

FRAMING IRISH *LITTÉRATEURS*: A CRITICAL SURVEY ON THE WORKS OF W.B. YEATS AND SAMUEL BECKETT

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Abstract

Quite apart from the mainstream of the English literary events, in Ireland, there stirred a new consciousness that came to be called by such various names as the Irish Literary movement, Irish Dramatic movement or Irish Theatre movement. The Irish cultural revival, initiated largely by the Irish poet William Butler Yeats (1865-1939), began late in the 19th century. Yeats urged to write for his country Ireland to draw their inspiration directly from Irish life and tradition rather than from English and European sources. In 1899 Yeats and Lady Gregory established the Irish Literary Theatre and later it was recognized as Irish National Theatre Society in 1902. In spite of that few writers seem to embody literary Ireland more than Yeats or Joyce. But for many Irish writers and readers, there are none greater than Samuel 'Barclay' Beckett (1906-1989) who is regarded as one of the 20th century's last dominating literary voices, and who managed a great shift in literary consciousness. As a native Irishman, Beckett is ranked with fellow countrymen Yeats, Synge, Pinter and Joyce and their comic genius and as a self-made Frenchman, Beckett is associated with existentialism and the 'Theatre of the Absurd'. However, W.B. Yeats's quest for poetry where 'words obey my call', and Beckett's claim for *Eleuthéria* noting 'the text as is, the words as is, that's all I know. The rest is Ibsen' (Morin 2009), are readily invoked as critical currency. The paper intends to examine the selected works of two Irish *littérateurs*, Yeats and Beckett, that their writings are very much philosophic, inaccessible and unget-at-able.

Key Words: Yeats, Absurd Theatre, Beckett, Irish, Existentialism, Celticism.

Introduction

The Anglo-Irish poet William Butler Yeats (1865-1939) is one of the paramount figures of 20th century literature. With Yeats, the affinities of temperament have been at work, practicing a secret magnetism on the rich fund of suggestions stored in the ancient spirit of Ireland, and extracting from it all that could be harmonized with the delicacy of a subtle art. His execution is more thoroughly steeped than any other in the fictitious mysticism which, it is told, is the essential attribute of Celticism. The ethics and profound roots of this mysticism are in the old traditions of Ireland; its exuberance, no doubt, derives strong nourishment from the racy sap of the soil. Sprung from Irish Protestantism and the son of an Irish painter, Yeats was born in Dublin, but his childhood was passed in London save for vacations in the west of Ireland. Although he relished his infancy in London, Yeats' poems reflect his deep emotional attachment to his native land, Ireland. Being a staunch supporter of Irish nationalism, he devoted himself to

native subjects- as writing and composing poems, writing plays, short stories and novels with Irish characters and setting. As many of his writings unfold a dreamlike nostalgia, and as he was a modernist who experimented with free verse and a symbolist who used allusive images and symbols throughout his career.

Belonging to Ireland, which in his day was swept by a national upsurge against British rule, he took upon himself the leadership of the Irish literary movement, intended at resurrecting the language and literature of Ireland. To the closing he consecrated an Irish National Literary Society in London and another in Dublin, and the Irish National Theatre Society which later attained the Abbey Theatre, Dublin. However, from Ireland, therefore, he derived the chief inspiration for his work: from her legends, her fairy tales, her folklore. But there were some outside influences too, continental and English, which included the French symbolists, William Blake, and the Pre-Raphaelites.

Yeats poetry parted into three divisions: the romantic, the realistic and the mystical. To the first division belong, generally, the volumes of this youth. In the second period, the formidable reality on the Irish struggle for independency claims most of his attention. In the final period both the dreams of early youth and the realities of the Irish situation are replaced by a mystic contemplation of life, developed from various philosophical systems, native, eastern, and western. But most scholars distinguish in his poetic career roughly by five main periods:

1. An early 'Romantic' period, (aesthetic period) (1889-99) lasting until about the turn of the century.
2. An 'Irish nationalist' period, (1899-1909) where he focused on the aspirations of the Irish people and his obsession with his life-long love interest Maud Gonne.
3. A 'country ideal' period, which experimented with rhythm and presented aristocratic elegance as an ordering principle.
4. A "systematizing" period, presenting a cyclic theory of life (Period of Transition) 1909-1918;
5. A re-energized "wild" period in his final years and became the most important poet of that time (1919-1939). Yeats spanned the transition from a high Victorian world view to 20th century modernism in much the same way Pablo Picasso did in painting.

The first poem that matters was *The Wanderings of Oisín* (1889), the volume with which the Irish Literary Revival attained complete self-consciousness. Though in succeeding years Yeats was a member of the coterie of poets and an outcome of the *Aesthetic Movement* in London, under the influence of Walter Pater, he was already in quest of a fresh tradition and an individual style. There is little that is derivative from English sources in the poetic plays, *The Countess Kathleen* (1892) and *The Land of Heart's Desire* (1894), or in the lyrics and ballad-pieces (*Cross-Ways* in 1889, *The Rose* in 1893, *The Wind Among the Reeds* in 1899) that associated the former. The influence of the French school and of Maeterlinck is evident in *The Wind among the Reeds* (1899), a new collection of verse. The delicate light rimes (frequently 'off-rimes' and 'assonances'), the insubstantial rhythms, and the vague outlines are characteristics of Yeats' first manner. The aesthetic theory of the separation of art from life, which Yeats was later to repudiate, is implicit. However, his *Poems* were collected in 1895, but for many years he was predominantly possessed with prose works like *The Celtic Twilight* (1893), *The Secret Rose* (1897), *The Tables of the Law* (1897) and *The Adoration of the Magi* (1897). The earlier prose writing was about fairy-lore and later on was about difficult occultism.

Notwithstanding, Yeats' standpoint for the residue of his life was apparently most strongly informed by late 19th century Irish nationalism, which was so profound and passionate in Dublin and which in fact directly disadvantaged his Anglo-Irish heritage and the influence of Ibsen's problem plays has been discerned. Nevertheless, Yeats' apathy, there was the impact of

Irish politics. He could not escape from his environment- the less so because he was in love with the burning Nationalist, Maud Gonne, and in 1899 he was influenced by Lady Gregory and both of them inaugurated The Irish National Theatre, in Dublin. During this time (middle years) Yeats seemed to be less dependent upon symbolism. His poetic work, includes *In the Seven Woods* (1903), is much prolific beside his outstanding plays like *Cathleen Ni Houlihan* (1902), *The King's Threshold* (1904) and *Deirdre* (1907). Her investigations of folklore and legend are recorded in numerous volumes, but her outstanding works was in the drama. She accompanied with Yeats in *The Unicorn from the Stars* (1908) and other plays. *The Rising of the Moon* (1907) and *The Workhouse Ward* (1936) are probably the best.

Yeats' heavy participation in both the Irish National Theatre and his assiduous dynamism during the formative, combative period of the Abbey Theatre had a profound impact upon him as a poet. For a time during his middle years (1909-1918) Yeats seemed to be less dependent upon symbolism. In *Responsibilities* (1916) and *The Green Helmet* (1910), the latter a reworking in ballad metre, are herd and dry in manner. Yet concurrently with his substitution of lively, homely detail for the dreamy vagueness of background in his renderings of Irish myths, his studies were becoming increasingly esoteric. At the time when he was engaged upon *Reveries over Childhood and Youth* (1916) and *The Trembling of the Veil* (1922) – he viewed his own life as symbols for his poetry that are often “private” and obscure to the verge of incommunicability and he was profoundly interested, and disturbed by, mystic experiences. *A vision* (1925), a prose worse, with its exposition of the phases of human experience symbolized by the Hunch back, the Saint, and the Fool, and with its great show of secret ‘gnosis’ in this pseudo-mystic learning. The sense of the conflict between soul and sense, between being and becoming, is suggested with utmost depth and splendor in *Sailing to Byzantium*, one of the first of his later poems.

However, he behoved as the most effective poet during his last period (1919-1939) for his few effulgent and percipient writings, such as: *The Wild Swans of Coole* (1919), *The Winding Stair* (1933) where he used strong rhythm, stanza and rhyme pattern and extended symbols. But his metaphysical poems included in his colourful writing, during the conclusive time of his career, as, *A Full Moon in March* (1935), *Last Poems* (1935-1939) *Purgatory* (1938) and *Plays and Controversies* (1923). In versification, while he is always musical, he later, where he adopts freer metres and attempts to keep close to the rhythm of speech. This together with his interest in the complexities of life made him a modern ‘poet’.

Samuel ‘Barclay’ Beckett (1906-1989), one of the most puissant writers of the twentieth century, was born in Foxrock, an opulent Dublin suburb on 13 April 1906, showed absolute competency in many fields and mastered such languages as French, Spanish, Italian and German. In notifying the arrival of the modern age, Matthew Arnold wrote, “the calm, the cheerfulness, the disinterested objectivity have deliquescent; the dialogue of the mind with itself has commenced”. Beckett is the ultimate ‘Boss’ of the inner dialogue that shows an individual progressively stripped of sustaining illusion and disorder, king Lear-like, to the level of bare, unaccommodated man who inaugurated to the essence of the Absurd Theatre from his study of Sartre, Camus and Kafka. As Hugh Kenner, in his book *A Reader's Guide to Samuel Beckett* said: “In the modern history of literature at least he is a unique moral figure, not a dreamer of rose-gardens but a cultivator of what will grow in the waste land, who can make us see the exhilarating design that thorns and yucca share with whatever will grow anywhere”. In Beckett's world of essence and existence, comedy meets tragedy, and the goal of art seems to be mum or stillness that invades and surrounds his works but never entirely dominates them. As a native Irishman, Beckett is ranked with fellow countrymen Swift, Sterne and Joyce and their comic

genius and as a self-made Frenchman, Beckett is associated with existentialism and the Theatre of the Absurd.

His keen rapport in French language, life and culture was invigorated by Feson (Alfred), a surrealist poet who later became his bosom friend. Unlike other Irish dramatists he perceived drawn to the European life, particularly the French and reached out beyond the local Irish culture. He initiated writing poetry, short stories and criticism in right earnest. However, his writings consist of with a kind of arbitrary collection or ‘bricolage’ of philosophical ideas and his works oozes an atmosphere of existential angst, despondent and human abandonment to the relentless course of the world. However, his literary work started from 1927 until 1946 was in English. His early publications included a critical study of Marcel Proust, a collection of short stories (*More Pricks than Kicks*, published in 1934), a volume of poems (*Echo's Bonus*, published in 1935), and two novels (*Murphy* and *Watt*). In 1946, Beckett began a tremendous period of productivity that resulted in his most famous works. During this period, he completed a fictional trilogy (*Molloy*, *Malone Dies*, and *The Unnamable*) and the play *Waiting for Godot* (1954) which is regarded as his masterpiece and brought him international attention. The play *Waiting for Godot* provides dramatic form to the internalized preoccupation of Beckett's fiction. The nonspecific setting is symbolically suggestive of the modern waste land. The drama proved to be a wholly new dramatic experience for the audience who were primarily blown, for no one had seen anything like this before. The play's two protagonists, Vladimir and Estragon, engage in chatter derived equally from the music hall and metaphysics as they await the arrival of Godot, who never comes. As Beckett proclaims what is possible in a world in which nothing happens.

It is noted that ere in July 1946, he began a novel, *Mercier et Camier*, presenting a couple whose desultory journey round and then out of a city into a desolate waste, in pursuit of a vague goal, accompanied by desultory dialogue, foreshadows the pointless activity of *Waiting for Godot* (‘did what they were looking for exist?’ ‘What were they looking for?’.... ‘there was no hurry’. However, *Waiting for Godot* is a dramatic reenactment of the unrecognized absurdity of the world that is lived and perceived by Beckett's contemporaries. His another chef d'oeuvre *Endgame* (1956), or so called ‘Fin de Partie’, is the most uncommon play of the ‘Absurd’ genre. Despite his dismissal of his later works, Beckett continued to publish important plays and fiction, including *Stories and Texts for Nothing* (1955), *Krapp's Last Tape* (1958), *How It Is* (1960), and *Happy Days* (1961) which marks the conclusion of the first phase of Beckett's writing for the stage. His notorious reluctance to discuss himself and his works or to enter the debate over their meaning created a sense of mystery and puzzlement surrounding his intentions. In the later period his exploration continued to ‘create and remake the playwright's space’ in such plays as *Play* (1962-1963), *Come and Go* (1965), *Breath* (1969), *Not I* (1972) and *A Brother not in That Time* (1975). However, after this completely new ideas of theatricality are expressed in *A Piece of Monologue* (1980), *Rockaby* (1981) and *Ohio Impromptu* (1981).

In Beckett's work the atmosphere of futility and stagnation around which Chekhov devised his stories and plays has become pervasive and penetrating. The world is drained of meaning, human familiarity are reduced to tensions and oppressions between hope and disappointment in which consciousness itself is insecure and erratic. Beckett's protagonists, who lack the possibility of significant action, are locked in a futile search for the means of overcoming the tyranny of time, space, and awareness itself. Beckett's forte is the dramatic monologue in which the minds of his characters cycle through the comedy and terror of their own awareness without the means of answering their own questions. It is clear to say that

Samuel Beckett's name is inseparably associated with 'The Theatre of Absurd', as mentioned aforesaid, to which also belong such European and American playwrights as Eugene Ionesco, Jene Genet, Arthur Adamor and Edward Albee. He is preoccupied by the essential absurdity of human life and lifelessness of the human condition.

Although Beckett continued to fight with varying manifestations of writer's block, he managed to produce over the years a considerable output in different languages and across many genres. In 1959, White, Emeritus Professor at Trinity, wrote to Beckett on behalf of collage to ask if he would accept the honorary degree of letters. After some deliberation, he decided to accept the degree because, as his biographer James Knowlson speculates, 'he probably regarded it as a gesture of forgiveness for having walked out of his lectureship over twenty-five years before'.

A sentient and truth-loving mind, Yeats is a perspicacious analyst. He loses the complexes of temperaments and the complexities of values through the suppleness of his intuitions; he disentangles and classifies their shades by means of his lucid intelligence. He remains the poet in his adjudication, and one whole side of his nature makes him alike to the school of critics moulded by the influence of the Elizabethans. His mosaic work will perhaps live, if enfranchised Ireland should give birth to an authentic literature, as an eminent blending of the national spirit with British and European culture. On the other hand Beckett diminishes his art to the central questions of who we are and what we can believe in the face of the impossibility of any credence. The upshot is a significant series of challenges to our conceptions of the world and our capacity to concede the full synthesis of the secrets of existence. As the nameless voice of thought itself concludes in *The Unnamable*: 'you must go on, I can't go on, I'll go on', In *Waiting for Godot*: 'we always find something, eh Didi, to give us the impression that we exist', and in *Endgame*: 'All lifelong the same questions, the same answer'. From Beckett's understanding that the world desiderates meaning and that the self cannot make sense of the senseless, he puts forward an intrinsic redefinition of art to reflect his discovery. Causality evaporates, as does narrative perspective and the illusion of art as an ordered pattern that gleams significance.

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