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Introduction
Ireland/Europe ... Beckett/Beckett
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There is danger in the neatness of identifications, so much is well known. But there is danger, too, in the neatness with which certain identifications come to be resisted. What the essays gathered here suggest, building on recent work by a growing body of scholars, is that a summary resistance to readings of Beckett's work as being intimately involved with Ireland – both before and after the *annus mirabilis* of 1946 – can no longer be justified: it is there in the earliest occasional pieces, as well as the last of the prose, and in many of the more well-known works that cemented Beckett's reputation along the way. If there is no sense in which Ireland can be taken as a sufficient context for an understanding of Beckett's work, or that it should be deemed ubiquitous in a remarkably diverse oeuvre, nevertheless it seems clear that future accounts of Beckett's aesthetic development must come to terms with the enduring impact of his early filiations with Ireland. The same accounts will have to allow, of course, for the ways in which those filiations were resented and resisted, and, at various times, largely superseded by other concerns (the Second World War is one obvious example). It is a situation that presents both as a challenge and an opportunity, and, as David Lloyd and Andrew Gibson both suggest here, attempts to address it are likely to reconfigure Irish studies as well as Beckett studies in significant ways.

We have long known that Beckett's writings were engaged with Ireland at some level, but there has, as Rónán McDonald recounts, been little consensus about the nature and extent of its influence. If the current volume offers no overall consensus either, it does offer a vigorously argued collection of essays demonstrating the range of available approaches to Beckett informed by an awareness of Irish concerns, addressing issues as diverse as state executions in the Irish Free State (McNaughton); the politics and poetics of landscape in the early and late fiction (Gibson; Bixby;

Wood); the marginality of Ireland's Protestant communities during the Irish counter-revolution (Kennedy); Beckett's investment in an Anglo-Irish Gothic tradition (Lloyd; Mooney); as well as new readings of the relevance of the more familiar literary tradition of Edgeworth, Yeats, and Bowen (Boxall). Taken together, they make it extremely difficult to read Ireland as a marginal concern in Beckett's work after 1946. Until recently, readings of Beckett in relation to Ireland have tended to remain a side-show to the main business of Beckett studies, despite important early contributions by Vivian Mercier and J.C.C. Mays, and it is still largely the case that although intimations of Ireland are everywhere felt there is no clear sense of how it fits into the overall picture (if such a thing can itself be discerned). Ireland has most often been read as a specter, a kind of afterthought or trace, which has been taken, in turn, as evidence of its diminishing significance. However, as Jacques Derrida has suggested, the specter often exerts an even more pressing claim in its absent presence, so that the ghostly presence of Ireland may need to be more carefully accounted for.¹ Michael Wood, Peter Boxall, David Lloyd, and Sinéad Mooney all speak of Beckett's Ireland here in "spectral" terms, but each provides compelling evidence for J.C.C. Mays's early claim that the late works consist in a "haunted appraisal" of Beckett's Irish heritage.²

There was a time, as Mays remembers, when the Irish people thought little of Beckett on the rather defensive basis that they had heard he thought little of them.³ An Irish Protestant living in Paris, Beckett had written books notable for a hostile attitude towards the Irish Free State before leaving land and language behind in what seemed like a summary dismissal of his birthright. To an insecure young nation just finding its feet, this was hardly endearing. Moreover, as the essays by James McNaughton and Patrick Bixby in this volume reveal, Beckett's early prose was asking awkward questions about Irish political life that would have touched many a nerve about the precise nature of a free Ireland's achievements, and, in the circumstances, some defensive posturing might be expected. It may also be, as Vic Merriman suggests, that a work like *Waiting for Godot* spoke too clearly of "the psychic wounds of colonialism" (114), compounding the reasons to ignore what was, in any case, an oddly disconcerting body of work. The last thing Irish people needed during a protracted recession was more reason to feel bad about themselves, and perhaps it is only now – post Celtic Tiger – that a more vigorous reevaluation of traditional sanctities has become thinkable. That said, Beckett has always been more popular in Irish theatres than in Irish studies, and after the recent centenary celebrations in 2006 it may be that he now

rivals Joyce as the writer of whom the Irish public is most proud (even if the work itself continues to produce a kind of bemused bafflement). So much so, that some commentators have been discomfited by the celebratory tenor of recent attempts to “reclaim Beckett as Irish,”⁴ which they see as little more than empty commodifications of the work. Although Anna McMullan has linked the renaissance of Irish interest in Beckett to the possibility of a thoroughgoing interrogation of the available definitions of Irishness,⁵ Brian Singleton feels an unthinking acceptance of the parameters of Ireland’s success story has allowed the culture industry to merely absorb and deflect the terms of Beckett’s critique. Many of the essays included here will serve to complicate that rapprochement with something less comfortable.

“Reclaim” is a word that one hears often in relation to Irish readings of Beckett, and the word “reductive” often follows. Obviously, the risk of reductiveness is there (it is the same as with the adoption of any other “approach” to Beckett), but there appears to be something about Ireland or Irishness that predisposes commentators toward anxiety. Often, it seems that a certain picture of Ireland as Beckett remembered it in the 1920s and 1930s is being projected onto a body of contemporary scholarship that is simply not interested in exerting territorial claims one way or the other. Indeed the very fact that the apprehension of Irish references in Beckett’s work is described as “reclaiming” as opposed to, say, “discerning” suggests that some proprietary anxieties are being processed through a debilitating Irish–Universal dichotomy, and we may even be witnessing a genteel tug-of-war intended to secure Beckett’s position at one or other pole. One senses a recurring anxiety that any reappraisal of Beckett’s relationship with Ireland would render the work less available to other diverse cultural contexts, and it is an assumption worth examining with care. Perhaps there are some scholars who wish to reclaim Beckett as Irish, though the term seems more appositely to describe the agenda of the Irish theatre industry,⁶ but more often the desire has been to interrogate the myriad ways in which Beckett’s work speaks back to, or remembers Ireland (and often from very oblique angles). A great number of the contributors to this volume share in broader concerns about an impoverished reading of Beckett based on what Sinéad Mooney terms “a falsely normative relationship between text and community” (131), but this has not precluded them from interrogating the links between Beckett’s writing and his Irish predicament variously conceived, and there must also be something reductive in the desire to retain Beckett as a quintessentially “European” writer (it is notable that while Irish readings of

Beckett are linked to charges of reductiveness, European readings that ignore Ireland usually escape that charge). In any case, as Andrew Gibson suggests here, the Irish–Universal dichotomy is beginning to look rather jaded.

My concern here, therefore, is with a number of binaries that recur in discussions of Beckett and Ireland that may have been strengthened, rather than undermined, by early attempts to read Beckett in an Irish context. Readers may recognize in my title a reference to Vivian Mercier's influential study from 1977, *Beckett/Beckett*. Based on a number of antinomies, including Gentleman–Tramp; Ireland–The World; Man/Woman, Mercier offered a dialectical reading of Beckett's work based on Wilde's claim that "A truth in art is one whose opposite is also true." The avowed aim was to challenge the idea that Beckett's work had nothing of the world in it, was "descended from another planet,"⁷ and some of Mercier's binaries retain their usefulness today (most scholars now acknowledge, for example, that Beckett's tramps had rather auspicious beginnings and, at the very least, a university education). The Ireland–World binary, however, has been less fortunate, and was probably less useful to begin with in that it carried the odd implication that Ireland was somehow opposed to "the World," or distinct from it. Given that he shared Beckett's Protestant background, the Irish Free State of Mercier's youth must have felt isolating in significant ways, but it was hardly *that* remote, which is precisely the point Mercier makes elsewhere in accounting for Beckett's achievement. Nevertheless, the Ireland–World binary has proved enduring – Ireland–Europe is just another version of it – and Beckett scholars have usually read its terms in what Rónán McDonald here describes as "sclerotic opposition" (17). His essay usefully traces the trend in a range of critical responses to Beckett, with Richard Kearney furnishing an early example:

Beckett had no time for the native nostalgia of the Celtic Twilight ... If contemporary European culture was undergoing a crisis of modernity typified by its art of "pure interrogation," the Celtic hinterlands were not to be sought after as an alternative ... That is why he followed Joyce and McGreevy to Paris, preferring "France in war to Ireland in peace."⁸

Kearney's work is revealing not only because it clearly demonstrates the tendency that McDonald has identified, but also because it invokes a key binary underlying all the others: tradition–modernity. If Kearney correctly accounts for Beckett's sense that the Yeatsian "flight from self-awareness" erred in positing the west of Ireland as a space outside of the modern, he

is less clear on the extent to which the Literary Revival was itself responding to the impact of modernization, and to Ireland's particular experience of broader European movements. In Kearney's analysis, Ireland is made synonymous with the idealized Celtic Twilight constructions of the West, and Europe with the seismic shifts endemic to modernity. Accordingly, he posits two distinct aesthetic strategies – confrontation of, or flight from self-awareness in modernity – and two distinct spheres, Europe and Ireland, where these differing responses (inevitably?) occur.

The result has been a partitioning of Beckett into distinct compartments, such as “The Irish Beckett,” and the problem with this approach is its complicity with an ideology of European diffusionism. As Susan Stanford Friedman has suggested, “however much the concepts of modernist internationalism differ from each other, they nonetheless typically operate within an unexamined center/periphery framework that locates the creative agency of modernity in the West.”⁹ Ireland often occupies an anomalous position in this schema, replicating its somewhat anomalous position in postcolonial studies, being sometimes aligned with the center and sometimes with the periphery, but it seems fair to say that Beckett studies routinely appeals to the same kind of tradition–modernity and stagnation–innovation binaries that drive the diffusionist model. Its logic has been a cornerstone of Beckett scholarship from the outset, surfacing again in S.E. Gontarski and Chris Ackerley's recent introduction to their indispensable *Grove Companion to Samuel Beckett*:

Eoin O'Brien has come as close as anyone to mapping the physical terrain of Beckett's Ireland, but [he] stops short of showing us how Ireland is absent or disappears from Beckett's work, how it exists as an afterthought, an aura, which is a spectre with its subject gone. Despite his Irish roots and recent attempts of countrymen to recolonize him, Beckett was a consummate European, more comfortable in the intellectual milieu of Europe than of his native “prosodoturfy.”¹⁰

Here, the dichotomy is forcefully restated: Beckett was a consummate European “despite” his Irish roots. It appears that Irishness is an impediment to be overcome on the path to a more achieved, cosmopolitan disposition, and Beckett's decisive achievement was to emulate Joyce in climbing free of his Irish beginnings. In order for Europe to take hold, Ireland must “disappear,” and its relevance consists not in what remains, but in what is jettisoned. The most revealing word is “recolonize,” characterizing recent work on Beckett by Irish critics as a wrong-minded move to reclaim him. The suggestion is that birth in Ireland represented a form of colonization for Beckett, and flight to Europe a means of decolonizing

his mind and transcending an oppressive national scene, until possessive and reductive scholars appeared to try and reverse that liberating trajectory. Hence the rather idiosyncratic use of the word “prosodoturfy”. What was, in *Murphy* (1938), a humorous neologism meant to align the poetry of Austin Ticklepenny with a conservative Irish postcolonial aesthetic, is deployed here to signify Ireland itself. In the process, an entire range of dissident political, cultural, and social initiatives evident in Ireland in the period that Beckett lived there is either occluded or reduced to direct expressions of dominant Free State ideology, conflating a vested political rhetoric with the rather more complex reality on the ground.

Underlying this account is the familiar assumption that the Ireland of Beckett’s day was synonymous with artistic torpor and stagnation and Europe with artistic freedom and creative stimulus (an instance of the neatness of identifications that is rarely remarked upon). Recently, Joe Cleary has highlighted how, in such accounts, Ireland is almost always reduced to a recipient of modernity, countering with the observation that peripheries have also functioned as sites of “alternative enlightenment” where ideas of the modern are “creatively extended, radicalized and transformed” before being transported back to the metropolitan center.¹¹ The broader problem, as Terence Brown has suggested, is that “sociologists of modernism have tended to adopt the internationalism of the phenomenon they investigate,” in ways that obscure its more local and regional inflections. For Brown, what is needed is a more nuanced and geographically specific analysis of modernism that takes into account the varying levels of modernization in different regions and examines precisely how these local tendencies coalesced into the broader movement.¹²

In this, Brown anticipated more recent calls for a location-oriented modernist studies that would reveal the different ways in which colonial and postcolonial writers have both informed and transformed modernism. And it was in this context that Declan Kiberd called some years ago for a “discrimination of modernisms.” Kiberd pointed out how Richard Ellmann’s work on Yeats, Joyce, and Wilde had all assumed that “the act of becoming modern require[d] a transcendence of mere Irishness,” and, in contesting this view, suggested the need for “a recognition that Irish modernism may not be at all the same thing as English modernism And French and American modernisms may be something else.”¹³ Citing the Famine as a traumatic modernizing event, Kiberd was especially critical of Ellmann’s unscrutinized tradition–modernity binary, and his assumption that modernity had not taken hold in a tradition-bound society like Ireland.¹⁴ More recently Joe Cleary has also suggested that Ireland’s entry

into modernity coincided with the Famine, discerning in contemporary accounts of that event the same experience of social dissolution and disruption described in other contexts by Karl Marx.¹⁵ According to Cleary, far from being exempt from the stresses of modernity, Ireland was among the first to experience its ruptures, and although there are major differences between the Irish experience and that of the rest of Europe, “the real challenge ... is to conceive of them *not* as two altogether alien and disjunctive histories but rather as two divergent vectors of the same capitalist modernization process.”¹⁶ In a significant transposition of the terms of the debate, he suggests that Ireland be rethought as “an exemplary nursery of exilic consciousness,” and not just somewhere to be abandoned in order that a modernist sensibility could fully take hold.¹⁷

In support of this claim, we might adduce Adrian Frazier’s recent observation that “[i]f one removes from English literature for the period 1890 to 1950 the works of Irish writers ... half the major achievements disappear.”¹⁸ Can Irishness still be thought of as an impediment to modernist achievement in such circumstances? Was it not rather something of an advantage? Assessing the evidence, many would now agree with Emer Nolan’s claim that Ireland in fact offers “a privileged vantage point for the exploration of the modern itself,”¹⁹ and it is possible to argue that Beckett was not a modernist “despite” his Irish roots but precisely because of them. This is not to discount the significance of France, but we might recall here that Beckett’s famous analysis of the “rupture of the lines of communication” in ‘Recent Irish Poetry’ was conducted in pursuit of “the nucleus of a living poetic in Ireland,” and, what is less often acknowledged, in arbitration between available Irish alternatives.²⁰

Susan Stanford-Friedman has recently tried to move beyond diffusionist accounts of modernization by way of a new spatialization of modernism charting the complex processes of exchange that occurred “both *between* different societies and *within* them,”²¹ and her model of “reciprocal exchange” allows for a far more nuanced analysis of Ireland’s relevance to Beckett.²² If Beckett longed for France when in Ireland, he also remembered Ireland obsessively when in France. He returned to Ireland far more often than Joyce did, and always to a country whose fate was being determined in broader European and global contexts. By virtue of being Irish, then, Beckett was always already European in important ways, and not just because of his Huguenot heritage. Moreover, as the essays in this volume demonstrate, when Beckett left Ireland in 1937 he certainly did not leave Ireland behind, so that the two spaces of his writing, Ireland and Europe, need to be considered together. Now is the time

to dispense with the notion of an “Irish Beckett” and attend, rather, to the complex, overlapping geographies of the mature work (the first pages of the French *Molloy* were written in Foxrock, for example, while the obviously Irish later work, *All That Fall*, was written in Ussy-sur-Marne). John Harrington’s pioneering study was invaluable in alerting people to the existence of Irish literary elements in Beckett’s work, but, as David Lloyd and Michael Wood both suggest here, there is less value now in continuing to talk in these terms. By the same token, there will be less need of a category like “Beckett the European,” which may have resurfaced recently in response to Irish critics deemed over-eager to “reclaim” him.²³ Instead of an either/or debate (and the possessive language that seems to go with it), we need to deconstruct the various binaries in Beckett studies – tradition–modernity, Ireland–Europe, Beckett–Beckett – so that the many fruitful tensions and correspondences between them can be more easily discerned.

Ultimately, this will entail the development of a Beckett studies that would apprise itself more fully of Ireland, and an Irish studies that would situate itself in a more conscious relation to Europe. W.J. McCormack has already noted a recurring “disjunction between an Irish local literature and the European culture into which it cries for reinsertion,”²⁴ and there is much to be gained from such an initiative. As Michael Wood suggests here, “there is a lot to be said for considering Beckett as an Irish writer who wrote in English and French, not merely because this happens to be platitudinously true, but because some sort of textual understanding may become available if we take each of the terms seriously enough” (173). Moving forward, then, we should not think in partitionist terms of Beckett–Beckett – the Irish Beckett–Beckett the European – but simply Beckett: an Irish writer with a strong interest in European culture who emigrated to France in the wake of one of the most politically unsettled periods of modern Irish history.

We will also need a clearer sense of how deeply Beckett registered that history. As W.J. McCormack reminds us, Beckett could not have remained oblivious to transformations in the Irish political landscape in the period after 1906,²⁵ and although we have Lois Gordon’s brief account of his shocked response to the Easter Rising,²⁶ more work needs to be done on the precise nature of Beckett’s response to the Irish revolution. The current consensus is that it was primarily negative, born of frustration with the Irish Free State’s narrow outlook regarding sexuality, politics, and culture after independence, and ‘Censorship in the Saorstát’

(1934) provides eloquent testimony to this.²⁷ We also have the letter to Thomas MacGreevy in which Beckett famously expressed his:

chronic inability to understand as member of any proposition a phrase like “the Irish people” or to imagine that it ever gave a fart in its corduroys for any form of art whatsoever, whether before the union or after, or that it was ever capable of any thought or act other than the rudimentary thoughts and acts belted into it by the priests and the demagogues in service of the priests.²⁸

In the circumstances, a negative reading seems about right. However, this letter is often used to suggest that Irish readings of Beckett are entirely misguided on the basis that he simply did not care to understand the Irish people, and his writing was not directed towards them (or about them) to any significant degree. If this is so, we must also remark that Beckett is entirely clear on many of the unsavory traits exhibited by the people that he is claiming not to understand, for he is clearly talking about Ireland’s Catholic majority and voicing the rather Yeatsian opinion that they are predominantly priest-ridden philistines. Whatever disclaimers he may provide, Beckett seems to know exactly what the phrase means, and who it represents, and also who it does not represent, and it is likely that he is dissembling to make a deeper point. For Beckett, the problem is not that the phrase is incomprehensible, only that it is inadequate and exclusivist, in that it ignores the complex social and religious divisions in Irish society. And his rejection of it should be read in light of the narrowing of available definitions of Irishness that sought to render “Irish” synonymous with “Catholic and nationalist” in the period leading to the birth of the Irish Free State.

When we think of Beckett’s relationship to “the Irish people” we need to be clear that his attitude was as complex as the sociopolitical situation itself. If his sense of the southern Irish Catholic majority conceived as an abstract social entity was hostile, his relations with particular Catholic individuals were a good deal more benevolent, while his relationship with his own southern Irish Protestant identity was equally complicated and conflicted. Famously dismissing it as having no more value than an old school tie, Beckett could also describe himself to MacGreevy as a “dirty Irish low church P[rotestant], even in poetry,”²⁹ and critics have long pointed out that his writings are suffused with Protestant values, most notably, as Hugh Kenner has remarked, in their reliance on “personal testimony, and the issueless confrontation with conscience.”³⁰ If the precise nature, extent, and critical relevance of these Irish filiations remain to be fully apprehended, summary dismissals of their relevance

seem unhelpful. Perhaps Beckett did think little of “the Irish people,” but this does not mean that he thought of them little, and both the work and the correspondence suggest something a good deal more vested and troubling. What the essays in this volume combine to suggest is that if Beckett’s move to France was an attempt to escape Ireland it was a fraught process that was never fully consummated.

For this reason, as many of the current contributors make clear, Beckett’s Protestantism seems to offer a particularly rich vein of inquiry. Vivian Mercier was the first to point out the significance of Beckett’s social and religious filiations, and J.C.C. Mays later suggested that the chief significance of Beckett’s Irishness consisted in precisely his awareness of, and sustained attempts to respond to his cultural predicament: “the condition of outsider, treated either with tolerance or suspicion.”³¹ Mays provides an extremely nuanced attempt to think Beckett’s writing through an Irish lens, and his early contributions to the subject are still among the most valuable work available, but he does, at times, invoke an either/or logic that seems unnecessarily limiting. Noting, perhaps of Mercier, that someone had suggested Beckett’s protagonists “might be presumed to share his own affluent, educated, Protestant beginnings,” Mays suggests that “the point is not what is shared, but what is opposed.” The “impulse is to cut free from ties, to explode classifications.”³² If there is an important sense in which this is true, we might also ask why that impulse is only ever partially realized: if the desire is to cut free of ties, why the stubborn persistence of details linking Beckett’s characters to his own Protestant Irish milieu? In ‘The End,’ for example, the narrator somewhat haughtily dismisses a visiting priest with the information that he is “a member of the reformed church.”³³ Why say so, or have one’s characters say so, if the underlying impulse is the kind of absolute severance from identifiable origins that Mays describes? Surely we are not reading reductively if we suggest that what is significant about many of these protagonists is that they both share and oppose Beckett’s background, are both implicated in and eager to escape from its constraints? Peter Boxall puts it best when he describes Beckett’s writing in terms of a central and defining ambivalence: “the systole-diastole of his rhythmic movement between resistance to and longing for a homeland.”³⁴

This reading diverges in important ways from the dominant account of Beckett’s development, in which, as Anna McMullan puts it, “all specificities of class, nation, or geography ... give way to abstracted and formalized spaces of representation.”³⁵ The problem with this reading is not that it is wrong, only that it overstates the case if applied unthinkingly across