism and Literature* (Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1990), p. 14-19.

⁸ *The Irish Mind*, op. cit.

⁹ Eoin O'Brien, *The Beckett Country* (Dublin: Black Cat Press, 1986).

¹⁰ Christopher Murray, “Beckett Productions in Ireland: A Survey”, *Irish University Review*, vol. 14, n° 1, spring, 1984, p. 103-126.

production of *Waiting for Godot*, following the first Dublin theatre festival totally devoted to Beckett (autumn 1991) are facts which speak for themselves.

Beckett's writing career did not really flourish until he had left Ireland and adopted the language and culture of France. Asked how a small country like Ireland could have produced so many great writers since the last half of the nineteenth-century, Beckett replied: "It's the priests and the British. They have bugged us into existence. After all, when you are in the last bloody ditch, there is nothing left but to sing."¹¹

Significantly, his first two major writings, the English novels, *Murphy* (1938) and *Watt* (1942) were written away from Beckett's native Dublin: *Murphy* was written during Beckett's two year stay London (1934-36) and seemingly would not have been finished had Beckett not undertaken psychoanalysis.¹² *Watt* was partly written in the unoccupied zone of the Vaucluse where Beckett stayed for most of the war years. It wasn't however until he wrote in French what turned out to be his second major play, *En attendant Godot* (1948-49), that Beckett finally became noticed as a writer.

Samuel Barclay Beckett was the second son of an upper-class Protestant Anglo-Irish family. Originally named 'Bequet', the Becketts were French Huguenots who moved to Ireland for economic and religious freedom. When Beckett finally left Dublin in 1937 to live permanently in Paris, he was reversing the migration which had brought his ancestors to Ireland.¹³

Beckett's childhood seems to have been a lonely one. He claims they were brought up "like Quakers"¹⁴ by a puritanical mother, May Beckett, who exercised a suffocating grip on both sons, but particularly on him. His childhood seems to have been one long battle of wits, with May determined to conquer Samuel's stubborn refusal to be reached and his determination to maintain his independence from May's domination. Not surprisingly, much has been made of the influence of this relationship on Beckett's work - a point which is beyond the scope of this article - and, in particular, on his need for personal analysis in London with Bion (1934-36).¹⁵ Beckett's education - derided in *Molloy* (*M*) as a "pain in the balls"¹⁶ - was that of a typical upper-class Irish Protestant: Portora Royal School, in Enniskillen, county Fermanagh, and later in 1923, Trinity College, "the educational and spiritual hope of the Protestant Ascendancy"¹⁷ where he read French and Italian. Yet, while Beckett had little time either for Protestant religion or Protestant culture, one cannot but detect a certain sectarian anti-Catholicism on his part concerning his celebrated remarks about Irish Catholicism. In an interview with Tom Driver, Beckett claimed that Irish Catholicism was not seductive but was more profound than Protestantism. Yet, he humourously undercuts these sentiments by saying: "When an Irish bus passes a church all hands make a quick sign of the cross. One day, the dogs in the street will do likewise, perhaps even the pigs."¹⁸

Such bitter derision of Irish Catholics and their myths finds its way into Beckett's later French writings. One banal example suffices here and it concerns the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception used for parody in *Molloy*. Beckett's satire of rural Catholic Ireland is the satire of the religious and cultural myth of Mother Ireland. This is symbolised by Moran's meeting with the (Irish Catholic) farmer who is on a pilgrimage to the "Turdy Madonna", (*M*, p. 159)

¹¹ Bair, op. cit., p. 241.

¹² *ibid.*, p. 155-168.

¹³ Alan Astro, "Le Nom de Beckett", *Critique* LXVI, n°. 519-520, août-septembre 1990, p. 737-54.

¹⁴ Bair, op. cit., p. 22.

¹⁵ On Beckett's childhood see, besides Bair, op.cit., p.9-190: Patrick Wakeling, "Looking at Beckett: the Man and the Writer", *Irish University Review*, op.cit., p. 3-18 and J.C.C. Mays, "Les racines irlandaises du jeune Beckett", in Jean-Michel Rabaté ed., *Beckett avant Beckett* (Paris: Accents, 1984), p. 11-26.

¹⁶ *The Beckett Trilogy* (Picador Edition, 1979), p. 38.

¹⁷ Bair, op. cit., p. 40.

¹⁸ Interview with Tom Driver in Columbia University Forum, 1961.

Turdy (meaning excrement) being the name of one of the text's many local towns with pseudo Gaelic names ('baile' in Gaelic meaning townland) such as: Ballyba, Shit, Shitba, Turdy, Turdyba, etc.. Beckett manages to attack both the mythic idealisation of Irish womanhood as modelled on the Marian cult of female virginity and the figure of Our Lady when he makes Moran remind the farmer that the local Madonna is the Madonna of pregnant married women because of whom he (Moran) lost his infant boy.¹⁹

Equally, it is perhaps only the young Protestant in Beckett who could have described, as Beckett did, Belacqua Shuah, the hero of Beckett's *More Pricks than Kicks* (1934) as a "low-down Low Church Protestant of Huguenot stock"²⁰ or who could have parodied in *Whoroscope* (1930) and later in *Watt* (1942), the "Jesuitasters" teaching of the "real presence" of Christ in the Eucharist" or the doctrine of transubstantiation: "so we drink Him and eat Him / And the watery Beaune and the stale cubes of Hovis etc."²¹ But, as any reader familiar with Joyce or Flann O'Brien knows, the Jansenistic Catholicism current in Ireland during Beckett's youth (1906-30) was no less 'puritanical' than its Irish Protestant counterpart. Consequently, the sexually suggestive title of Beckett's *More Pricks than Kicks* was enough for the book to be banned in Ireland without even having been read by the censors. As Bair tells us, the title is biblical, from Acts ix, 5: "I am Jesus whom thou persecutest; it is hard for thee to kick against the pricks."²² It is no surprise then that in *First Love* (written after the war but not published until 1970), Beckett should mock at the Irish Catholic ruling on censorship and contraception. Such mockery cannot of course be simply seen as some sectarian anti-Catholicism on Beckett's part. It must be seen as Beckett's dismay with the lack of a wider intellectual freedom. It is this dissenting dismay which had inspired him into writing the article: "Censorship in the Saorstát" in 1935. The article decries the act of 16 July 1929 which established a board of censors to determine what books should be allowed into the Republic of Ireland. Beckett dismissed the bill as "panic legislation" in a country which legislated "sterilisation of the mind" while "banning all forms of contraception."²³

The ultimate turning point of Beckett's career, if we exclude the very important relationship Beckett enjoyed with Joyce during his earlier two year Parisian stay (1928-1930) and the undoubted beneficial and creative effects of his London analysis with Bion (1934-36),²⁴ was his emigration to France. But such a self-imposed exile has been seen not as a rupture from Irish theocratic society on Beckett's part, but as a symbolic continuation with an Anglo-Irish Protestant cultural tradition.

As the Anglo-Irish literary critic, Vivian Mercier, shows, alienation and the search for identity were serious problems for Irish Southern Protestants.²⁵ In fact, Mercier 're-reads' Beckett's radical existentialist status as an absurdist dramatist, in terms of being sanctioned by a specific Irish Protestant experience: "The typical Anglo-Irish boy... learns that he is not quite Irish almost before he can talk; later he learns that he is far from being English either...'Who am I?' is the question that every Anglo-Irish man must answer."²⁶

¹⁹ For a cultural analysis of Irish literature and sexual myth, see Richard Kearney's Field Day Pamphlet entitled: *Myth and Motherland* (Derry: Field Day Theatre Company, 1984).

²⁰ Quoted by Richard Kearney in his article entitled: "Beckett: the Demythologising Intellect", published in *The Irish Mind: Exploring Intellectual Traditions*, op. cit. p. 350.

²¹ *ibid.*, p. 271.

²² Bair, op. cit., p. 157-58.

²³ *ibid.*, p. 188.

²⁴ On Beckett's analysis, see: Bair, op. cit., p. 153-168; Didier Anzieu, "Beckett et Bion" *Revue de Psychothérapie Psychanalytique de Groupe* 5-6, 1986, p. 21-30 and Bennet Simon, "The Imaginary Twins: the Case of Beckett and Bion" *International Review of Psychoanalysis*, 15, 1988, p. 331-352.

²⁵ *Beckett / Beckett*, op.cit., p. 25.

²⁶ *ibid.*, p. 26.

Expatriation, whether physical or spiritual, is easy, according to Mercier, for Southern Protestants since they form a minority group that draws its ideas and general culture from outside its native country. As a criticism, one can point to Sartre's analysis of Valéry's bourgeois which is shown not to be the ultimate factor in Valéry's radical status as a writer since not every petit-bourgeois is a writer like Valéry, though Valéry himself was a petit-bourgeois.²⁷ However, for Mercier, it is Beckett's cultural background which explicates his status as a writer. The novels and plays cannot therefore be consistently interpreted as versions of pastoral or pleas for the downtrodden. Instead they link up with an Anglo-Irish literary tradition. Even if Vladimir and Estragon of *Godot* were not born into the landed gentry, it is reasonable to argue that "they came from the professional classes, prone in Ireland as in England, to ape the manners of the aristocracy while possessing a better education than they."²⁸

Beckett's Irish Protestant identity was, however, much more disturbing than Mercier is willing to admit. Another Irish critic, Beausang,²⁹ reads images of expulsion in Beckett's texts as the consciousness of a hostile milieu, a schizophrenic reaction to a social identity crisis. Beckett's Other is the British caricature of the average Irish Catholic, as exemplified by Beckett's *Murphy*: incompetent, mentally slow and yet hilarious. Just in the same way as the Anglo-Irish expelled their Catholic tenants from their land, so Beckett's language is equally in search of a place not so much in order "to be", but in order to explore the possibilities of non-being and non-identity. In fact, Beckett's heroes are either ejected out from some privileged place or find themselves imprisoned in some persecutory space.

A counter-view is provided by Richard Kearney who, while ignoring the Protestant dimension, places Beckett's exile in an Irish counter-tradition of decentredness, double-vision, otherness. We are (rightly) reminded that Beckett had no time for the native nostalgia of the Celtic twilight. Kearney inadvertently refers to Beckett's Protestant heritage when he goes on to say that Beckett revels in discontinuity and alienation. In contrast with Yeats who celebrates the mythic idioms of collective continuity and community, Beckett, in Kearney's view, promoted a counter-tradition of Irish authors who embraced a modernist Continental literature of self-reflection.³⁰

Obviously, there can be no fast, easy or definitive explanations for Beckett's exile. If anything, these differing accounts complement one another. But a different perspective would be to emphasise what Beckett gained from exile rather than what he "lost". On this point, little has been written. The most convincing line of thought, in my opinion, which still requires considerable development and which I can only briefly summarise here, is that opened up by Casement and Anzieu whose psychoanalytic readings, inspired by Winnicott's theory of play, stress Beckett's search for space and play.³¹

The central idea is that either through the wider foreign cultural environment of France which facilitated Beckett's choice to write bilingually,³² and the inner environment of the exiled writer, Beckett was able to find and use a "transitional" or "potential" space. The concept comes from the famous British psychoanalyst D.W. Winnicott who has shown that for a child to have the possibility of play - fantasy, illusion - there must be paradoxically an illusory

²⁷ Jean-Paul Sartre, *Search for a Method* (New York: Vintage Books, 1968), p.53-60.

²⁸ *Beckett / Beckett*, p. 52.

²⁹ Michael Beausang, "L'exil de Samuel Beckett: La terre et le texte", *Critique*, mai 1982, n° 420, p. 561-71.

³⁰ *Myth and Motherland*, p. 16.

³¹ Cf. Ciaran Ross, "Aspects du jeu dans l'œuvre de Samuel Beckett", in *Interfaces: image, texte, langage - "Samuel Beckett: Intertextualités et psychanalyse"*, (Cahier du Centre de recherches "Image, texte, langage", Département d'anglais, Université de Bourgogne, Dijon, 1992), p. 79-90.

³² Cf. Ciaran Ross, "Samuel Beckett: traducteur de l'autre", in *Traductions, Passages: Le domaine anglais*, G.R.A.A.T. n° 10 (Publication des Groupes de Recherches Anglo-Américaines de l'Université François Rabelais de Tours, 1993), p. 155-177.

space which is neither subjective nor totally objective.³³ In this regard, we have the possibility not to simply see Beckett's exile and his adoption of French as a simple rupture or separation from the past. The French writings are both a separation from and a reunion with the past. Casement argues - albeit reductively - that through French, Beckett was able to play out something of his own unresolved internal relationship to his mother alongside the new phenomenon of the "re-created" mother of his literary art.³⁴ The appearance of the theme of play and playfulness as in *Malone Dies*: "Now it is a game, I am going to play. I never knew how to play, till now. I longed to, but I knew it was impossible. And I often tried to." (*The Beckett Trilogy*, p. 166) is indeed no coincidence. Nor is the fact that it was in French that Beckett was at his most creative in writing *Mercier et Camier*, *Eleuthéria*, *Nouvelles*, *Molloy*, *Malone meurt*, *L'innommable*, *En attendant Godot* and *Textes pour rien* all between 1945 and 1950. Didier Anzieu³⁵ sees the "siege in the room" as a cultural intermediate space, the inner space being externally facilitated by Beckett's cultural and personal freedom from Ireland and France's newly-found freedom from Nazi persecution.

Any further psychoanalytic development of these remarks would unfortunately bring us beyond the scope of this article which deliberately purports to remain social and cultural in outlook. However, I shall return later to the notion of play in the context of my re-reading of *Godot*. In order to say something specific about relations between theatre and society in Beckett, the rest of the article will focus on the most internationally renowned of all of Beckett's texts, *Waiting for Godot* (*Godot*).

The Quest for Beckett's Irish (Protestant) Identity

Any critical discussion linking Beckett's work with an Irish context must first acknowledge the established social image of Beckett as a radical European dramatist.³⁶ The early "French" Beckett was the result of a convergence of existential, religious and marxist ideas concerning the functions of avant-garde theatre. In contrast, when we turn to Irish criticism of Beckett, issues already raised by religious and social critics reappear concerning the question of Beckett's radicalism and sociological reductionism, that is, the inevitable tendency to reduce Beckett's theatre to predictable "radical" meanings. Irish critics such as Bair and Mercier equally make no difference between Beckett's theatre and his prose but unlike the earlier critics, they reductively relate Beckett's texts to a more specific socio-cultural context, i.e. Irish society and more precisely, Southern Irish Protestantism. The difference between these critical groupings is that the Irish critics invert the relationship between Beckett's radicalism / reductionism in order to show that a reductionist relationship of the texts to their social dimension does not necessarily depend on radicalism (either Beckett's or society's) but rather on a sociological conservative viewpoint. The Irish conservative viewpoint is finely balanced by the contribution of Kearney (1985) who locates Beckett's radical appeal in what he calls an Irish counter-tradition including writers like Yeats, Joyce, Mc Greevy and Flann O' Brien. Vivian Mercier's reading makes an explicitly sociological case for understanding Beckett in that he stresses a consensual relationship between Beckett's theatre and Beckett's own upper-class Protestant background. Beckett had the capacity, according to Mercier, to reveal the

³³ Cf. Donald D. Winnicott, *Playing and Reality* (London: Tavistock, 1971); French transl. J.-B. Pontalis, *Jeu et Réalité. L'espace potentiel* (Paris: Gallimard, 1975).

³⁴ Patrick Casement, "Samuel Beckett's Relationship to his Mother Tongue", *International Review of Psychoanalysis*, vol. 9, part 1, 1982, p. 39.

³⁵ Didier Anzieu, "Samuel Beckett, de la psychanalyse au décollage créateur", in R. Chemana, et al., *Art et Fantasmie* (Seysell: Champ Vallon, 1984), p. 51-66.

³⁶ I am referring here to specifically social themes in early Beckettian critical literature (1950-1970) with particular reference to three dominant trends: existentialism, religion and marxism. For a full critical bibliography of Beckett, see what is the most extensive and recent essay in Beckettian bibliography: Cathleen Andorian, *Samuel Beckett: a Reference Guide* (Boston: Hall, 1989).

unconscious hopes and fears not only of himself but of his social group. Mercier was certainly more specific than Bair in being orientated to what Beckett was communicating in this particular play, *Godot*. In examining the photographs of the first production, Mercier notes that both Vladimir and Estragon “are more shabbily-genteel than ragged.”³⁷ Evidence for this lies in their pristine dark clothes, stiff collar and tie and the fact that they both wear intact bowler hats. The Protestant element is the down-at-heel tramp or bum (also to be detected in other characters such as: Murphy, Watt, Mercier, Camier and Krapp) whose inactivity is symbolically the action of a Puritan ideal of self-reliance, assertion and autonomy. They are not exactly “imbued with what American sociologists like to term the Protestant Ethic.”³⁸ The Beckettian tramp who waits for Godot is in disguise a Protestant tramp.

Beckett’s Protestantism is not, however, confined to clothes. Mercier stresses other factors such as education, income and religion.

Religion is seen as a structural device to many of the texts. While his views are no more different than those of the earlier religious commentators, nonetheless, Mercier eventually tries to locate such general theological interpretations —He sees the Trilogy as being strongly influenced by the religious thought of Pascal— in Beckett’s specific socio-religious situation. He does so by examining the concept of purgatory and the theme of waiting in Beckett’s texts as derivative of specific Irish Protestant belief. Such a Protestant theology could be simplified and summarised by the following salient points:

- i) God’s existence or non-existence is not explicable in terms of traditional metaphysical proofs of reason;
- ii) all we know about God is what the perplexing parables of scripture tell us;
- iii) God is totally other and transcendent, absent from the workings of the world and of men;
- iv) God can only be experienced by a solitary act of faith or by an agonised waiting;
- v) God’s separation from man is rendered insurmountable by virtue of our inveterate fallibility and fallenness.³⁹

Beckett’s drama, then, is theologically structured by the notion of waiting. In *Godot* the tramps exist in order to wait; in *Endgame*, Clov must wait until the end of the play before trying to leave Hamm (but that remains ambiguous); in *Happy Days*, both characters have no choice but to remain immobile. Similarly in the trilogy, all the narrators are all waiting either to leave their rooms or to begin their narratives. Theologically speaking, waiting can be interpreted as waiting for the Second Coming whose central idea was used, according to Mercier, by Beckett as a “structural convenience”.⁴⁰ Equally, “waiting” implies the concept of purgatory which despite its non-Protestant origins, is nonetheless put to use by Beckett.⁴¹

Yet, Mercier sees a specific Protestant theology represented by texts like *All that Fall* and *Happy Days*. The protagonist of *All that Fall*, Maddy Rooney, is “a faithful member of the Church of Ireland”, who only received communication in both kinds at her parish church and intends to hear tomorrow’s sermon on the text: “The Lord upholdeth all that fall and raiseth up all those that he bowed down.”⁴²

And similarly in *Happy Days*, Winnie’s repertoire of biblical clichés are seen to be specifically Anglican in nature: “In the opening moments of the play, for instance, we see her

³⁷ *Beckett / Beckett*, op. cit., p. 47.

³⁸ *ibid.*, p. 71.

³⁹ *The Irish Mind*, op. cit., p. 278.

⁴⁰ Mercier, op. cit., p. 178.

⁴¹ “It formed no part of the Protestant tradition in which he grew up.(...) he may have heard of it first as a doctrine disputed by Protestants.” *ibid.*, p. 179.

⁴² *ibid.* p. 217.

pray inaudibly, but she ends each of her two prayers with an audible Anglican formula: 'For Jesus Christ sake Amen' and 'World without end Amen'."⁴³

Beckett is radical, then, for Mercier not because he represents conservative Protestantism but because Irish Protestants are and have been active exponents of radicalism within Irish Theocratic society. Beckett's status within Irish society is that of a radical religious writer, that is religious in the wider sense of its cultural intellectual tradition. Such a status is seen to be both superior and thus offering a challenge to the antiintellectual tradition of Irish Catholicism.

Playing with Religion in *Godot*: between the Real and the Imaginary

I would like to intervene and criticise Mercier's repossession of Beckett by re-examining the particular interplay between religion and childhood in *Waiting for Godot*.⁴⁴ This involves re-reading the references to theology and Godot throughout the waiting rituals as representing to some extent a discourse of childhood learning, that is learning the language of Protestant Theology. In this way, and by using Winnicott's concept of transitional space, I hope to show that the play's reputed "objective" Protestant status is disrupted and "played" with by the drama's more complex imaginary structure.

The emphasis in the play seems to be on factual understanding the Bible rather than a more Catholic mystical experience which would rely on faith.⁴⁵ Vladimir tells the stories of the Bible, themselves the product of reading, of learning and memory, to Estragon in the mode of the mother/child bed-time reading relationships:

VI: Did you ever read the Bible?
Est: The Bible.. (He reflects.) I must have taken a look at it..
VI: Do you remember the Gospels?
Est: I remember the maps of the Holy Land. Coloured they were. Very pretty. The Dead Sea was pale blue. The very look of it made me feel thirsty..
VI Ah yes, the two thieves. Do you remember the story?
Est: No
VI: Shall I tell it to you?
Est: No
VI: It'll pass the time. (Pause.) Two thieves, crucified at the same time as our saviour. One..
Est: Our what?
VI: Our Saviour... one is supposed to have been saved..
Est: Saved from what? (*Godot*, p. 12)

Despite the endless debates about Godot's symbolism and its literal relations with God, God and Godot are explicitly and implicitly linked together in the play. But it is the precise textual functioning of "God" as quoted in *Godot* which requires close attention, that is the absence of Godot literally brought to bear on the imaginary presence or illusion of "God". This comes about as follows.

⁴³ *ibid.* p. 217.

⁴⁴ *Waiting for Godot* (London, Boston: Faber and Faber, 1979). Further references to the play in this article will be abbreviated to: *Godot/G*.

⁴⁵ This point echoes what Winnicott in his famous article about Transitional Objects and Transitional Phenomena says about the subtle differences between Catholic and Protestant religious symbolisms. He notes that for Protestant Religion the wafer of the Blessed Sacrament is really symbolic whereas for Catholic religion the wafer is experienced as symbolically real: "for the Roman Catholic community it is the body, and for the Protestant community it is a substitute, a reminder, and is essentially not, in fact, actually the body itself. Yet in both cases it is a symbol." *Playing and Reality*, *op. cit.*, p. 7.

Having resisted the occasion to learn about the Bible, Gospels, and expressed his desire for leaving (“Let’s go”, etc), Estragon is told for the first time of Godot and of the need to wait for him despite his absence:

Est: Let’s go.
 Vl: We can’t.
 Est: Why not?
 Vl: We’re waiting for Godot. (G, p.14)

In terms of the earlier “Bible” sessions which failed —religion as an entity cannot at all be assimilated by Estragon—, we can re-read Vladimir’s introduction of Godot to Gogo as the parent’s attempt to playfully teach about God, the word God being changed into a play-word or term “Godot”. In order to learn about God and his absence, it seems that Godot is invented by the parent in order to be imaginatively present even though he is always absent. And it seems that the more playful version of God - Godot, in lessening its spiritual and theological importance, has allowed Estragon to digest things hitherto unassimilable, for it is he, late in the play, who wonders if God can see him:

Est: Do you think God sees me?
 Vl: You must close your eyes. (ibid, p. 76)

The child’s limited conception of the invisible world is hinted at here, invisibility, thus, the spiritual, being located at the limits of the visible. Vladimir also wonders dreamily if at he “too someone is looking” (p. 91). Both imagine Godot as possessing the properties of the Old Testament God, that is, a wicked old man with a white beard:

Vl: Has he a beard, Mr. Godot,
 Boy: Yes, sir.
 Vl: Fair or...black?
 Boy: I think it’s white, sir.
 Vl: Christ have mercy on us!
 Est: And if we dropped him?
 Vl: He’d punish us. (p. 92-93)

Thus, Godot or “God” as a reality cannot be thought of as either being fully real or imaginary but as being something illusory or similar to a substitute for the mother and the cultural environment, that is as being neither absent nor present but potentially both. This line of reasoning is different from the more clichéd and passive idea advocated by many critics that Godot is simply the epitome of unknowability. For me, the Beckettian religious phenomenon is irreducible to any external objective categories as described by critics. Godot’s irreducibility is not an autonomous or absolute one but rather one which is constituted by an undifferentiated intersubjective play between two types of ‘reality’, that is, subjectivity and objectivity. To elaborate this point, I would like to briefly look at Vladimir’s monologues towards the end of the play.

Vladimir describes the absence of Godot as “straying in the night without end of the abysmal depths...in an instant all will vanish and we’ll be alone once more in the midst of nothingness”. (p. 80, 81) His last monologue is “split” between being a parental figure to the sleeping Gogo and to simultaneously harbouring fears concerning Godot’s reliability:

“Was I sleeping...Am I sleeping now? Tomorrow when I wake, or think I do, what shall I say of today? That with Estragon my friend, at the place, until the fall of night, I waited for Godot?...But in all that what truth will there be”? (p. 90)

Vladimir makes no clear distinction either between sleeping or waking or between Godot’s “real” qualities or “dreamlike” qualities. In other words, the fact and illusion concerning Godot remain unbridged. Having earlier mirrored to Gogo as a benevolent God-like figure, he now requires someone to watch over him while he “sleeps”. Vladimir’s search for a mirror consists in finding someone who will equally prevent him from knowing whether he is asleep or awake, or whether it is daytime or nighttime. One could extend this line of thought and say that Vladimir wants to suspend a state of knowing and accede to being. This ‘someone’ who might facilitate the transition from knowing to being can be easily named as Godot. However,

Vladimir's mirror is concretely provided by the boy whose arrival twice at the end of each Act, represents the absence of Godot. This "mirror of absence" is precisely that which the boy signifies since his relationship to Godot is equally imaginary though real for Gogo / Didi and real though imaginary for the boy.:

Boy: What am I to tell, Mr. Godot, sir?
VI: Tell him...(he hesitates) that you saw me and that...(he hesitates)..that you saw me...(with sudden violence)..you're sure you saw me, you won't come and tell me tomorrow that you never saw me. (p. 91,92)

What is missing between both speakers is of course Godot whose paradoxical present absence and absent presence is mirrored by the boy's representation of both Godot's presence (arrival) and his absence (non-arrival). Godot, like the boy, can be said to be 'transitional', that is neither 'real' nor 'illusory'. The religious discourse around Godot is neither imaginative nor real. It is neither reducible to the characters' discourses nor to the mysterious entity of Godot nor to the sum of the two. The Beckettian "Protestant" discourse is transitional since it is constituted by the relation between these two discourses, that is, the discourse of presence, symbolised by Estragon and Vladimir's waiting and the discourse of absence, marked by Godot, the boy's presence and all those speeches which relate elements of Godot's "existence". Thus, the play's social meaning is strictly a potential one. Social meaning - or any other meaning - is not discovered or already found outside the boundaries of theatrical space. Despite the explicit use of Protestant imagery - a point I am temporarily willing to accept-, the Protestant "reality" of the play is not pre-constituted nor can it be said to exist as a pre-determined entity in the world.

Constituting a critical difference: Towards a counter-mythical analysis of *Godot*

The contention then of the remainder of this article is to examine in what way do these different levels of theatrical analysis —sociological, religious, psychoanalytic, and later (post)-structuralist— constitute the text's specificity. In other words, one must attempt to analyse the particular signification in associating "theology" with the unheard of, unknowable, inexplicable "concept" of Godot. In order to organise the remainder of my analysis, I will formally make use of Barthes's notion of mythology as a fabricated 'natural' attitude or belief in order to show how one may read Beckett's *Godot* as a demythologising force against its social myths - political, religious, Irish, etc..

In asserting the ideological basis to *Godot* (ideology either as a subjectivising of the text or an objectification of the text), Marxist critics can be seen as intervening in the naturalness of the text's status as rendered by the view of Beckett's existentialist critics. In fact, no other play perhaps could have been more suitable to a representation of "Derelict Man" and his social dereliction than *Godot* whose critics found more than ample evidence to witness its metaphysical dehumanisation of Man. In short, religious and philosophical thinkers constitute a metaphysical "nature" for Beckett. The 'Irish Beckett' myth is different in that it inverts the relationship between the History and Nature of Godot in order to show us how the play can simultaneously point towards a coextensive relationship between truth (universality)⁴⁶ and history (Beckett's Irish Protestant background). Such a perception is a classical example of bourgeois mythology, where through the particular, historical bourgeois conditions of a text, that is, the reputed upper-class clothing, educated speeches of Vladimir and Estragon, a universal truth is practiced and depends on the coextensive functioning of such a paradox. In other words, Beckett's Protestant code is inverted into a natural reference or what Barthes

⁴⁶ Mercier, op. cit., writes: "Beckett's universality, in the last analysis, does not depend on impatriation or expatriation, on Irishness, Frenchness or Cosmopolitanism: it depends on the paradox of a unique self that has found its bedrock in our common human predicament." p. 62.

terms in *S / Z*, “a cultural stereotypical proverb(...) a stereotypic vertigo.”⁴⁷ Such stereotypes concerning Beckett include the notions of universality, parochialism, loyalty, gentlemanliness, culturedness, intelligence, etc.

In my view, the play analysis I put forward counters this Irish social myth. My reading can be shown to be counter-mythical in specifically uncovering the text’s regression to an infantile narcissistic playing discourse which disrupts the text’s pre-established objective relationships to external society. The play, if limited to an Irish context, subverts the essential “natural” beliefs associated with the “truth” of Protestantism by revealing its cultural basis as a socially received childhood discourse. The fundamental paradox of the play’s dramatic mode, that is, the resistance to action or fulfilling our attitude towards action or even resolving the static situation of waiting, is a paradox specific to (i) the transitional qualities of the waiting; (ii) the intersubjective mode of identity constituted by the play, and (iii) our (audience) intersubjective role in the “playing” of the play. Godot manifests its transitional qualities by revealing for the speakers both subjective and objective features which are never differentiated or resolved but rather held or fused in Godot’s illusory or potential space. This paradoxical ‘fusion’ is generally expressed in the performance by the interplay between Godot as fantasy and reality, that is, as a subjective possessive object for the “fall of night” - (“Will night never come”, *Godot*, p. 36.), thus a comforter against the anxiety of dream and as an objectively perceived object which in reality never existed or in the playing discourse’s terms, never turns up. In both cases, Godot is ‘represented’ by a boy. This paradoxical structure is specifically related to the play not only through Godot but also through the complex matrix of mirroring relationships taking place.

In terms of deconstructionist readings of Beckett and given the thematic importance of radicalism explored in this article, such a psychoanalytic reading of playing cannot be said to be fully radical since it ultimately preserves an identity in the text even though this identity is strictly dependent on the specific intersubjective mode of the play’s theatrical context and thus opposes any pre-established objective relations between Beckett and society. Analysing theatrical action in terms of inaction - “playing” - makes simplifying assumptions about the complex meaning of Beckettian theatrical “action” which, as other critics have shown, is inseparable from the play of writing. For example, analysing the play’s central fragment: “Let’s go/ we can’t/ why not? / we’re waiting for Godot”, etc., Hugh Kenner⁴⁸ argues that Beckett implements inaction as a subverted mode of action or discourse which resembles very much both Barthes’ “deconstructive” descriptions of myths and their “natural” conditions and Foucault’s notion of discursive practice. Yet, we have no criteria of certainty concerning the status of the players’ inaction. We cannot assume that inaction is either the result of an imposed discursive strategy (Kenner) or the effect of an overall speech identity that is the identity of imposed limits, e.g. Protestantism. Derrida’s opposition between writing and speech⁴⁹ plays a significant role in our discussion at this point, for in demonstrating how ‘speech’ is marked and inhabited by the properties of writing, Derrida provides us with a critical model for rethinking Beckett’s action/inaction relations in terms of a writing/speech dynamique.

Beckettian inaction (“writing”) can be reformulated as being constituted by action (“speech”) but action which is irreducible to inaction. Inaction is not the specific speech identity of either Vladimir or Estragon. Their irrational preference for inaction despite pleading for action (“Let’s go”) is not reducible to their intentions nor to some wider strategic intention or discourse. Instead, inaction is ‘re-presented’ or supplemented by the play or action of writing, an action which is neither fully present nor absent to inaction since the phrase (“Let’s go/ We

⁴⁷ Roland Barthes, *S / Z* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1975), p.97-98.

⁴⁸ Cf. Hugh Kenner, *Samuel Beckett: A Critical Study* (New York: Grove, 1962).

⁴⁹ Cf. Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology* (Baltimore, London: John Hopkins University Press, 1974), p.1-87.

can't") can only be a supplement, a 're-presentation' of action. Inaction is thus inhabited by meaning, difference, 'action' which can be defined as the 'presence' of the inaction which the text constitutes as supplement.

Beckettian theatre, thus, possesses no natural properties. It is constructed and constituted by "play" which mythifies theatre as self-evident speech practice involving everyday attitudes towards action ("Let's go/ we can't/ why not? / we're waiting for Godot, etc") or as theatrical action as being naturally "inactive". Beckett's theatrical discursive practice does not, however, escape its own mythical limits since in intervening upon its own mythical conditions in order to counter them, it reproduces, as it were, the effects of a second order myth, i.e. imposed "play".⁵⁰

Nonetheless, I want to show that Beckett strategically produces a decentering or a critical delusion by playing, in two different ways, the text's "inactive" mode against its "active" mode. Inaction is constituted by action and it is the text's play mode which disrupts our natural attitude towards action ("let's go", etc.) Taking Beckett's dramatic practice to its extremes, one could argue that if Beckett is representing anything it is the impossibility of closure, that is, the difficulty in attributing a fixed determinable meaning to a theatrical performance. In other words it is not theatrical discourse which produces a limited or imposed meaning - Protestant identity - but rather the play of unlimited meaning which produces such a limited discourse. As we have already seen in the earlier discussion involving Derrida, such a radical inactional status is not, however, so 'self-assertive'. The relationship between action/inaction is more economical than historical or "social". Through the action of speaking, inaction is not constituted but rather deferred, put off since it cannot be completely made "present" to the action of Estragon and Vladimir's intentions which themselves involve resolutions towards action. Thus, as audience, we are obliged to be active in interpreting the players' speeches about inaction as action and not yet as action. The play's almost context-free closed economic system (Kenner) whose inactivity can be infinitely repeated, is therefore not produced from the 'outside' but rather through the supplementary logic of the text's meaning, of its active play as "playing". Thus, inaction in the play cannot be represented through action (political, social, etc) since it cannot be said through a discursively controlled language. Instead of producing an interruption in our intersubjective perception as audience, inaction actually orients the play's action which is never fully itself nor can it be reduced to a static (Protestant) property of inaction. Being only present metaphorically (i.e. action as a metaphor for inaction), inaction becomes a metaphor of itself, that is a figure (immobility) of a figure ("Let's go"). Indeed it seems to me that Vladimir and Estragon's inaction reveals a non-mastery of their "theatre" (action), that is, a blindness to meaning, to "natural" action, or in Mercier's terms, to Protestant thinking. In other words, the play's inaction - its "nothingness" - is not an "object" (of dehumanised society) but rather an excess of an unthought residue (non-mastery of inaction) of thought (action, strategy, discourse).

Such a line of argument opens up the Beckettian Irish critical discourse since it shows that this is (inaction). With regard to this critical delusion, our position as audience is no longer defined by what or by how the play speaks or says, but the place from which it speaks. The play's systematic imposition of inaction can be read not as a 'natural' expression of Protestant culture, but as its misapprehension, as a critical delusion in an assumed Protestant identity.

It is not my contention to simply replace what really is a predictable Irish interpretation of Beckett's Protestant identity in order to champion other critical factions - psychoanalytic or post-structuralist - but rather to unravel the practical (and social) implications for us as readers and audience. For one must ask how can one perceive this Beckettian non-mastery or self-misapprehension of a play's theatricality, without including and reducing such a movement to

⁵⁰ "Second order myth." Cf. Roland Barthes, *Mythologies* (London: Toronto, Granada, 1972), p.134-136.

the limits of “theatre”, that is, to the “re-representativity” of a self-apprehensive discourse concerning misapprehension? The Derridian response is that the play or rather its performance is not always what or where we think or where it thinks it is (inaction). With regard to this critical delusion, our position as audience is no longer defined by what or by how the play speaks or says, but the place from which it speaks.

The play’s action cannot, however, be said to be totally mythless or devoid of some implicit “truth practice”. The text’s actional code is mythical by attempting to present an action about action, a non-mastery through mastery and by also attempting to stage the “impossibility” of action through inaction. Indeed it is through such mythical limits, that is, the limit of theatricality itself, that we can more readily accept Beckett’s counter-mythical status as a radical intervention in Protestant discourse.

In order to re-read Godot’s Protestant mythicality, I propose to make use of other actional myths which Hugh Kenner identifies such as: tautology, rationality, theology, systematicity. To conclude, I want to show that the text ‘re-presents’ the myth of Protestantism not only through its intervention in theatre, but also through specific myths constitutive of Protestantism which are also constitutive of theatricality.

‘Re-presenting’ the Intellectual Irish Protestant or the difference of which Godot is the return

Mercier identifies the particularity of Godot as being constituted by a particular social stereotype such as the ‘poor down-at-heel Protestant’. The particularity of the play’s social meaning becomes dubious though when we consider that the notion of a social fall implies a wider system of values which cannot be simply reduced to Godot. In a way, the meaning of the play is a condensation of a certain type of knowledge, that is, the history of Irish Protestantism, which in being already part of history closes the specificity of Godot to serve as an accomplice to its conceptual power. Also the concept of ‘Irish Protestantism’ is open to a very rich and varied history of practices, i.e. theology, sport, education, business, etc. But what is specific about its relationship to the text of *Godot* is the text’s appropriation. In other words, within the closed context of Irish Protestantism, the play is specifically intended for the reception of a limited social group. In being so richly open to its vast history as a concept, Irish Protestantism is much poorer than that of the discourse of *Godot* since while the text may be taken to be unmistakably ‘Protestant’, not every other Protestant discourse can be said to be reducible to Beckett’s theatrical discourses. In this way, and strictly speaking, the Protestant myth can only constitute a ‘proportional’ relationship with Beckett.

Mercier neglects the fact that the two ‘tramps’ are also ‘represented’ in the discourse and that the discourse does not originate from them as aprior characters. It has been indicated that the text is rich in allusions to the speakers’ education and religion which constitute a positive social identity for the play. The biblical references are, however, no more important than the other elements or “clichés” within the text’s theatrical system, that is, if we accept Kenner’s view of the play as an unimpingeable self-consistent tautology —imposed economy of dramatics—⁵¹ that neither the “truth” of the bible or of Godot can ever change or induce a modification upon the static situation. But as Barthes tells us, tautology cannot be simply accepted as some general truth about things but rather as the practice of a particular mythical signification: “Tautology is a faint at the right moment, a saving aphasia (...) the indignant “representation” of the rights of reality over and above language (‘because that’s how it is’).”⁵²

⁵¹ Hugh Kenner, op. cit., p. 133-34.

⁵² Mythologies, op. cit., p. 152-53.

One obvious Beckettian tautology is theology as seen in the Christian imagery, the references to ‘God’, Sainthood, Abel/ Cain and redemption, etc.. (*Godot*, p. 12-13, 52, 76, 80, 83, 94). A quote is however more than just a quote. The references are also specifically saying that a theological / Biblical frame of reference is no more than its own frame of reference as well. In other words, the Bible can also be endlessly quoted and repeated as simply an experience of reading or learning just as a play can make us realise that its speeches are all already written, arranged like a musical score. But there are two further ‘elements’ which make these two tautologies, i.e. theatre/theology, even more specific and it is the word ‘Godot’ and the social status of the two main characters. We can articulate this specific series of relations as follows: why should an unknown person, object, thing called Godot be the generating principle of a system of tautologies performed by two ‘(un)disguised’ upper-middle class ‘intellectuals’? In what way does Godot ‘re-represent’ a generalised (typical) re-representation of Anglo-Irish Protestant discourse?

Barthes provides us with a general answer with regard to the use of tautology as being a specific myth of bourgeois thought: “One takes refuge in tautology as one does in fear, or anger or sadness, when one is at a loss for an explanation.”⁵³

In relation to Beckett, it seems that three tautological relationships centre around Godot and correspond to three specific myths. The following table outlines the specific interplay between tautology and myth in the discourse with the following code operating: T = tautology, M = myth:

T1:	Godot/Drama	=	M1:	Upper-class/Drama
T2:	Godot/Theology	=	M2:	intellect/theology
T3:	Godot/Rationality	=	M3:	neologism/upper-class
Tn/Mn = stereotype of ‘intellectual Irish Protestant’				

T1/M1: The repeated circular tautology: ‘Let’s go; We can’t; Why not?; We’re waiting for Godot’ which provides the ‘intellectuals’ with their most repeated ‘line’, constitutes not only the bourgeois myth of ‘helplessness’ but the more specific myth of saying that ‘drama is (only) drama’. Drama as an inexplicable ‘object’ can only be ‘explained’ by repeating its inexplicability, its ‘Godot-ism’, its matter of factness, or its repeatability of a received idea, i.e. the idea of a rendez-vous with the unknown (Godot).

T2/M2: The relationship between Godot and theology in the discourse, is not a reductionist one but rather an associative one where certain strategies are revealed via their association. In other words, one must attempt to analyse the particular signification in associating ‘theology’ as a tautological system with the unheard of, unknowable, inexplicable ‘concept’ of Godot. If Godot is used as a matrix of ‘unknowingness’ or ‘indeterminability’ then why should a clichéd theological discourse (theme of Resurrection, Tree of Knowledge, etc.) be put to use in the theatrical discourse? There seem to be several answers which all point to a certain underlying myth concerning the relationship between religion and intellectuality. If Godot is taken as a rational problem, that is, a problem which can be only articulated and discussed in rational terms, pointed out by Kenner, then the specific association with theology, which is another tautology, implies that theology itself is another rational discourse, another set of theoretical or theatrical ‘rules’ whereby tautological operations may be ‘researched’. But Godot can also be seen as remaining beyond the limits of rational discourse and thus neither theology nor rationality can serve to explicate. The specific myth at play could be expressed as follows:

Godot demonstrates (i) the stupidity in treating theology as a superior rational weapon than rationality itself; (ii) the stupidity in treating reason/logic as a weapon better suited to ‘truth’ than theology or religion. The specific myth being practiced here is the ‘intellectuality’ of theology, or the theology (truthfulness) of any principle of intelligibility.

⁵³ *ibid.*, p. 152.

T3/M3: The fundamental relationship in the play is not so much between any two of the five characters but rather between any one speaker and the word Godot. Few critics have ever really addressed the simple phenomenon in the play as constituted by upper-class adults talking about an unknown entity called Godot. I suggested a children's playing or learning space. But this is not enough. If we temporarily suspend psychoanalytic interpretations of the play and focus on Godot in terms of a neologism, a certain social myth emerges. T3 is no longer being articulated in terms of 'theatricality', nor 'theology' although it is part of them. The tautology takes place between the rationalised repetition of Godot as a contingent word and those who repeat it, i.e. Gogo/Didi. Within the context of rationality, theology and the reputed educational status of the characters, it is conceivable to see the word 'Godot' as a neologism for the two down-at-heel thinkers.

Discussing the use of neologisms as constitutive of bourgeois myth, Barthes writes: "China is one thing, the idea which a French petit-bourgeois could have of it not so long ago is another (...) One should at least get some consolation from the act that conceptual neologisms are never arbitrary: they are built according to a highly sensible proportional rule."⁵⁴

Indeed, it is no accident that the name/word 'Godot' is associated with a particular system of tautologies involving a 'theatricality', a 'theologism' and a pervading 'rationality'. As a word, Godot is contingent, as context free as any other word or conceptual neologism but it specifically loses its arbitrariness when one sees how it induces not simply tautologies involving 'theatre' or 'theology' but rational operations governing many of the play's activities. Some of these include the 'adieu' scene in Act 1 involving Pozzo, Estragon and Vladimir; Vladimir's systematic and circular song; the exchange of hats; the repetition of the Pozzo/Lucky relationship by Gogo/Didi and the "repetition" of Act 1 by Act 2.

As an arbitrary neologism, Godot is intersected by a particular discourse involving the interplay of three tautologies: 'theatricality'/'theologism'/'rationality', all conveyed by upper-class speakers arguably representative of an Irish Protestant class. The specificity of the play's discourse emerges in terms of four variables: theatre, theology, intellect, class. In my view, these four variables can be seen constituting a specific stereotypical social class identity. Hence the specific appeal of the Protestant reading of Beckett since the Anglo-Irish Protestant class is virtually a synonym for the great theatrical tradition dominated by Southern Protestants such as Synge, Wilde, Shaw, etc. In addition to its artistic legacy as a social class, the Anglo-Irish Protestants have also been strikingly intellectually far more superior in matters pertaining to religion, art than that of their Catholic counterparts. With their intellectual interest in the Bible foremost, the Irish Protestants have been reputed within Irish secular society for their rational, cultural and intellectual view of life at large.⁵⁵

The specificity of Beckett's play *Godot* consists, then, in the way it intervenes and changes the social discourse of Irish Protestantism by specifically intervening in 'theatre' as a traditional mode of Anglo-Irish Protestant representation. Beckett de-mythologises and counter-mythologises such self-evident 'natural' and social identities. However, his intervention in Protestantism as a mode of representation cannot be reduced beyond the theatrical actional mode of the play and it is through the actional mode that the intervention in Protestantism can be more critically formulated. As audience we are obliged to be active in experiencing the inaction ('They do not move') as action and not yet as action. Hence, the

⁵⁴ p. 121.

⁵⁵ Cf "The Twilight of Ascendancy", "Education: Sheep and other sheep", and Protestant Preferred", in Jack White, *Minority Report - the Protestant Community in the Irish Republic* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1975), p. 53-70; 137-70. On the literary front, see Seamus Deane's analysis of Irish literature and culture, with references to Irish Protestant literary discourse in his introduction to *Nationalism, Colonialism and Literature*, op. cit., p.3-19. See also: Seamus Deane "The Literary Myths of the Revival: A Case for their Abandonment", *Myth and Reality in Irish Literature*, J. Ronsley ed. (Waterloo, Ont.: W. Laurier University Press, 1977), p. 317-329, and Seamus Deane, *Heroic Styles: the Tradition of an Idea* (Derry: Field Day Theatre Company, 1984).

play's representation of Protestant stereotypes is itself a critical delusion, a misapprehension since we cannot know whether the inaction of the characters is action or 'really' inaction. Nonetheless, we are obliged as audience through the theatrical specificity of the play (inaction) to be active in apprehending the 'representation' of Protestant myth as misapprehension due to its very myth of apprehensibility, of self-reliance. Thus, Beckett's theatre radically interrogates our rational competence as receivers of fictional discourse. Our received criterion of such a competent (masterful) rationality, that is, Protestantism, is radically disrupted by the fictional 'action' of *Godot*.

For me, the meaning of Beckett's radicalism arises from the necessary interaction between the assumptions and attitudes concerning theatre and its objective 'realities.' Beckett disrupts and challenges our stereotypical assumptions concerning the relationships between such realities as Irish Protestantism and theatre. In inviting us to un-do and re-do our experience of theatre in general, and in particular Irish Protestant theatre, Beckett radically deprives us of having to choose between theatre and social reality. Against sociological and cultural reductionism, Beckett initiates a radically fictional practice of self-determinism challenging the sociological and colonialist tradition which has characterised Irish literary and theatre criticism.