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Beckett at eighty plus is eminently visible – a face and a name appropriated by the world – as the leading non-realist Western writer of the second half of our century. This visibility is itself ironic, for he had chosen reclusive privacy in living, and the isolation of the self as an obsessive subject. The narrators of his fiction and the protagonists of most of his plays are incurable soliloquers. The most memorable image in his only film is a man (played by Buster Keaton) for ever in retreat from a potential observer. The writings of his youth and early manhood were mostly neglected in the thirties and forties and are, with the exception of Murphy, not widely read today. Again, the ageing writer of the seventies has produced perfect yet highly compressed ‘minimalist’ texts which are not likely to become familiar, in the literal as well as in the literary sense – preserving their strangeness beyond reading and performance.

The fame of Waiting for Godot (written in 1948 but first performed only in 1953 in Paris and 1955 in London) began to transform Beckett’s situation – from the obscure avant-garde writer to the world figure. That particular play, performed everywhere from the San Quentin penitentiary to colleges of education, had become a set book in secondary schools and a relative best-seller by the 1970s. Gradually the more elusive plays and novels also came to attract world-wide attention and – a significant fact for new readers and their guide – a vast array of criticism, comparable only to the industry devoted to major writers of the past. The new situation has brought with it the risk of over-interpretation: it is possible that in Beckett criticism ‘more is less’, while the inner law of Beckett’s work is ‘less is more’.

The essential contours of the Beckett terrain will be traced here, not through highly specialised standpoints, but through a sharp focus on the map of contexts leading to an exploration of the ground, the individual works. We find then an overall unity: a vision of diminishing human faculties (a tragicomic failing and falling) written into texts of diminishing language, ever more daringly lessened forms of drama and fiction.
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It now requires an imaginative effort to reconstruct the original contexts of Beckett’s writing – which often cannot be read unaided out of the text of this or that play or novel. The roots of Beckett’s art (both the vision of the world and the avant-garde poetics) stretch back to a now almost vanished era: the great fertile phase of modernism in the twenties, accelerated by the First World War. The modernist heritage embraces: a total commitment to writing as an art (which in Beckett is later accompanied by a total scepticism about the possibilities of communication and expression), and the imperative of ‘making it new’ so that each new work is a venture into the unknown. The central importance of language in all modernist writing becomes, in Beckett, a dangerous immersion in language as a creative/destructive element, language as the stuff that makes up, or else annihilates, the world and the self. (This is the polar opposite of the belief that language comes to us more or less ready-made to represent the world.) Even Beckett’s all-encompassing pessimism and spiritual despair – religious symbols used without a structure of belief, the pervasive mysticism of ‘nothingness’ – spring from a sensibility nearer to the age of Joyce, early Eliot and Kafka, than to the moods and modes of writing dominant now.

The feeling for Beckett as a contemporary writer is understandable and even helpful in so far as his long creative work – and his impact – stretch into the present. But there is in this seeming contemporaneity also an element of delayed reaction or telescoping: creative maturity reached relatively late in works published with delay (from the mid-fifties on in Britain and America) and then absorbed slowly, in a series of delayed responses, by the wider reading/theatre-going public. Even today public appreciation of Beckett is often superficial or uncomprehending; at the same time, some of his admirers have been tempted to turn him into a cult figure. (In this study evaluation will be mostly implicit, working towards conclusions.) Meanwhile, over three decades Beckett’s work has ‘kept up with the age’, as can be seen, in one conspicuous aspect, in the artistic transformation of several new communicative tools and media: the tape recorder (in Knapp’s Last Tape), radio (in All That Fall and other plays), film and television (the close-up and the voice-over, in Eh Joe and in the late plays – That Time and Rockaby). He has worked closely with a number of gifted actors in three countries (including Billie Whitelaw and Patrick Magee in Britain) and, despite his reclusiveness, he keeps responding promptly to an endless succession of scholarly enquirers. For
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a seemingly apolitical writer, Beckett has also shown compassionate awareness of contemporary political conditions: Catastrophe (1962) is dedicated to the persecuted Czech playwright Vaclav Havel, and the short play dramatises oppression. (In war-time France, Beckett, a citizen of neutral Ireland, worked for the Resistance.) Nevertheless in Beckett’s work we are entering types of vision and form no longer of our time, though much in the achieved work is likely to remain challenging for all time.

Biography, always only partially and controversially relevant to the study of a writer’s work, is particularly problematic as a context for Beckett’s work. For Beckett has always endeavoured to distance and transform the autobiographical elements which are, without doubt, a main source of his creative work. At times the author behind the narrator/protagonist becomes visible or audible – the erudite London-based Murphy, the vision ‘at the end of the jetty’ replayed on Krapp’s tape, and, in the late work, the voices returning to the ‘old scenes’ of Dublin bay in That Time.¹ The biographical context will here be highlighted where it is most relevant – especially in the nurturing literary environments of Ireland and Paris – but not given as a self-contained or primary history.

Similarly, the philosophical context – that is to say, the ‘raw ideas’ from Descartes to Sartre that Beckett undoubtedly gathered and cooked – is to be seen less as a set of intrinsically fruitful ideas and more as the material of fiction-engendering speculations. Beckett imaginatively incorporates everything at hand – transmuting a vast array of concepts and conceits from his reading and professional scholarship (Dante to Proust). Religious ideas are used as fragments in a creative writer’s mythology: with ineradicable traces of a Christian education (‘We were brought up like Quakers’)² leading to a life-long quest for essential meaning, not to be found. Every work has a religious or metaphysical dimension, from the subtile ‘negative way’ of the exploring self in the trilogy to the cruder theatrical voice of Hamm (playing the role of the post-Nietzsche atheist) – ‘The bastard! He doesn’t exist!’ (Endgame, p. 38). What is unique is the supreme fiction that turns so many disparate ideas, impulses, beliefs and unbeliefs into a new and personal mythology. This book does not aim to subordinate the Beckett mythology to any particular environment or system or ideas, but rather to find the points where the writing and the ideas connect.
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Ireland

The Irish writer in exile can be seen as dwelling in a kind of no-man’s-land with persistent echoes of Ireland – in terms of mental and fictional landscape, character and theme and, above all, language and style. Beckett takes after Joyce in this respect, in having preserved the indelible marks of ‘the Irish connection’, even though he has gone further than Joyce in his separation from his native country: by abandoning Dublin as the specific imaginative setting for his works after his published early collection of stories, More Pricks than Kicks (1934), and by deciding to write the trilogy and two of his epoch-making plays in French. Beckett’s self-exile thus shows the peculiar intensities of linguistic exile (also seen, in significantly different ways, in the writings of Conrad and Kafka) on top of the culturally ‘destabilising’ effect of being Irish in the modern world. So when we look at the Irish background, we need to see not only the firm contours of a particular upbringing and landscape, but also the gradual and less distinct transformation of those contours in a long working life spent mostly in Paris.

Like the majority of Anglo-Irish writers (but unlike Joyce) Beckett came from a Protestant and well-to-do middle-class family. He was brought up in a substantial house in leafy Foxrock near Dublin, and received the education of the establishment – at Portora Royal School and Trinity College Dublin – intended by his parents as a preparation for a prosperous career, preferably in the family business. There is no record of a major trauma in his childhood (comparable to the famous conflict between Kafka and his father), though the relationship between a dominating mother and a withdrawn if not already reclusive son is prime material for the biographer. Nor were the child and the young man subjected to the turmoil of war and revolution, though he did watch the fires of the Easter 1916 rebellion from the hills of Dublin, and was moved. The legend, started by Beckett himself, that he was born on Good Friday, 13 April in 1906 cannot be proved; the birth certificate is made out for May that year. But even if he was born on Good Friday, it is the orderliness and the sheltered ‘old style’ gentility of a pre-First World War childhood, at the relatively quiet edge of the Western world, that strikes one. His early studies were not in any way outstanding – though he did excel at playing cricket. It seems that the scholar and gifted linguist emerged only in his third year at Trinity, and the writer much later. It was his mastery of
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French that made his professor recommend him for the much-coveted two-year position as lecteur at the Ecole Normale Supérieure in Paris (1928–30), with the expectation that he would grow (or dwindle) into a university professor in romance literature. Beckett started two research projects (including one on Descartes, whose body–mind dualism came to obsess him) and he tried university teaching for a brief spell, only to resign (in 1931), later pleading, with singular integrity: ‘how can I teach what I do not understand’. From that date Beckett became just one of the wandering scholars and semi-obscur artistic exiles (settling permanently in Paris in 1937), flanked by a host of dilettanti, with endless experimentation and uncertainty about the ultimate value of anything written.

Can we define what was the most lasting Irish heritage? Added to the habit of travelling with a set of unanswerable questions – theological and metaphysical questions seen existentially – three clusters of deeply ingrained experience stand out: the Dublin theatre, the countryside around Dublin and the language – pure Anglo-Irish, with its lyrical bent and latent instability.

Dublin, a small-scale cultural capital, offered Beckett a substantial introduction to modern drama: the Irish dramatists at the Abbey (including Yeats, Synge and O’Casey), the new European dramatists at the Gate, with melodrama and vaudeville still thriving at lesser theatres (Queen’s, Theatre Royal and the Olympia). Beckett thus had the good fortune of being introduced early to three essential elements in his own future drama: Irish (the poetic prose of Synge and the non-realism of Yeats), modern theatricality (including Pirandello) and the popular theatrical tradition. Significantly, Beckett was also fascinated by the cinema: Chaplin, Laurel and Hardy and Harold Lloyd. His mature work includes a film script, Film (1964), written for Buster Keaton. (For drama generally see ‘Contexts for the plays’ below.)

The haunting presence of Irish scenery in Beckett’s writing – usually described in simple, lyrical language – will be noticed by every reader. But as Beckett does not aim at topographical realism (in any of the works studied here), we may well wonder to what extent that particular ‘influence of natural objects’ matters in our reading. For example, the island scenery in the final sections of Ma line Dies, against which are played out the exodus of inmates by boat and the terrible massacre, is unmistakably Irish. It is now possible to be more precise, and track down the course of the boat-trip from Coliemore Harbour to Dalkey Island in the Dublin
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coastal area: photographs with matching texts from that novel can be gazed at in The Beckett Country by Eoin O’Brien. Is this valuable knowledge? Well, the exact particulars of location are clearly quite secondary. But the correspondence of feeling, landscape and language (the associated purity and lyricism) is an essential element in Beckett’s writing. So much so that certain novels and plays — including Molloy, Waiting for Godot and Knapp’s Last Tape with its ‘Vision’ on the jetty — transfer fragments of an Irish landscape into the interior landscape of the characters. And to miss that dimension would be to impoverish our reading.

Anglo-Irish as a particular literary language — with its purity of diction mingling with playful rhetoric and wordplay — offers a potential expressiveness beyond the reach of most types of standard twentieth-century (British) English. But it also has a greater potential towards instability, partly through its richness, partly through the insecure ‘outsider’ self-image of the writers of that language. It is as though the Irish writer were writing a foreign language when writing English — an insight already reached by Stephen Dedalus in Joyce’s A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man — or ‘a learned language’ in Yeats’s phrase, or ‘struggling with a dead language’, like Mrs Rooney in All that Fall, Beckett’s all-Irish radio play. Then a drive towards hyper-literary expressiveness is accompanied by an acute and often painful consciousness concerning the fragility — or incongruity — of words uttered or written. Even Bernard Shaw’s titanic Victorian robustness was not free from a sense of ‘absurdity’ in his uses of language. Beckett, the most inward and critically language-conscious of all Irish-born writers, moves towards an inner bilingualism even before he came to choose actual bilingualism — that gift which is also a curse, a burden on tongue, pen and consciousness. The mastery of more than one language then reaches a precarious feeling for all language as a destructive/creative element to be immersed in. Those who have no direct experience of such a state must imaginatively acquire at least some vicarious language pains. Beckett’s inborn language-consciousness was deepened by certain philosophies of language (he is said to have read aloud to Joyce from Mauthner’s Critique of Language), and by the aesthetic distrust of ordinary language (which Beckett inherited from the French symbolist poets).

The dislocations of language that follow are serious but, given the playfulness of the Anglo-Irish tradition, hardly ever solemn. Humour runs across almost every episode or scene in Beckett’s novels and plays. Even when ‘it is no laughing matter’, a
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tragicomic language is created that is constantly at play, as if acting out the mutilated Nell’s response to Nagg’s laughter (in one of the ashbin dialogues in _Endgame_, p. 20): ‘Nothing is funnier than unhappiness, I grant you that. But – ’

Paris

Paris between the two World Wars was still the major centre for innovation in the arts of the West and the cultural melting-pot of all movements as well as of nationals. It was also still a relatively compact and inexpensive place for daily living and writing. Paris in the years after the Second World War experienced the peculiar intensities of a war-tortured survivor – quite distinct from victorious but quiescent London, or from Berlin and Vienna which lay in ruins – spawning popular versions of philosophical existentialism as well as of Marxism, and remaining exceptionally receptive to non-realist writing in fiction as in the theatre. Beckett was fortunate, then, in living through some of the modernist ferment of Paris in the thirties (centred for him in the circle around Joyce and _transition_ magazine) and, in the post-war phase, settling down in a ‘siege’ of seclusion in his old pre-war flat, to write, in French, what can be regarded as the central works of his maturity – the trilogy and the first two plays. It was in many ways a hospitable cultural climate. Although it was still difficult for him to get published or performed in Paris, it would probably have been even more difficult in London (despite the publication of _Murphy_ there in 1938), especially as fiction and drama in the Britain of the fifties tended to be dominated by versions of realism (for instance Kingsley Amis, John Osborne).

Intellectual ferment and greater receptivity to his work were, then, the principal windfalls of the Paris milieu. Beckett chose to settle in Paris permanently in 1937, when he was over thirty, after a period of restless _Wanderjahre_ spent partly in Germany (drawn by a beautiful cousin and by the culture, not by the rise of Nazism) but mostly in London where he did not thrive. How deliberate was the choice of residence can be seen from his destiny-conscious decision to remain in France when the Second World War broke out. Choosing Paris included a vote against Ireland, at first an escape from home, country and religion (the Joycean pattern for exile). But it was also a vote for the provocative conditions just outlined, in a relative writer’s haven which could turn into the threat of vanishing ‘inside the whale’, in Orwell’s phrase. What
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we have to recreate imaginatively here is the fusion, in the Paris of the thirties, of at least three levels of experiment, in living as in writing: the immediate relationship with Joyce, the retroactive critical immersion in Proust, and the ceaseless artistic experimentation, from dada to expressionism and surrealism.

Beckett’s relationship with Joyce was more than that of disciple to master, it was in many ways a symbiotic interaction between two very different word-intoxicated artists, between the diffident young apprentice writer and ‘the great writer’ of the age. They shared a cultural background, an obsessive interest in fictional and verbal patterns pushed to the limits of art, as well as habits of copious drinking and long silences. By the time Beckett met Joyce – during his first stay in Paris, in his years at the Ecole Normale Supérieure (1928–30) – Joyce was working on his ultralexperimental novel *Finnegans Wake* (published in 1939), which aimed at a hybrid super-language made of English words merging with foreign words in a ceaselessly punning dream. Beckett was one of those singled out (with the approval of ‘the master’) to write a critical defence of Joyce’s ‘work in progress’ in an argument in which the exhaustion or deadness of the (English) language was a cardinal point (see ‘Vision and form’ below). Beckett’s Joycean heritage includes the relentless pursuit of new and extreme positions in writing, sometimes reflected in local experiments such as the unpunctuated final sequence of *The Unnamable* and of the entire text of his last longer fiction, *How It Is* (1961). Nevertheless, Beckett’s long-term development can be seen as moving in a counter-Joycean direction – towards greater simplicity, compression and diminishment, as is argued at several points in this study.

Beckett’s involvement, as a very subjective critic, with Proust’s supreme novel, *Remembrance of Things Past* (*À La Recherche du temps perdu*), 1913–27), is as important in the early Paris years, and in its life-long consequence, as the living relationship with Joyce. For the emphasis that Beckett gave, in the long essay, *Proust* (1931), to Proust’s vision and form is emphasis through distortion: intensifying the pessimism in Proust’s vision by soaking it in Schopenhauer’s ‘congenial’ philosophy (the inescapable futility of all willing and desiring), and understating Proust’s impressionistic delight in the surfaces of a brilliant if flagrantly flawed social world. Implicitly, Beckett has begun to write his own artistic manifesto in the guise of the Proust critic: seeing the novel as ‘pure writing’ – formal or ‘radiographic’, the X-ray image replacing the photograph. This prepares the way for Beckett’s own aesthetic
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philosophy and his own experiments, a total fusion of subject matter and expression, vision and form.

Beckett’s relationship with revolutionary changes in art – especially with successive movements in the visual arts, expressionism, surrealism, etc. – can be only touched on here. The overall effect was to push the young writer towards non-representational forms of expression, and then towards abstraction. Yet we need to pause and reflect here, for words – unlike colours and shapes, or for that matter sounds – cannot become wholly non-representational or abstract, since they carry the stamp (the referents) of the world’s images and concepts into every phrase or sentence. But Beckett was also haunted by certain specific images of avant-garde art, for example, the woman buried in sand in Dali’s surrealist film Le Chien andalou (1929) may be seen behind the dominant stage image of Happy Days (1961).5

The Second World War must have deepened Beckett’s awareness of suffering and of fearful uncertainty, as well as of the instability of language – to some extent a shared experience among survivors of the war. Beckett was a relatively ‘privileged observer’ of the war: after joining a Resistance group in Paris and escaping arrest, he lived in hiding in Vichy France, experiencing both danger and long periods of waiting. He must have heard reports of some of the extreme barbarities of the war in occupied France – terror, torture and Nazi deportations – and news of Auschwitz and the other death camps reached France early. One of Beckett’s Jewish friends had perished. And while Beckett has never written directly about those extreme experiences (or turned war experience into a moral fable like Golding’s Lord of the Flies), the imagery of a world that had run its course – a ‘corpsed’ world – has found its way into Endgame. Earlier versions of the text of that play were much nearer to raw experience than the version we know, which has moved towards a universalising myth of negative creation. But we may assume that the play – and much else in Beckett’s work – gains some of its power ‘to claw’ from the dark experiences of the war years.

Thought in post-war France tended to be dominated by Jean-Paul Sartre’s existentialism, in its popular and simplified version a ‘vision of the world’ that sees each self thrown into life without definition, purpose or essence. In its technical version this philosophy explores the total alienation of each person from others (the other) and the ‘nothingness’ of the self as a pure consciousness – separated from the world of things and actions. Such ideas
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clearly have some relevance to Beckett’s vision, and, as already suggested, created a favourable cultural climate for the reception of his post-war work. But, I think, the direct influence of existentialist thought on Beckett has been exaggerated. One might as well argue that Beckett did not ‘need’ the French versions of existentialism, for he had a version of his own already, made up of a deeply felt sense of loss – in a world where God is absent – and of a medley of philosophical ideas domesticated in his youth. From Descartes came the isolated and solitary self thinking, ‘I think therefore I am’, starting from a new, anxiously sceptical probing of rationality; from the Irish Bishop Berkeley came the profoundly tragicomic notion that if God does not see me, if nobody sees me, I may not exist; and from Schopenhauer came the vision, akin to Buddhism, that the desiring self does not exist in any ‘real’ sense, except through suffering the painful consequences of wilful self-assertion. These, and related ideas, filtered through a questioning yet deeply and obsessively feeling temperament, are quite enough ‘philosophy’ for a writer who is, in any case, not primarily philosophical. Beckett is not presenting ideas but constantly transmuting his own idiosyncratic versions of received ideas into vision – like Dante in The Divine Comedy, above all in Purgatory. But, unlike Dante, Beckett has no system of belief; on the contrary, his novels and plays are all written against any system.

Beckett’s decision to start writing in French and then to become his own translator into English (assisted in the translation of Molloy) is probably unique. Conrad could hardly expect to reach a world reading public in his first language, Polish, Koestler in Hungarian, Kafka in Czech; their choice of writing in English or German comprised an element of communicative strategy on top of subtler, private urgencies. But Beckett’s choice of French after the war had much more to do with an internal stylistic conflict – the desire to ‘write without style’, as he once said. That sounds paradoxical for, strictly speaking, writing and style are inseparable Siamese twins. But Beckett admired the relatively neutral ‘styleless’ writing of the classical period (best seen in the tragedies of Racine) and he wanted to prune away the superabundant expressive potentials of English (Anglo-Irish): the prolific word-stock, wealth of idiom and metaphor, ‘the whirling words’ of the Hamlet world, with their pressure of incessant private association. French must also have had affinities – in the Parisian cultural environment we have sketched – with Beckett’s ever more intense search for experimental and abstract modes of fic-