Introduction: Beckett, our contemporary

> I had agreed to review this production … on RTÉ Radio One's arts programme, *Rattlebag*, on a date which suited us both: 11 September 2001 … The following week, an Irish publication protested that as 9/11 unfolded RTÉ radio was broadcasting a review of Beckett's *Krapp's Last Tape* … What struck me forcibly was the greatness of Beckett's play in being adequate to the awfulness of the historic moment, its ongoing prophetic ability to address world events long after its composition.
>
> –Anthony Roche, "Samuel Beckett: The Great Plays after *Godot*" (2006)

> NELL: Actually, I think they have little to offer us anymore–
> JUDITH: Who are you talking about?
> NELL: Giacometti. Beckett. All the rest of them! They're dead. We're alive. What we know now comes to us from the future.
>
> –Thomas Kilroy, *The Shape of Metal* (2003)

Tony Roche told me the story, recounted above, about appearing on the radio to discuss a production of Samuel Beckett's *Krapp's Last Tape* just hours after al-Qaeda's attacks on America.[1] As he recalled in a recent essay, his decision to go through with the radio interview was not universally admired: Was it appropriate to "go on" given the enormity of the events on September 11? Didn't his appearance suggest a kind of insensitivity to the gravity of the moment? More significant, I think, was the implication that topics such as the theatre – and Samuel Beckett – just didn't matter at such a critical historical moment. Media outlets and their listeners ought to concern themselves with more serious things – dare I say, to use an expression susceptible to any number of unfortunate connotations, more *relevant* things?

Just a few hours before Tony began his trek to the RTÉ studio in Dublin, I was brewing coffee at my home in the American midwest, preparing breakfast, getting my children ready for school, and packing my notes for a seminar on Samuel Beckett and Harold Pinter. As is typical on such mornings in our house, the news show *Today* was droning away on a

television in the background, offering its mildly diverting, but largely ignored soundtrack to the minor chaos of eggs being scrambled, misplaced notebooks being found, and backpacks being overloaded with the myriad necessities teenagers require. This morning evolved differently, though, as pictures of the first burning skyscraper in midtown Manhattan stopped me in my tracks. One of the program's hosts admitted his uncertainty about the fire's origin, and the earliest reports from the scene speculated that a small commuter plane had accidentally struck a building, one which, as we all know, was later identified as the North Tower of the World Trade Center. In the time between my leaving home and arriving on campus some fifteen minutes later, reports came over the radio that more planes – large passenger jets, not single-engine "puddle-jumpers," as my father used to call them – had crashed into the WTC's South Tower, into the Pentagon in Washington, and into a remote field in Pennsylvania. More people had died; more confusion, more grief. The seminar convened as scheduled and, not surprisingly, it began with expressions both of shock over these attacks and anxiety over what they might portend. We decided nonetheless to move on to Beckett and plodded through the day's reading with considerable awkwardness, far more than that typical of a group of new post-graduate students meeting for the second time in the term. Given the events of the morning, one of the students found *Waiting for Godot* – the principal focus of the session – far too depressing. She eventually left the seminar, then dropped all of her courses for the remainder of the semester.

The seminar pressed on.

Much as it had with Tony Roche, this odd conflation of horror and Beckett struck me as meaningful almost immediately, and I found myself – as I now recognize more clearly some years later – responding to the moment in ways inflected by my experience of reading Beckett or watching his plays in the theatre. After my sorrow had abated – and after I experienced the relief of learning that my brother-in-law, whose company was housed in the WTC, had been out of town on a business trip that morning – Beckett seemed to speak to a new reality born in the rubble and tragedy of September 11. Something, as Clov informs Hamm in *Endgame*, was indeed "taking its course." Perhaps oddly, I began to regard the events of this terrible day as paralleling the scene of Beckett's late prose piece *Ill Seen Ill Said* and echoed by Paul Muldoon, a poet greatly affected by Beckett, in the opening lines of his elegy "Yarrow" from *The Annals of Chile* (1994). Namely, events were set in motion that produced ineffable senses of encroachment and of an irreversible process under way that would forever alter our feeling about living and the everyday. Muldoon's "Yarrow" begins with just such a sense:

> Little by little it dawned on us that the row
> of kale would shortly be overwhelmed by these pink
> and cream blooms, that all of us
> would be overwhelmed …[2]

Some force or thing akin to the pink and cream blooms of yarrow slowly enveloping the kale – and the world – in Muldoon's poem was asserting itself upon life in America and the West more generally. This malignant force, however, was hardly fragrant or floral, but more craggy and obdurate like the stones that "increasingly abound" in *Ill Seen Ill Said*. Violence was "gaining" on us and, in the ruthless play on words in Beckett's late text, there was "none to gainsay" or "have gainsaid" this fact. "Ever scanter even the rankest weed," Beckett's narrator observes in an echo of *Hamlet*, describing the shrinking green space of his – and our – world.[3] Beckett seemed, in short, wholly adequate to the task of discerning a changed structure of feeling in the contemporary world in which such senses of encroachment and an all-too-familiar absurdity seem almost overwhelming.

Of course, not everyone would agree with this assertion. Moments from the final curtain of *The Shape of Metal*, Thomas Kilroy's vivacious octogenarian-sculptress announces a view of Beckett that contrasts sharply with Roche's – and with mine. As Nell Jeffrey declaims in the second epigraph above, Beckett and his friend Alberto Giacometti, who once designed a tree for a revival of *Waiting for Godot*,[4] have nothing to say to a new generation hurling toward a future of dizzying technological advancements, ever-intensifying political tensions, and – perhaps – the conditions of man's "extinction." Considering the prominence in Nell's memory of meeting both artists in Paris in the late 1930s – she refers to it throughout the play, adding more details with each retelling, including their inebriated debate over the importance of a good pair of boots – this pronouncement comes as something of a surprise. Over sixty years later, her recollection of this encounter is still vivid, and within the play's narrative her repudiation of its importance might be explained by her daughter's feminist taunt that "You are a great artist. You don't need a male example, never have …"[5] But protest its importance as she does, Nell recalls this meeting often: it is indelibly traced in her mind, and she returns to it on an almost daily basis.

The difference between the opposing positions staked out by my epigraphs – Beckett possesses enduring relevance for the twenty-first century; Beckett has "little to offer" it – only partially illuminates the project of this book. Indeed, Beckett may grow even more meaningful in a century that is still in its infancy because unlike Didi and Gogo in *Waiting for Godot*, as the events of

September 11 so strikingly demonstrate, we cannot comfortably bide our time as the stones of barbarism advance, or wait patiently for the next Hurricane Katrina to arrive. The latter point informed numerous responses to the November 2007 productions of *Waiting for Godot* in the "weed-choked fields" that were once a neighborhood in New Orleans' Lower Ninth Ward. As Jed Horne reported, in this ravaged place Beckett's play was "weirdly, eerily expressive of the continuing fiasco in which New Orleans finds itself" – an "emblem of Bush-era incompetence" – as it awaits the next storm.[6] Reporting on these performances of *Godot* for *The New York Times* – it was produced at two different venues in New Orleans – Holland Cotter felt that in such a locale "The soul of *Godot* isn't in Vladimir's cry at being marooned in nothingness, but in something he says later in the play: 'Let us not waste our time in idle discourse! Let's do something, while we have the chance!'"[7] Only time will tell if proactive doing or further worrying is justified, and in its later chapters this book confronts ways in which in the present century Beckett, for reflective good or commercial ill, is being refashioned into our contemporary: at some times as a low-comic analogue to present-day political misadventures and buffoonery; at others as a tourist attraction, a one-man theme park who draws euros and dollars, however deflated, to Ireland.

In much of what follows, however, I also hope to illuminate the ways in which Beckett has *already* demonstrated his importance to contemporary Irish and Northern Irish culture, in particular to representations of "the Troubles" in the latter half of the previous century. And, much like Nell's rich memories of Paris in the 1930s, the title of this prolegomenon "Beckett, Our Contemporary" originates in my first encounter nearly a half century ago with Jan Kott's classic study *Shakespeare Our Contemporary* (1964). My allusion to Kott's book is intended neither as a frivolity nor a homage, although his articulation of Shakespeare's *King Lear* with Beckett's *Endgame* remains as compelling today as it was when he wrote it. Like many of Beckett's narrators, or John Banville's, I may be accused of suffering an unfortunate compulsion to explain myself and exhaust all the possibilities of my chapters' titles (titles, like names and words, as the following pages will corroborate, are something of an obsession with me). If so, my unease, at least in part, speaks to the susceptibility of such an idea to responses of bemusement or indifference. That is to say, of course Samuel Beckett is our contemporary. As he lived from 1906 until 1989, readers who have attained the age of, say, thirty or more, hardly require a reminder that he lived in their time, that he *was* their contemporary. I seek these readers' forbearance, asking that they withhold their verdict about a critical enterprise that, by comparison to Kott's assertion of Shakespeare's contemporaneity, might seem tepid or even superfluous.

This book concerns itself not only with twentieth-century writers born before World War II who share affinities with Beckett or, in some cases, employ him or his characters as one or another device – playwrights, poets, and novelists contemporaneous with his later years and works – but also with a newer generation of writers who have discovered in Beckett values quite different from those privileged by the postwar generation. Because the term "values" in this instance is quite purposefully vague, it might prove useful to identify something more specific like dramatic *form*, a radical "value" that emergent playwrights of the later 1950s and 60s like Harold Pinter, Tom Stoppard, and Sam Shepard have acknowledged as crucial to their development. Among other things, Beckett's dramatic form exhibited a kind of subtractive calculus that, as Stoppard once underscored in revisiting his first viewing of *Waiting for Godot* in 1956, "immobilized" audiences "for weeks": "Historically, people had assumed that in order to have a valid theatrical event you had to have x. Beckett did it with x minus 5 … He's now doing it with x minus 25."[8] Shepard experienced a similar epiphany, once remarking that shortly before he began to contribute to New York's burgeoning "Off-Off-Broadway" movement in the early 1960s, he was barely more than a theatrical neophyte guided only by his experiences of high school productions and the model of *Waiting for Godot*, which a "beatnik" had causally given him to read: "We were listening to some jazz or something and he sort of shuffled over to me and threw this book on my lap and said, 'Why don't you dig this, you know?' … It was *Waiting for Godot*. And I thought, what's this guy talking about, what is this? And I read it with a very keen interest."[9]

However significant, as *Waiting for Godot* certainly was for a postwar generation of young playwrights, more than dramatic structure or the conventions of theatrical minimalism were and are at stake. Beckett, for example, has exerted an obvious and profound impact on postwar philosophy. In this regard, given my invocation of Kott, it might seem incongruous to agree with commentators like Alain Badiou who recently – and rather feistily – disparaged nihilistic readings of Beckett's *oeuvre* as reflective of a "two-bit, dinner-party vision of despair" which should be "repudiated."[10] "Negation," Banville similarly observes in his contribution to *Beckett 100 Years: Centenary Essays* (2006), an anthology celebrating the centenary of Beckett's birth, "is not nihilism,"[11] even if commentators like Theodor Adorno writing about the Holocaust and *Endgame* understood this relationship differently. Given Kott's reflection on the operations of a "grand mechanism" of cruelty in his chapter on *King Lear* and *Endgame* in *Shakespeare Our Contemporary*, he rather amazingly advances a view of

Shakespeare that at times complements Badiou's understanding of Beckett. Glossing a line from Prospero's monologue in *The Tempest* – "And my ending is despair" – Kott insists that despair "does not mean resignation," supporting his inference with a line from *Antony and Cleopatra*: "My desolation does begin to make/A better life."[12] Thus, as we shall see, although evocations of the Holocaust and a more nihilistic Beckett occasionally surface in Northern Irish writing, a testament to Beckett's enduring importance to both an old century and new millennium, recent writers find a multitude of other meanings – and beauties – in his work.

Another provenience of "Beckett, Our Contemporary" is far less complicated than disagreement over Beckett's putative nihilism. And, again, it is hardly "news" that Beckett's work has inflected the thought of, among others, Adorno, Badiou, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari – and that Jacques Derrida once famously rationalized that because he felt so close to Beckett he was unable to write about him. Many of these matters demand our attention and will receive it, particularly in the chapter that follows. Equally important, though, and in some ways an analogue to Beckett's prominence in European philosophy, are the influential writers who have turned to Beckett to explain the history of Irish literature or, more broadly, to define irreducible qualities of Irishness and the Irish experience. The former topic might be regarded as an addendum to, or gentle correction of Vivian Mercier's influential book *The Irish Comic Tradition* (1962) which, at almost the same time Kott was adducing similarities between *King Lear* and *Endgame*, attempted the unlikely project of demonstrating how Beckett's writing reveals a "continuity with a [Gaelic] tradition of whose very existence he is hardly aware."[13] In *Irish Classics* (2001), Declan Kiberd seems at times to hazard the even more daunting enterprise of tracing the presence of Beckett in Irish writing centuries *before* Beckett was born. In the early pages of *Irish Classics*, destitute seventeenth-century bards resemble "Beckettian tramps who once had learning but now face a deteriorating situation"; lines in seventeenth-century Gaelic poetry proclaiming the banning of poetry are "deeply, richly poetic" in a manner that will "become familiar" in Beckett's work; and "moments of animation in [Irish] culture" from the seventeenth century to the mid-twentieth parallel "Samuel Beckett's bleak aphorism that it is the search for the means to put an end to things which enables discourse to continue."[14] Beckett is not only *our* contemporary, Kiberd seems to suggest, he has been nearly every major Irish writer's contemporary for something like four centuries. In these and other ways, Kiberd's Beckett, who during my days as a post-graduate student in the 1970s was indexed in bibliographies as a French author and then later, in a more colonial register,

as a British one, has now been repatriated by a new generation of Irish scholars. And, as my coda about Beckett and tourism explains, in the twenty-first century he is being made more Irish every day.

Paul Muldoon's view of Beckett complements Kiberd's. In a series of Oxford lectures published as *To Ireland, I* (2000), Muldoon argued that Irish writers have developed a "range of strategies" for "dealing with the ideas of liminality and narthecality that are central … to the Irish experience."[15] In extrapolating his concept of "narthecality" from the architecture of early Christian churches, in which the narthex was a porch or vestibule leading to the nave, Muldoon offers the tantalizing addition that a narthex in the early Church was reserved "for penitents and others not admitted to the Church."[16] If "liminality" in rites of passage defines the condition experienced by initiands "betwixt and between" social categories or formations – a condition shared by Vladimir and Estragon, the narrator of "The Expelled," and many other characters in Beckett's work – then narthecality identifies the site of such a condition. Why those sequestered there cannot be admitted or pass through the threshold – the berm between the assembled congregation and the margin, between town and lonely road, between life and death – and who or what denies them such progress are both more varied and less important than the condition itself and its location. And moments later in *To Ireland, I* – a title that like "Beckett, Our Contemporary" is also an echo, in this case of Donalbain's line in *Macbeth* – Muldoon proclaims Beckett the "Lord of Liminality." What does such a Lord do? How does he exert his power? Recalling one definition of the privileged term *gnomon* in the opening of "The Sisters" from Joyce's *Dubliners* and its reappearance in *Krapp's Last Tape*, Muldoon implies, much as Kiberd does, that Beckett casts his considerable shadow over Irish writing, perhaps as a kind of ghost. After all, the *bec* in Beckett's name may be "construed as a version of the Old English *boc*, a 'beech' that lies behind 'book.'"[17] Taken together, in these tropes Beckett is the "Lord" or shadow or ghost that presides over Irish liminality and the writing that expresses it; in a more arboreal figure, he is the wood or beech from which paper is manufactured and on which Irish writing exists. In a more Freudian register, Beckett resides in a mystic writing pad, a deep etching in a waxy substrate lying below recent Irish writing and Irishness itself.

All these metaphors aside, on the most literal level Kiberd and Muldoon are surely right. While perhaps not omnipresent, Beckett has appeared prominently in Muldoon's poems and others by Derek Mahon and Anthony Cronin; in novels and short fiction by Banville and Bernard MacLaverty; and of course has influenced a rich canon of contemporary

Irish plays by Brian Friel, Martin McDonagh, and Marina Carr, to name just a few. While Mahon produces such evocative poems as "An Image from Beckett" and "Beyond Howth Head," poems which offer extended rejoinders of what, in the latter, Mahon's speaker terms Beckett's "bleak reductio,"[18] a contemplative diner in Cronin's "Lunchtime Table, Davy Byrne's" reflects upon the occupations of his companions and imagines that Joyce and Beckett "give a cachet/To jobs concerned with handouts, trade and art."[19] A weary passenger in MacLaverty's story "At the Beach," from the collection *Walking the Dog and Other Stories* (1994), quips to his wife that in addition to the usual "Wake for Meals" card in the travel kit provided by the airlines they have another, "We give birth astride the grave," and later in the same volume a man who likes to imagine himself as Beckett contributes a recipe for boiling an egg to a cookbook. While McDonagh famously takes the title for *A Skull in Connemara* (1997) in his "Leenane Trilogy" from Lucky's speech in *Godot*, Beckett makes an unlikely appearance near the end of Peter Sheridan's memoir *44 Dublin Made Me: A Memoir* (1999) in the company of African-American blues artists Leadbelly, Howlin' Wolf, and Sonny Boy Williamson because, for the teenaged Sheridan in the 1960s, *Waiting for Godot* was a "two-hour blues song of unbearable pain."[20]

Even if Beckett does not make a cameo appearance within this or that text, literary critics and reviewers seem to find him there anyway, which allows publishers to employ his celebrity for their own purposes on dust jackets and covers. So, for one critic Banville's *Eclipse* (2000) is marked by its paradoxical "Nabokovian lushness" and "Beckettian asperity," and for another, more academic reader of *Eclipse*, Beckett amounts to Banville's "other ghost" in a novel haunted by all manner of ghosts and specters (as much of Banville's work is).[21]

Reviewers of both Marina Carr and McDonagh's plays detect traces of Beckett at every turn, even if Carr herself seems at times chary about the comparison. While, on the one hand, conceding her admiration of Beckett's "black humor" and going so far as to deem her earlier work the product of her "Beckett phase," Carr has claimed more recently, on the other, not to be "hugely influenced" by the "great Irish playwrights of the past," a group which includes Beckett.[22] Nevertheless, commentators consistently characterize her early work *Low in the Dark* (1989) as derivative of Beckett's theatre, particularly in the physical restriction of the character Curtains, which in turn allowed the actress to discover a "new freedom for her voice." Sounding a bit like Muldoon, reviewers found Patrick Mason's 1998 Abbey Theatre production of *By the Bog of Cats* … set in a familiar "Beckettian no-man's-land" to register its protagonist's occupation of a "liminal space"

between society's big house and the tinker's shabby caravan.[23] More recently, writing in the *Guardian* Lyn Gardner describes Carr's *Woman and Scarecrow* (2006) as a "Beckett-like deathbed drama," a sentiment shared by numerous reviewers.[24] Many of the same characterizations have been used to describe McDonagh's canon – his Beckettian humor, for instance, and the haunted self-consciousness of his characters – and Christopher Murray has asserted that the "weakest parts" of *The Cripple of Inishmaan* (1997) occur precisely where "bits of Beckett obtrude."[25]

At this exceedingly early point, however, much like the narrator of *Ill Seen Ill Said*, I am tempted to interpose the cautionary term, "Careful." Be cautious when making claims that promise exactitude or even the "mere-most minimum" intellectual certainty about who or what Beckett and the Beckettian are, to borrow a phrase from *Worstward Ho*. It is because of this caution that I inserted that ever so slight comma in the title of this brief commentary – "Beckett, Our Contemporary" – a comma Jan Kott's study of Shakespeare lacks. A comma, of course, scarcely provides the pause this topic requires. When reflecting upon the challenge of playing Mouth in *Not I*, the difficulty of delivering lines so rapidly that they seem "spewed out," Jessica Tandy observed that if Beckett "puts a comma [in the script], he means a comma there. And Beckett puts his four dots in when you need to take a breath."[26] My puny comma is intended to provide such space for a needed breath, a surrogate of the "four dots" any actress playing Mouth so desperately needs. In what precise ways (*pause*) *is* Beckett our contemporary? Can emphases of asperity or spectrality, of grotesque comedy and/or "philosophical cruelty," convey Beckett's influence – or adequately describe Beckett's work itself? Even this hedging, uncertain formulation implies that there is an essential, unchanging Beckett to uncover who spans the time between, say, *Whoroscope* and *Stirrings Still*. Among others, Alain Badiou has insisted that this is not the case, that with the publication of *Comment C'Est* (*How It Is*) in 1961 Beckett began a new moment in his writing and thinking. Not surprisingly, then, the signifier "Beckett" and its adjectival form "Beckettian" require our attention: What does it mean to call any writer or literary work "Beckettian"? How do we understand this adjective and manage its connotations?

So, the lone comma – perhaps there should be five or six – represents the need to slow down, to work through ideas more carefully, one of which I have labored to avoid and inserted hesitantly in the preceding paragraph: "influence." An enterprise like this one must confront the idea of literary and cultural influence, however anxiety-producing such a confrontation promises to be in the wake of Harold Bloom's well-known meditations on

the issue. In his 1997 "Preface" to *The Anxiety of Influence* (1973), a preface that anticipates his later devotional tract *Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human* (1998), Bloom advances several formulations of influence that bear upon this conversation. He argues, for example, that the "largest truth of influence is that it is an irresistible anxiety: Shakespeare will not allow you to bury him, or escape him, or replace him," and that "Joyce, Burgess, and Fraser in their different ways acknowledge the contingency that Shakespeare imposes upon us, which is that we are so influenced by him that we cannot get outside of him."[27] Such influence for writers like Henrik Ibsen, according to Bloom, engendered a "horror of contamination." For Bloom, "influence," as it appears in Shakespeare's own writing, might mean "inspiration," or, more determinatively, it might signal "the flowing from the stars upon our fates and personalities." Muldoon's *gnomonic* shadow of influence, then, might in other metaphorical registers characterize the actions of Lear's wanton gods who torture us for their sport, or reveal a contaminant that parasitically insinuates itself into our anguish, or identify the "sheeted dead" whose "gibber" is as foreboding as that of the Romans Horatio describes in *Hamlet* and the Northern Irish prisoners at Long Kesh Muldoon similarly refers to as "sheeted dead" in his verse play *Six Honest Serving Men*.[28]

In the pages that follow I try to account for these possibilities insofar as Beckett and contemporary Irish and Northern Irish writing are concerned, leaving it to others to conduct analogous investigations of contemporary French, British, and world literatures. On occasion, to employ the spectral trope common to such projects – Tony Roche's privileging of Beckett as the "ghostly founding father" of contemporary Irish drama, for instance – two other "ghosts" will make recurrent appearances, indeed, they already have: Shakespeare and Joyce.[29] As Bloom insists, we cannot escape Shakespeare – and neither could Beckett nor the contemporary Irish writers who have followed him. *Hamlet* and *King Lear* in particular are so much a part of a transnational cultural imaginary that they make Shakespeare unavoidable, and so, too, in Irish writing are *Dubliners*, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, and *Ulysses*. In the pages that follow, I hope to make an analogous case for the large shadow, or contaminative viral potential – or just plain importance – of Samuel Beckett to contemporary Irish writing.

In this way I hope to extend the projects of Vivian Mercier, Declan Kiberd, Paul Muldoon, and others by considering cultural texts produced after the mid-twentieth century. In a later chapter these include works by Marina Carr and Sam Shepard, whom I regard as a kind of honorary Irishman by virtue of the premiere of his 2007 play *Kicking a Dead Horse*