

Samuel Beckett and the 'State' of Ireland

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Edited by

Alan Graham and Scott Eric Hamilton

Cambridge
Scholars
Publishing



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This book first published 2017

Cambridge Scholars Publishing

Lady Stephenson Library, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE6 2PA, UK

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

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ISBN (10): 1-4438-9567-9

ISBN (13): 978-1-4438-9567-5

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The essays in this volume are based on a selection of the papers presented at the Beckett and the 'State' of Ireland conferences held between 2011 and 2013 at the Humanities Institute of Ireland (HII) at University College Dublin (UCD). The editors wish to thank the following for their assistance in the organisation of the conference series: our co-organiser Feargal Whelan; HII Directors Marc Caball and Gerardine Meaney and especially HII Manager Valerie Norton for their invaluable support; conference volunteers and supporters Aoife Whelan, Carole Quigley and Jan Redmond; Ollie Sweetman for the conference artwork; the UCD College of Arts & Humanities Graduate School; UCD Innovation; Special Collections Librarian Evelyn Flannigan at the UCD James Joyce Library; Dublin UNESCO City of Literature. We would also like to thank all of the panel chairs, conference participants, and attendees who made the three conferences such a rich and collegiate arena in which to explore Beckett's relationship with his native country.

For their advice and support during the preparation of this volume, we are indebted to Carol Koulikourdi, Victoria Carruthers, Sam Baker and Theo Moxham at Cambridge Scholars Publishing.

INTRODUCTION

Beckett's 'Irishness' is a touchy subject to say the least. On the one hand, the French in laying claim to him as a 'French' writer have a fair point in that he adopted France (and its language for much of his work) as his homeland, famously preferring that country at war to Ireland at peace. And, of course, the Irish have the advantage (if it can be fairly judged as such) in claiming him as their own simply because birth-right and the influences of childhood and adolescence are deemed to confer nationality on whoever fulfils these criteria. These considerations take no account of what the victim of such national traits of possessiveness may feel in the matter. I was very conscious of these sentiments when I wrote *The Beckett Country*, and I knew that if I transgressed what I might call the boundaries of decency and respect, I would lose the support and assistance that Beckett so kindly proffered to me. I acknowledged these sensitivities in my introduction, which, I believe, hold true thirty years on: "Samuel Beckett is an Irishman. This simple statement should be taken for what it is, a mere declaration of fact. It should not be seized upon by the patriotic purveyors of national character and genius for public display. Beckett's nationality, taken at face value, is nothing more than an accident, as a consequence of which he was brought up in a small island with a people peculiar to that region. But there is more to it than that. Beckett's confinement to Ireland occurred during a period of his life when influences are formative and lasting; a period when the culture, mannerisms and eccentricities of a particular society are not only fundamental to the development of personality, but may provide also the raw material of creativity should a sensitive talent be among its youth ... So while allowing that Beckett is Irish in origins, in manners, and at times thought, we must accept that he belongs to no nation, neither to France nor to Ireland; if any claim has validity, it is that he represents in outlook the true European, but even this tidy categorisation is excessively constraining ... Beckett is of the world." So, in being kindly invited to write a foreword to *Beckett and the State of Ireland*, I am conscious of possible transgressions that might counter the wishes of one who pleaded "no symbols where none intended", yet I am also reminded of conversations with Beckett which resonate with the themes of this volume.

Benjamin Keatinge's essay, "Rethinking Beckettian Displacement: Landscape, Ecology and Spatial Experience" opens by drawing attention to what he regards as a surprising remark by John Banville - that Beckett is "nothing if not an old style landscape writer." Indeed, this is an astute observation. In a presentation with Margaret Drabble at the Happy Days Enniskillen International Beckett Festival in 2013, I likened Beckett to the Romantic poets, most notably Wordsworth, portrayed so fulsomely in Drabble's *A Writer's Britain*, and although the comparison was something of a revelation (to her and the audience), it can be readily supported in many passages of pastoral tranquillity in Beckett's novels and poems; for example, *The Roses are Blooming in Picardy* vignette in *Watt*, the spring evocation at the foot of the Dublin mountains in *More Pricks than Kicks* when it is "a matter of some difficulty to keep God out of one's meditations", or the "birdless sky" with "the odd raptor" on the Dublin mountains in *Mercier and Camier* (quoted in this essay). Beckett edified the landscape of his youth, and he has, in my opinion, immortalised in prose the beauty of the Dublin mountains, just as Wordsworth did for the Lake District in poetry. We should be careful though, as Keatinge wisely remarks, not to attribute indulgent nostalgia to Beckett's topographical beauty. And yet, on one of my many visits to Paris to discuss the photography for *The Beckett Country* I recall one poignant moment when the photograph of Bill Shannon, the whistling postman in *Watt*, brought tears to Beckett's eyes and I bid farewell wordlessly by placing a hand on his shoulder to show I understood. Similarly, Paul Stewart's "Like fucking a quag: Exile, Sex and Ireland" brought to mind interesting conversations with Beckett about the security of the womb and the ability of the expelled infant to recall the sensations of deprivation that must have accompanied such a dramatic change of environment, and the potential consequences for such memories to induce symptoms of stress and anxiety in later life.

Rodney Sharkey's "Torture and Trauma in Translation: Beckett's Theatre of Abuse" reminded me of a personal vignette which gives added credence to the concept of 'solitude', fundamental to the unique and uncanny ambience in the Portrane Lunatic Asylum with which this essay opens. My uncle, who was a psychiatrist of solitary and gentle mien, happened on the first day of his appointment to the asylum to be sitting on a rock throwing stones into the sea which laps the shoreline of Portrane, when a patient came upon him and remarked to him mistakenly as one inmate to another: "Don't let the quiet get you down, one gets used to it." How much Portrane, harbouring the secluded, indeed excluded, members of society, in particular, and lunatic asylums in general (and Beckett visited quite a few) influenced the creation of Beckett's characters is a matter for

interesting conjecture. In “‘Ni Trêve à Rien’: Beckett’s Poetry of Self-Determination - The ‘mirlitonrades’”, Damien Lennon rightly draws attention to the scant critical commentary which Beckett’s poetry has inspired. The relatively obscure *mirlitonrades*, originally written in French on scrap paper, were never translated by Beckett himself, possibly because even he balked at the very idea of translating such pieces of minimalism. Translation always carries the danger of misinterpretation, or indeed downright mistranslation, except in those rare instances, as with some of Beckett’s writing, when the author translates his own work. Threatening though such potential short-comings may be for a novel, when imbalances may be, as it were, balanced simply by the longevity of the text, such compensatory processes are less likely to prove corrective with poetic translation, and are almost non-existent in the minimalistic verse of the *mirlitonrades*. Put another way, there surely comes a point in reductionism when the sentiment being expressed can only be given meaning in the language in which it is uttered. And yet it is inevitable, and indeed fortunate, for those of us not familiar with French, that the *mirlitonrades* continue to be the objects of translation efforts.

In “*Mercier and Camier: Narrative, Exile, Myth*”, Scott Eric Hamilton contends with good reason that *Mercier and Camier* marks an important point of development in Beckett’s prose by signalling the moment when he compounded, as it were, the exilic process by adopting another language. This annihilation of the past in favour of a new present must have consequences, Hamilton argues, both for the influence of times past and the creation of the new. Rina Kim’s “Psychoanalysis and Ireland in Beckett’s Early Fiction” examines manuscript notes entitled “Trueborn Jackeen” and “The Cow” which focus on Irish mythological history and geography. The notes confirm the well-known antipathy of Beckett for the Yeatsian *Cathleen ni Houlihan* image of Ireland whom he would rather replace with a promiscuous Miss Counihan in *Murphy*, a Cathleen “standing in profile against the blazing corridor, with her high buttocks and her low breasts,” and looking “not merely queenly, but on for anything.” Amanda Dennis approaches the creative potential of imagination in “On Roaming in *The Lost Ones*: Embodiment and Virtual Space.” She is correct in assuming at the outset that she is dealing with no ordinary imagination. Beckett once chided me by asking me not to “deimaginise” his imagination by excessively anchoring his work in reality; in other words, he was asking me not to deny him the creativity of imagination. Be that as it may, Dennis explores the evidence, if that is not too strong a word, in *All Strange Away*, *Imagination Dead Imagine*, *Enough*, *Ping* and, particularly, *The Lost Ones*, to support her spatial thesis

that there is communication between actual imagination and its equivalent in a virtual continuum; in this, she certainly succeeds in giving thought to the intricacies of Beckett's imagination.

Siobhán Purcell's "The Defamiliarised Familial: Reading Anomalies, Heredity and Disability in *Watt*" acknowledges Beckett's interest in medical literature by drawing attention to the epistemological claims in his war-time novel. If medical academics were to turn their attention to the psycho-pathological disorders that the Lynch family are heirs to – hunchback, double amputation resulting from falls, visual impairment, congenital disorders of the unmentionable kind, and haemophilia - there would be sufficient material for an entire symposium. Purcell's analysis invites us to consider how these conditions implicate the lack of access to family planning and the subsequent effect on womanhood in Ireland when *Watt* was written. Alan Graham's starting point in "The skull in Connemara: Beckett, Joyce, and the Gaelic west" is the unveiling of a bust of the author in An Cheathrú Rua, a small town in the Connemara region of county Galway in the heart of Irish-speaking Ireland. Graham traces the many references to the 'west' in Beckett's *oeuvre* from the hilariously comic Nackybal scene in *Watt* (when Ernest Louit presents his 'evidence' to support the grant awarded, and dissipated with alacrity, for his research trip to county Clare) to the allusions to the west of Ireland in *Waiting for Godot*.

Through these concerns, *Beckett and the State of Ireland* recognises and probes many of the complex influences that origin may have exerted on Beckett's subsequent endeavour.

Eoin O'Brien,
Dublin, 2017

RETHINKING BECKETTIAN DISPLACEMENT: LANDSCAPE, ECOLOGY AND SPATIAL EXPERIENCE

BENJAMIN KEATINGE

Reading Beckett's Topographies

In a lecture about landscape and stage scenario in *Waiting for Godot* from 2006, Enoch Brater cites a surprising remark made by Irish novelist John Banville; at the round table discussion on Beckett and the visual arts at the Beckett centenary celebrations in Dublin in April 2006, Banville said that Beckett is “nothing if not an old style landscape writer”.¹ The remark is surprising because it credits Beckett with an “old style” eye for the picturesque without remarking on Beckett’s frequent sardonic erasure and cancelling of his descriptive passages. It also grants Beckett’s “old style” admiration for landscape an aesthetic centrality and implies that Beckett’s writing has something in common with the Old Masters whose landscape paintings he so admired.

One should quickly add that the singularity of Banville’s remarks is not diminished by the extensive discussion of Beckett’s Irishness from the publication of Eoin O’Brien’s crucial study *The Beckett Country* (1986) to J.P. Harrington’s *The Irish Beckett* (1991) to more recent discussions by Emilie Morin (2009), Peter Boxall (2009) and Seán Kennedy (2010).²

What David Pattie has called “obsessional Ireland” in Beckett has been a mainstay of Beckett studies for some time.³ Banville’s comments alert us, rather, to another dimension of the debates surrounding Beckett’s Irishness which is the precise and painterly precision with which Beckett uses aspects of landscape and topography. Beckett’s descriptive powers and visual imagination are a reflection of several facets of his Irishness and of his education: his upbringing in Foxrock, in the shadow of the Dublin mountains and subsequent education at Trinity; his emotional investment in the landscapes of his childhood; and his finely-tuned visual antennae

trained in the art galleries of Europe in which he spent so much time during the 1930s and subsequently.

In an essay titled “‘The Beckett Country’ Revisited: Beckett, Belonging and Longing”, Seán Kennedy focuses on Beckett’s dual sense of “belonging and longing” in respect to his homeland.⁴ Kennedy makes the useful distinction between what he calls the “topographical imaginary” and the “national imaginary”. Kennedy’s point is that Beckett’s nostalgia for a “lost” homeland was expressed via an emotional/aesthetic investment in landscape, a residual “longing” for a recollected place of origin; however, this “longing” co-exists with an opposing sense of “self-exile” and oppression stemming from Beckett’s implacable rejection of Ireland as a socio-political entity which Kennedy refers to as the “national imaginary” of the socio-political realities of the Irish Free State.⁵ Whereas many commentaries on Beckett and Ireland have seen the topographical imaginary as a function of the national imaginary - in other words, have subordinated land(scape) to politics - Kennedy’s point is that one can retain an affection for place which is expressed topographically and independently of any geo-political associations. Kennedy further argues that this was the precise predicament of many Protestant or Anglo-Irish exiles who left the Irish Free State after 1922, including Beckett.⁶

Nevertheless, there are several complicating factors which must be placed alongside the distinction advanced by Kennedy. For one thing, if Beckett’s descriptions of Ireland have the characteristics of a lost homeland, it is nonetheless, as Beckett has it in *Proust*, a “Paradise that has been lost”.⁷ Furthermore, the landscapes of Beckett’s childhood cannot really be described as living landscapes imbued with the emotional resonance of community, human affection and a sense of “dwelling”; rather, Beckett’s landscapes seem uniquely barren, albeit austere beautiful. Indeed, they might be classified as negative landscapes which reflect issues of historical loss and human absence. Indeed, Andrew Gibson touches on this important point in his “Afterword” to the essay collection *Beckett and Ireland* where he writes that Beckett’s landscapes reflect an “historical devastation”, a “boneyard” and site of “impoverishment, disempowerment, captivity, beggary, suffering”.⁸

Indeed, it is far from clear if Beckett’s sense of the picturesque can be said to accommodate a sense of belonging. Rather, his landscapes seem to emphasize a separateness of the kind Beckett expressed in his comments to MacGreevy on Cézanne’s *Mont. Sainte-Victoire* where he writes:

What a relief the Mont Ste. Victoire after all the anthropomorphised landscape – van Goyen, Avercamp, the Ruysdaels, Hobbema . . . after all the landscape “promoted” to the emotions of the hiker . . . Cézanne seems to have been the first to see landscape & state it as material of a strictly peculiar order, incommensurable with all human expressions whatsoever.⁹

In subsequent discussion of Jack B. Yeats’s painting, Beckett admired “the unalterable alieness of the 2 phenomena, the 2 solitudes” and the “impassable immensity” of landscapes which resist being “humanised”.¹⁰ This points to Beckett’s view of the incommensurability of the human with the non-human and his linkage of landscape with the “inorganic”.¹¹ It is a viewpoint which finds its expression in several mature works as, for example, when Vladimir and Estragon take stock of their surroundings in *Waiting for Godot*:

ESTRAGON:[*Suddenly furious.*] Recognize! What is there to recognize? All my lousy life I’ve crawled about in the mud! And you talk to me about scenery! [*Looking wildly about him.*] Look at this muckheap! I’ve never stirred from it!

VLADIMIR: Calm yourself, calm yourself.

ESTRAGON: You and your landscapes! Tell me about the worms!¹²

The question, then, of Beckett’s attitude towards landscape is a complex one. Beckett’s sense of man’s alienation from his environment is reflected in his use of settings which emphasize this disconnection by way of being inhospitable and featureless. These landscapes have even appeared, in the eyes of some critics, to be abstracted landscapes, “anywhere and nowhere . . . a pathless, borderless land associated more with mental than phenomenal terrain”, as S.E. Gontarski and Chris Ackerley allege in their *Grove Companion to Beckett*.¹³ Equally, Gontarski’s demonstration of Beckett’s “vaguening” of topographical detail in his mature drama has revealed a simultaneous abstraction and specificity in some topographical allusions.¹⁴ Thus, the reference by Hamm in *Endgame* to “the situation at Kov, beyond the gulf”¹⁵ can be read as an abstracted non-place in a post-holocaust world and/or as a veiled allusion to Cobh, Co. Cork, site of mass starvation and emigration during the Great Irish Famine in the 1840s. In the same way, “the skull the skull the skull the skull in Connemara”¹⁶ mentioned by Lucky in *Waiting for Godot* is both a partly abstract, quasi-existential allusion to the famously rugged terrain of the granite coastal region of Connemara in Co. Galway and Co. Mayo and/or to the more specific historical traumas of poverty, famine and emigration associated with this region.

The geographer and geologist Frank Mitchell does well to remind us that the landscape of post-Famine Ireland was “a ruined landscape, almost destitute of any woody growth, and with the fertility of much of its soils grossly depleted by endless repetitions of potato crops.”¹⁷ It was also an empty landscape which barely concealed the disappearance of over two million people through death and emigration. This sense of desolation and aftermath is palpable in several of Beckett’s landscape descriptions such as this passage from *Mercier and Camier*:

A road still carriageable climbs over the high moorland. It cuts across vast turfbogs, a thousand feet above sea-level, two thousand if you prefer. It leads to nothing any more. A few ruined forts, a few ruined dwellings. Tarns lie hidden in the folds of the moor, invisible from the road, reached by faint paths, under high over hanging crags . . . None ever pass this way but beauty-spot hogs and fanatical trampers. Under its heather mask the quag allures, with an allurements not all mortals can resist. Then it swallows them up or the mist comes down . . . It’s a birdless sky, the odd raptor, no song. End of descriptive passage.¹⁸

In spite of the undoubted qualities of this passage as a piece of proto-Romantic landscape description sardonically undercut by Beckett’s identification of it as such, it is easy to see that this is also a picture of desolation, however picturesque. Nothing lives in this landscape save “the odd raptor” and the occasional hiker, with (presumably) a few sheep scattered across the mountains. As Clov says in *Endgame*, “There’s no more nature”.¹⁹ This is landscape writing which intersects with an historical and ecological disaster. But it also suits Beckett’s purposes that such landscapes should be marked by absence and alienation; even a reflexively “realistic” description of such a setting must reveal “a nature almost as inhumanly inorganic as a stage set” and can only underline the “solitude” and “loneliness” of the landscape that Beckett also found in Jack Yeats’s painting, as he confided to MacGreevy in a letter of 14 August 1937.²⁰

There is thus, arguably, a tension at work, a tension between a certain “longing” alongside a sense of estrangement and desolation. These feelings are poignantly expressed in *Krapp’s Last Tape* where Krapp regrettably evokes his own lost Eden, very much wrapped up in a sense of place and topography:

KRAPP: . . . [*Pause.*] Lie propped up in the dark – and wander. Be again in the dingle on a Christmas Eve, gathering holly, the red-berried. [*Pause.*] Be again on Croghan on a Sunday morning, in the haze, with the bitch, stop and listen to the bells. [*Pause.*] And so on. [*Pause.*]²¹

The same sense of irretrievable loss is expressed in a letter to MacGreevy from 1 January 1935 where Beckett recalls “a Xmas morning not long ago standing at the back of the Scalp with Father, hearing singing coming from Glencullen Chapel”.²²

But we must be careful not to over-emphasise or sentimentalise whatever latent nostalgia may exist in Beckett’s mature evocations of Irish landscape. In a discussion of nostalgia in Beckett’s late television play . . . *but the clouds* . . . , Peter Boxall cautions:

The figure in Beckett’s play . . . calls images from ruin . . . as he vanishes in his little sanctum through the night . . . The back roads here become both the locus of a remembered Irish landscape . . . and the route towards the recovery of such a landscape, the back road along which the imagination might return to its lost home. But this play . . . is a play about broken channels of communication; the back road here offers only partial access to rural Ireland . . .²³

The desolation of Krapp, which is echoed in later dramatic texts, is due to a failure of communication and is underlined also by the ultimately solitary and desolate features of the Co. Wicklow and south Dublin landscapes evoked by Beckett, landscapes which speak of the separation between the human being, his environment and his fellow beings. This is not a friendly or reassuring landscape to be summoned to the mind for compensation and reassurance. Rather, for Beckett, the landscape of the Dublin mountains evinces a “calm secret hostility” and even “the lowest mountains” serve to “terrify” and are “frightening”.²⁴ This fear includes the emotions of loneliness and estrangement as well as exilic regret. In this light, we should be careful not to attribute a soft-centred nostalgia to Beckett’s topographies even while we interrogate their centrality in some of his major writings.

“but to hell with all this fucking scenery”: Disowning Landscapes

There are multiple examples in Beckett’s writing of landscape description being subject to ironic dismissal even at the moment in which it is voiced. Even as Beckett participates in some emotionally-charged descriptions of landscape, he creates a distancing mechanism by simultaneously undercutting those descriptions by drawing sardonic attention to their “stink of artifice”.²⁵ In the above citations, Estragon exclaims, “You and your landscapes!” while the narrator of *Mercier and Camier* declares “End

of descriptive passage” as if bored by his own linguistic inventiveness. A similar dismissive attitude is taken by the dying Malone as he tries to describe the topography of St John of God’s Hospital in *Malone Dies*:

A high wall encompassed it about, without however shutting off the view, unless you happened to be in its lee. How was this possible? Why thanks to the rising ground to be sure, culminating in a summit called the Rock, because of the rock that was on it. From here a fine view was to be obtained of the plain, the sea, the mountains, the smoke of the town and the buildings of the institution . . . A stream at long intervals bestrid - but to hell with all this fucking scenery. Where could it have risen anyway, tell me that. Underground perhaps. In a word a little Paradise for those who like their nature sloven.²⁶

Malone exasperates and exhausts himself with the mechanics of description which contribute to the “Mortal tedium”²⁷ of his fabulations.

The ending of *Malone Dies* raises particular critical issues related to the nature of Malone’s recumbent narrative as it draws to a farcical, yet profound, conclusion amid evocations of a south Co. Dublin landscape. Issues of longing and belonging seem very much wrapped up in Malone’s narrative arguably tilting it towards the Romantic sublime as Malone’s expiration draws near:

No, they are no more than hills, they raise themselves gently, faintly blue out of the confused plain. It was there somewhere he was born, in a fine house, of loving parents. Their slopes are covered with ling and furze, its hot yellow bells, better known as gorse. The hammers of the stone-cutters ring all day like bells.²⁸

Whatever biographical resonance this may have with Beckett’s own upbringing in Cooldrinagh in the gentrified surroundings of suburban, middle-class Foxrock, shadowed by the Dublin mountains, we should keep in mind that this passage is deployed in the delirious denouement of a tale involving Macmann, Lemuel and Lady Pedal whose final moments are marred by mayhem and murder. If one wished to find an epithet for the resonant quality in these descriptions, one might borrow a phrase coined by David Lloyd in which he refers to “the traumatic event” as the “*indigent sublime*” in a discussion of the Great Irish Famine.²⁹ The “*indigent sublime*”, as theorized by Lloyd, seems to capture the simultaneous experience of trauma and transcendence, elevation and debasement which energizes the final pages of *Malone Dies*. Even if landscape seems absurdly redundant – as it would have been during the Famine years – it lingers in Malone’s imagination in the same way as “the

afterlife [of trauma] in the collective and individual memory” does in relation to Famine memory.³⁰ The ending of *Malone Dies* seems to imply some kind of “unacknowledged . . . catastrophe”³¹ and Malone pays as much attention to the site as to the substance of the disaster.

Viewed in this light, Beckett’s self-cancelling landscapes may not just be an anti-realist strategem, a self-conscious allusion to the artificiality of narrative. Rather, they may also be indicative of land(scape) as a site of historical repression and effacement of unspoken traumas of the kind that modern-day “beauty-spot hogs and fanatical tramps”³² will choose to ignore. Why else, we might ask, would an otherwise innocuous landscape be regarded as “frightening” and endowed with a “calm secret hostility”?

It may not be entirely irrelevant to note that contemporary landscape author Tim Robinson has expressed similar feelings to those of Beckett when observing Roundstone Bog from the top of Errisbeg in Connemara, Co. Galway. In *Listening to the Wind*, the first volume of his trilogy on Connemara, Robinson writes:

I have tried several times to describe this landscape. Not long ago I went up to look at it again from the top of Errisbeg, trying to find an adjective for it, and the one that came spontaneously to mind was “frightened”. For a moment I felt I had identified the force that drives the expansion, the self-scattering, of the universe: fear. The outline of each lake bristles with projections, every one of which is itself spiny; they stab at one another blindly. There is a fractal torment energizing the scene . . . in which lakes seem to fly apart like shrapnel. Of course all this is purely subjective and projective . . . But when I collect myself and try to analyse the view from Errisbeg and relate what forms I discern in it to what I read in geological texts on Connemara, the results are deeply perturbing to my sense of the human scale.³³

Robinson is surely right to emphasize the subjective element in these perceptions. Beckett himself visited Connemara with his brother Frank in the autumn of 1932 and came away with different impressions. Although he did not visit the Roundstone district, he did see the equally rugged terrain of Achill in Co. Mayo. In a letter to Thomas MacGreevy, Beckett describes it as “an unforgettable trip . . . through bog and mountain scenery” which he found “somehow far more innocent and easy and obvious than the stealthy secret variety we have here”.³⁴ It may well be, however, that Beckett responded to the same type of fractal dissonance perceived by Robinson but in relation to the scenery of the Dublin and Wicklow mountains. Both landscapes share some geomorphological

features, including blanket bog, underlying granite rock formations and noticeably treeless terrain. It is also clear that Beckett had an outline knowledge of geology having copied out a list of geological periods from an unknown source into the Whoroscope Notebook. His characters occasionally express the same sense of perturbation that Tim Robinson feels at the dwarfing of “the human scale” by geological time. In *Endgame*, Hamm imagines a world of “Infinite emptiness” for Clov in which he will be “like a little bit of grit in the middle of the steppe”³⁵ and in *Godot*, Lucky expresses a geological vision of “the air and then the earth abode of stones in the great cold . . . the great deeps the great cold on sea on land”.³⁶ We might therefore surmise that Beckett’s sense of the “hostility” of the landscape and his reluctance to aestheticise landscape in his works can be attributed to his deeper “excavatory” and “immersive”³⁷ sense of the hidden historical and geological traumas which are more or less inscribed or embedded in the terrain of south Co. Dublin and Co. Wicklow. These were the landscapes to which he felt instinctively drawn and yet also recoiled from.

“the charm of our country”: Beckett’s Ecologies

It is not hard to see why the impact of ecocriticism and of environmental studies generally has yet to be fully felt in Beckett scholarship. Notwithstanding Paul Davies’s pioneering essay “Strange Weather: Beckett from the Perspective of Ecocriticism”, there remains scope for a deeper consideration of Beckett and the environment.³⁸ Any future study will have to reckon with Beckett’s vision of environmental degradation in *Endgame* where Hamm dismisses the natural world as an anachronism:

HAMM: [*Pause. Violently.*] But what in God’s name do you imagine? That the earth will awake in spring? That the rivers and seas will run with fish again? That there’s manna in heaven still for imbeciles like you? [*Pause.*]³⁹

Such an apocalyptic vision may not be redundant in the era of climate change and dramatic reductions in biodiversity. Nevertheless, one is inclined to agree with Chris Ackerley who infers “a distrust of nature”, at least in Beckett’s early work, rather than an outright dismissal in the manner of Hamm.⁴⁰ Just as Beckett resisted an aestheticization of landscape, so he satirises the natural world even as he grudgingly acknowledges its seasonal plenitude. Thus, the famous anti-pastoral of *Watt*, in Arsene’s “short statement”,⁴¹ may be read as only a half-dismissive parody of the fecundity of the four seasons:

The crocuses and the larch turning green every year a week before the others and the pastures red with uneaten sheep's placentas and the long summer days . . . and the cuckoo in the afternoon and the corncrake in the evening and the wasps in the jam and the smell of the gorse . . . and the apples falling . . . and the larch turning brown a week before the others and the chestnuts falling and the howling winds and the sea breaking over the pier and the first fires . . . and of course the snow and to be sure the sleet and bless your heart the slush and every fourth year the February débâcle and the endless April showers and the crocuses and then the whole bloody business starting over again.⁴²

Beckett may have been sceptical about "the whole bloody business," which is compared in the same passage to "A turd . . . A cat's flux,"⁴³ but the animosity is not insensitive to such beauties as are occasioned in nature.

In his correspondence, Beckett shows a clear sensitivity to other species and to the natural phenomena he encountered in his Marne retreat at Ussy. To Georges Duthuit in June 1949, Beckett confesses: "In the fields, on the roads, I give myself over to deductions on nature, based on observation!"⁴⁴ and he refers in several letters in the 1950s to his tree-planting activities at Ussy, including "thirty arbores vitae and a blue cypress," as he mentions to Robert Pinget in March 1956.⁴⁵ His letters also include sharply-observed descriptions of nature such as his observations on some partridges in his Ussy garden related to Pamela Mitchell in a letter of March 1955: "Visited by partridges now daily, about midday. Queer birds. They hop, listen, hop, listen, never seem to eat."⁴⁶

Beckett's conflicted attitudes towards the natural world are best described, again by Ackerley, when he notes that: "While [he] expressed the Modernist suspicion of Romantic excesses, throttled the lyric impulse and trampled the Blue Flower of beauty, Beckett retained a contradictory attraction towards the romantic, even as he refused to validate it."⁴⁷ In Beckett's own words, describing the "long green slopes" of south Co. Dublin to Georges Duthuit in July 1948: "Romantic landscape, but dry old stick of a traveller."⁴⁸

However, these established viewpoints should be supplemented by a consideration of the relevance for Beckett studies of contemporary debates within the environmental movement, especially the new movement away from managed conservation and towards "rewilding". In his book *Feral: Searching for Enchantment on the Frontiers of Rewilding*, the journalist and environmentalist George Monbiot argues that what is missing in

conservation is a willingness to allow nature to take care of herself.⁴⁹ He suggests that what we often regard as “natural” or “unspoiled” environments are, in fact, highly degraded landscapes which bear the scars of deforestation and intensive agriculture whereas a really pristine environment would require the withdrawal of human intervention from the field and a return to a truly “natural” environment. The “rewilding” movement envisages the allocation of unproductive land to progressive degrees of regeneration through non-intervention and a return of this land to a wilderness condition which would enable the return of keystone species, including lynx, beavers, wolves and bears. The rewilding movement argues for “the disorderly, unplanned, unstructured revival of the natural world”⁵⁰ and it aims to facilitate this by identifying regions where “self-willed land”⁵¹ can be allowed to develop without hindrance from farmers and without the “intense intervention”⁵² sometimes found in other conservation models.

In his analysis of the early twenty-first century landscape of Wales, specifically the region of the Cambrian Mountains, George Monbiot sees a “bleak and broken” landscape which is “treeless” and where the “mown mountains look like the set of a post-apocalyptic film” and where the “paucity of birds and other wildlife creates the impression that the land has been poisoned”.⁵³ In this, the landscape of Wales – so similar to that of Wicklow and the Dublin mountains – is “derelict”, as Beckett’s narrator notes in ‘First Love’ in relation to the Irish-inspired landscape of that novella.⁵⁴ This same dereliction, experienced by Beckett in terms of fear and “calm secret hostility”, is experienced by Monbiot as an “emptiness” which “appals” him.⁵⁵

We might, on the one hand, see Beckett’s evocation of this barren, sterile and “derelict” landscape as one more expression of a general alienation from one’s environment and a confirmation of Beckett’s view of landscape as “material of a strictly peculiar order, incommensurable with all human expressions whatsoever”, as he wrote to MacGreevy in regard to Cézanne’s *Mont. Sainte-Victoire*.⁵⁶ The narrators of the *novellas*, for example, are more concerned with their various sufferings and the wish to “Die without too much pain”, as the narrator of ‘The Calmative’ has it.⁵⁷ Ecological concern is not among their priorities.

Nevertheless, as in Beckett’s own correspondence, one gathers hints of a subversive, persistent engagement with the natural world among the various vagrants who populate Beckett’s prose texts. The narrator of ‘First

Love' refers to the same landscape of the "indigent sublime" as Malone with the same notes of transcendent impoverishment:

I saw the mountain, impassible, cavernous, secret, where from morning to night I'd hear nothing but the wind, the curlews, the clink like distant silver of the stone-cutters' hammers. I'd come out in the daytime to the heather and gorse, all warmth and scent, and watch at night the distant city lights . . .⁵⁸

Beckett's narrators themselves behave like hunted animals, trying to merge into the scenery and avoiding the hazards of human encounters; as Molloy says "Morning is the time to hide".⁵⁹ If we interpret the journeys of Beckett's vagrants as partly journeys of interiority, "a contraction of the spirit, a descent,"⁶⁰ we might even consider that Molloy's anarchic peregrinations and Moran's hapless pursuit amount to a certain "rewilding" of self, especially in Moran's "descent" into indigence and apathy.

We should note also that Moran's failure to find Molloy is mirrored in the failure of the authorities to reclaim the "Molloy country" which is characterized by impassable swamps:

For between my town and the sea there was a kind of swamp which, as far back as I can remember . . . there was always talk of draining, by means of canals I suppose, or of transforming into a vast port and docks, or into a city on piles for the workers, in a word of redeeming somehow or other . . . It is true they actually began to work and that work is still going on in certain areas in the teeth of adversity, setbacks, epidemics and the apathy of the Public Works Department, far from me to deny it.⁶¹

The failure at "redeeming" the recalcitrant landscape of the "Molloy country" amounts to an ecological resistance to "improvements", as robust as the resistance of Molloy himself to any civic identity. As Seán Kennedy notes: "if we think infrastructurally, most of Beckett's works have a rather quizzical relationship to the trappings of modernity – they contain more caves and chamber pots, for example, than electric circuits or sewers" and in this they overlook or obliquely satirise the nation-building, infrastructural projects initiated by the Irish Free State.⁶²

In this light, we should reconsider the concluding pages of Molloy's half of the narrative in terms of a refusal to civilize or be incorporated into the ecologically destructive infrastructures of contemporary civilization. Significantly, Molloy enters a *primaeval* forest as his narrative draws to a close; it is an unimproved landscape, at last. As he finally moves towards stasis, it is the calls of unmolested nature that ring in his ears:

I lapsed down to the bottom of a ditch. It must have been spring, a morning in spring. I thought I heard birds, skylarks perhaps. I had not heard a bird for a long time . . . Had I heard any at the seaside? Mews? I could not remember. I remembered the corncrakes.⁶³

These lines suggest that there is an ecological dimension to Beckett's "topographical imaginary" which here is expressed by allusion to two of the most recognisable birds of the Irish countryside, the skylark and the corncrake, formerly extremely common in Ireland. What Seán Kennedy refers to as Beckett's "impulse to uncouple art from national context" sees him asserting an untamed topographical identity in place of the accoutrements of Irish national identity.⁶⁴ In so doing, he shows a greater connection to the ecologies of "the Beckett country" than his otherwise desolate scenarios might at first suggest.

"Where now?": Spatial Experience in Later Beckett

In his essay on "Beckett and Obsessional Ireland" David Pattie observes that "Ireland has a rather odd place in Beckett studies. It is there and not there . . . Beckett is still treated as someone whose Irishness has to be excavated laboriously."⁶⁵ While Beckett's Irishness may now require less strenuous demonstration than formerly, its paradoxical quality remains undeniable. On the one hand, Beckett was trenchantly dismissive about his homeland, writing, for example, to Barney Rosset, in 1954: "No, there are no compensations for me in this country, on the contrary. And as so shortly to be the only survivor of my family I hope never to have to return."⁶⁶ Yet, the images of this homeland were, indeed, "obsessional" as he admitted to James Knowlson.⁶⁷

Several commentators on Beckett have attempted to elucidate what Pattie calls the "immanence" of Ireland in the later work and how Ireland features as an absent presence in some of the later prose and drama.⁶⁸ As Pattie acutely recognises, "After a certain point . . . something happens to these locations; either they are described but not named . . . or they are named but not described (the sudden irruption of Croker's Acres into the monologue in *Not I*, for example)."⁶⁹ In this, Pattie is surely right in seeing a crucial contrast between the "imaginative certainty"⁷⁰ of Joyce's attitude to Ireland and the contrasting impalpability of Beckett's "back roads" which is also noted by Peter Boxall as based on "broken channels of communication" and "only partial access to rural Ireland".⁷¹

It is necessary to look again at the role which spatialization and place play in the later works in the light of some theorizations of space and place from the field of humanistic geography. At the beginning of *The Unnamable* we read the famous tripartite question: “Where now? Who now? When now?”⁷² This question suggests threefold criteria for subjectivity: there must be an entity or person or consciousness who can correspond to the “Who now?” of the question, but there must also be a space or place to answer for “Where now?” and a time to answer for “When now?” Famously, *The Unnamable* seems to dissolve this traditional formula so that the subject, if one can speak of a subject, is constructed linguistically. He or it is “in words, made of words, others’ words”.⁷³

However, it is perhaps significant that Beckett’s threefold questioning of the traditional subject begins with the question “Where now?” We are accustomed to the idea of orientation within time and space; indeed, these are the basic co-ordinates of traditional subjectivity. We think of the subject as inhabiting space, or moving through space, and as perceiving an environment and we consider that the subject experiences spatiality in relation to the embodied self, the body which corresponds with the “Who now?” of the question in *The Unnamable*. If one allows for the fact that, in Beckett’s work, especially in the *Trilogy*, disorientation in space is closely linked to the loss of selfhood, we begin to see that there is a potentially close alliance between a sense of place and a sense of self.

The classic account of *Space and Place* by geographer Yi-Fu Tuan sets out the basic criteria for our customary sense of orientation:

What sensory organs and experiences enable human beings to have their strong feeling for space and for spatial qualities? Answer: kinesthesia, sight and touch . . . Space is experience directly as having room in which to move. Moreover, by shifting from one place to another, a person acquires a sense of direction . . . Space assumes a rough coordinate frame centred on the mobile purposive self . . . Purposive movement and perception, both visual and haptic, give human beings their familiar world of disparate objects in space. Place is a special kind of object. It is a concretion of value . . . it is an object in which one can dwell.⁷⁴

If we follow the logic of Tuan’s argument, we will reach the same conclusions as are set out by J.E. Malpas in his book *Place and Experience: A Philosophical Topography* who suggests that subjectivity and spatial orientation – location and locatedness – are mutually interdependent:

In grasping the structure of place . . . what is grasped is an open and interconnected region within which other persons, things, spaces and abstract locations, and even one's self, can appear, be recognized, identified and interacted with . . . Place is . . . that within and with respect to which subjectivity is itself established – place is not founded on subjectivity, but is rather that on which subjectivity is founded. Thus one does not first have a subject that apprehends certain features of the world in terms of the idea of place; instead, the structure of subjectivity is given in and through the structure of place.⁷⁵

This account of subjectivity incorporates the important role that experience and memory play in self-identity. Both Tuan and Malpas emphasize that humans acquire their sense of self by experiencing and testing their sense of place. As Tuan argues, citing evidence from child development researchers such as Jean Piaget, it is via the trial and error of “sensorimotor” experiment that the child learns who and where he is.⁷⁶ It is the “child's experience”⁷⁷ as a young infant exploring space which forms the basis for any sense of adult locatedness and is prior to the process of acculturation which gives us our sense of community, national identity and feelings of place and dwelling.

If we are to fully rethink Beckettian displacement, we need to consider the very basic ways in which several of Beckett's narrators seek to orientate themselves in space or to express their sense of disorientation and displacement. To do this, we must look not only at the vestigial traces of homeland and Irish topography in the *Trilogy*, and beyond; rather, we must address the almost infantile levels at which Beckett's narrators seek haptic, auditory and visual assurance of their very existence in space. Such a task would require a linkage of the microcosmic and cell-like dwellings of both dramatic and fictional characters in the later work in relation to the wider backdrop of Ireland and its associated topography which are more often discussed by Beckett scholars.

In order to illustrate the nature of this approach, one needs only to consider the coalescence in *Malone Dies* between the stationary situation of Malone, supine in his room, and the wider descriptions of landscape which he evoke in his “stories”.⁷⁸ Side by side are posited an enclosed, microcosmic space, resembling the constricted range of a small infant, and more expansive, geographic spaces which resemble a remembered Irish landscape. The novel is suffused with detailed descriptions of Malone's haptic, visual and auditory perceptions as he lies alone in his room. Malone's “long stick” which enables him to “rummage” among his “possessions”⁷⁹ reminds us of a small child rummaging among his toys.

Indeed, Malone resembles an infant, by turns asleep and awake, incontinent and immobile, “a tiny tot” whose “chest moves no more than a sleeping child”⁸⁰ and who sucks on his pillow or pencil, and whose “exercise-book” is “almost a child’s”.⁸¹

According to Tuan, it is as very young children that we learn “to read spatial and environmental cues”.⁸² This is what Malone spends his whole time doing. But, even in his senility, he has the advantage of experience on which his storytelling is based. There is a coalescence here between the basic, haptic experiences of infancy and the more worldly wisdom of a senile, second childhood. It is a deliberate linkage between the most infantile exploration of space and the adult recollections of experience and sense of cultural displacement. In this respect, Beckett may be said, in the later texts, to treat memories of Ireland a bit like Malone’s haptic experiences with his pencil: one moment they are present, in another, they are absent. “What a misfortune, the pencil must have slipped from my fingers”,⁸³ says Malone, and, in similar fashion, memories come and go in the later prose, they are “there and not there”.

The evocations of Ireland in *Company* have very much this flavour. The voice which “comes to one in the dark”⁸⁴ evokes, in the opening pages, a situation of “A small boy” coming out of “Connolly’s Stores” holding his mother’s hand. Significantly, the boy asks a question about spatial relationships, whether the “blue sky” is “not in reality much more distant than it appears”.⁸⁵ The question relates to the special interest, mentioned by Tuan, which children have “with the remote and the proximate” and their focus on the relationship between the “horizon” and their immediate surroundings at the neglect of “the middle ground”.⁸⁶ The child’s expectant inquiry, however, is cut short by the “cutting retort” of the mother which is “never forgotten”.⁸⁷

Again, abstract spatial relationships and the supposed emotional freight of Irish memories appear alongside each other, but the memories seem weightless, they are as abstract as the spatial question posed by the child so that the imaginative integrity and certainty of the relationship with Ireland is not felt. It is via a careful reading of the relationship between the immediate and the horizon in these later texts that we can reach a better understanding of what is happening in Beckett’s imaginative transactions with his homeland.

Conclusion

In his account of Beckett's experiences of "Dublin and Environs", John Pilling remarks that:

Beckett's short stories on first reading make it seem as if the places in them are simply what they would be in real life, backgrounds against which figures figure. In the heightened reality of the fiction, however, locations that have no option but to stay themselves take on different colourations in becoming something other . . . But, as with the poems, a personal geography, well beyond any putative map references, is at work in them. And Ireland . . . is unwittingly taking part in a complicated game in which Beckett is settling either old or recent scores with his native terrain, largely to its discredit.⁸⁸

While there is clearly an evolution in Beckett's use of Irish topographies whereby the later fiction and drama evokes a more purely imaginative terrain compared to more tangible settings in the early fiction and poetry, Pilling is surely right to insist that the "personal geography" exists from the start. This geography expresses, in various media, at different moments, Beckett's core dilemma, what Peter Boxall calls a "mortal struggle between . . . contradictory conditions", the conflicted sense of "belonging to the world, and . . . being estranged from it."⁸⁹

One should therefore be somewhat wary of the critical paradigm which implies that Beckett moves from violent repudiation of Ireland towards a more serene accommodation in the later prose and drama. Rather, the "contradictory conditions" of this relationship subsisted from the beginning to the end so that Beckett remained "in a strait of two wills"⁹⁰ in relation to Ireland throughout his career. This "strait" finds expression on a number of levels including a repressed Romanticism in respect of landscape and nature and an "estranged" but "obsessive" nostalgia for a country he could never fully discard imaginatively. What the narrator of "Ding-Dong" describes as Belacqua's "little trajectory", the "boomerang, out and back,"⁹¹ surely remained part of his creator's "personal geography," in spite of Beckett's best efforts to disavow its importance.

Notes

¹ John Banville, Comments to the round table discussion, Beckett and the Visual Arts, National Gallery of Ireland, 9 April 2006. Cited by Enoch Brater, "Talk about Landscapes: What There Is to Recognize", *Modern Drama* 49, no. 4 (Winter 2006): 503.

² Emilie Morin, *Samuel Beckett and the Problem of Irishness* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009); Peter Boxall, *Since Beckett: Contemporary Writing in the Wake of Modernism* (London: Continuum, 2009); Seán Kennedy, ed., *Beckett and Ireland* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2010).

³ David Pattie, "Beckett and Obsessional Ireland," in *A Companion to Samuel Beckett*, ed. S.E. Gontarski (Oxford: Blackwell, 2010).

⁴ Seán Kennedy, "'The Beckett Country' Revisited: Beckett, Belonging and Longing," in *Ireland: Space, Text, Time*, eds. Liam Harte, Yvonne Whelan and Patrick Crotty (Dublin: Liffey Press, 2005), 135-144.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 138-140.

⁶ Kennedy links Beckett's self-chosen exile from Ireland with the more general exodus of Irish Southern Protestants from post-Independence Ireland. Comparing "the Beckett country" with "memoirs written by expatriate Irish Protestants who left Ireland after the formation of the Irish Free State," Kennedy suggests that Beckett shared in his fellow Protestants' "unwillingness" to participate in the new "national imaginary" being constructed within the Irish Free State. Thus, Kennedy's essay seeks to establish Beckett's cultural affinity with the "many thousands of Irish Protestants" who experienced a "nostalgia in exile" from a new Ireland to which they felt politically unable to assimilate (Kennedy, "'The Beckett Country' Revisited: Beckett, Belonging and Longing," 136-137).

⁷ Samuel Beckett, *Proust and Three Dialogues with Georges Duthuit* (London: John Calder, 1965), 74.

⁸ Andrew Gibson, "Afterword: Beckett, Ireland and elsewhere," in Kennedy, ed., *Beckett and Ireland*, 192.

⁹ Samuel Beckett, Letter to Thomas MacGreevy, 8 September 1934, in *The Letters of Samuel Beckett Volume 1: 1929-1940*, eds. Martha Dow Fehsenfeld and Lois More Overbeck (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2009), 222.

¹⁰ Samuel Beckett, Letter to Thomas MacGreevy, 14 August 1937, *Letters of Samuel Beckett Volume 1*, 540.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² Samuel Beckett, *Waiting for Godot*, in *The Complete Dramatic Works* (London: Faber and Faber, 1986), 57.

¹³ S.E. Gontarski and C.J. Ackerley, "Introduction," in *The Grove Companion to Samuel Beckett*, ed. S.E. Gontarski and C.J. Ackerley (New York: Grove Press, 2004), xiv.

¹⁴ S.E. Gontarski, *The Intent of Undoing in Samuel Beckett's Dramatic Texts* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1985).

¹⁵ Samuel Beckett, *Endgame*, in *The Complete Dramatic Works*, 117.

¹⁶ Beckett, *Waiting for Godot*, 43.

¹⁷ Frank Mitchell, *The Irish Landscape* (London: William Collins, 1976), 210.

- ¹⁸ Samuel Beckett, *Mercier and Camier* (London: John Calder, 1974), 97-98.
- ¹⁹ Beckett, *Endgame*, 97.
- ²⁰ Beckett, Letter to Thomas MacGreevy, 14 August 1937, *Letters of Samuel Beckett Volume 1*, 540.
- ²¹ Samuel Beckett, *Krapp's Last Tape*, in *The Complete Dramatic Works*, 223.
- ²² Samuel Beckett, Letter to Thomas MacGreevy, 1 January 1935, *Letters of Samuel Beckett Volume 1*, 239.
- ²³ Peter Boxall, *Since Beckett*, 35-36.
- ²⁴ Samuel Beckett, Letter to Thomas MacGreevy, 18 October 1932, *Letters of Samuel Beckett Volume 1*, 136.
- ²⁵ Beckett, *Mercier and Camier*, 3.
- ²⁶ Samuel Beckett, *Malone Dies*, in *Trilogy: Molloy, Malone Dies, The Unnamable* (London: John Calder, 1959), 279.
- ²⁷ *Ibid.*, 218.
- ²⁸ *Ibid.*, 287-288.
- ²⁹ David Lloyd, "The Indigent Sublime: Specters of Irish Hunger," *Representations* 92, no.1 (Fall 2005): 156, italics added.
- ³⁰ *Ibid.*
- ³¹ *Ibid.*
- ³² Beckett, *Mercier and Camier*, 98.
- ³³ Tim Robinson, *Connemara: Listening to the Wind* (Dublin: Penguin, 2006), 68.
- ³⁴ Samuel Beckett, Letter to Thomas MacGreevy, 8 October 1932, *Letters of Samuel Beckett Volume 1*, 127.
- ³⁵ Beckett, *Endgame*, 109-110.
- ³⁶ Beckett, *Waiting for Godot*, 43.
- ³⁷ Beckett, *Proust and Three Dialogues*, 65.
- ³⁸ Paul Davies, "Strange Weather: Beckett from the Perspective of Ecocriticism," in *Beckett after Beckett*, eds. S.E. Gontarski and Anthony Uhlmann (Gainesville: Florida UP, 2006), 66-78; Mary Bryden, ed., *Beckett and Animals* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2013).
- ³⁹ Beckett, *Endgame*, 118.
- ⁴⁰ Chris Ackeley, "Inorganic Form: Samuel Beckett's Nature," *AUMLA: Journal of the Australasian Universities Modern Language Association* 104 (November 2005): 82.
- ⁴¹ Samuel Beckett, *Watt* (London: John Calder, 1976), 37.
- ⁴² *Ibid.*, 45-46.
- ⁴³ *Ibid.*, 46.
- ⁴⁴ Samuel Beckett, Letter to Georges Duthuit, 1 June 1949, trans. George Craig, in *The Letters of Samuel Beckett Volume II: 1941-1956*, eds. George Craig, Martha Dow Fehsenfeld, Dan Gunn and Lois More Overbeck (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2011), 162.
- ⁴⁵ Samuel Beckett, Letter to Robert Pinget, 8 March 1956, trans. George Craig, in *The Letters of Samuel Beckett Volume II: 1941-1956*, 605.
- ⁴⁶ Samuel Beckett, Letter to Pamela Mitchell, 13 March 1955, in *The Letters of Samuel Beckett Volume II: 1941-1956*, 531.
- ⁴⁷ Ackerley, "Inorganic Form", 86.