Samuel Beckett’s oeuvre is replete with references to stone, which mythologically supports his characters’ struggle for the sacred. Mircea Eliade maintains, indeed, that a stone’s ability to resist time displays for primitive man “an absolute mode of being”, a mode that the old woman in Ill Seen seeks by striving for permanence in the midst of an identity – i.e., a narrative – in flux. Beckett establishes this struggle in his earliest fiction and soberly reinforces it in Ill Seen where the archetypal image of stone engenders an aporetic text that displays the presence of language and, ultimately, of being.

Perfection is not of this world. It is something different, it comes from somewhere else.
(Mircea Eliade)

That Samuel Beckett’s texts are laden with references to stone should come as no surprise given his self-confessed ‘love’ for certain stones as a child in Foxrock where the distant tinkle of stone-cutters in the adjacent hills would have been all too familiar. Stony sites as ancient as the cromlech at Glen Druid must have made a deep impact on so sensitive and impressionable a youth as Beckett, who once recounted how he would take particular stones home from the beach in order to protect them from the inclemency of the weather and lay them down in the protective bosom of tree branches to keep them safe from harm (Knowlson, 29). Later in his life, of course, he would link his enduring fascination with stones to Freud’s theory, outlined for the first time in his revisionist Beyond the Pleasure Principle of 1920, of the death instinct, that is, Freud’s notion that human beings have an “instinct to return to the inanimate state” (46) in order to restore an ear-
lier state of things. As early as 1937, in a letter to Thomas MacGreevy dated 14 August, Beckett praised the painting of Watteau for its depiction of people who are ‘mineral’.

In the psychoanalytic tradition, Beckett also connected stone with the unconscious mind, rather reminiscent of Gottfried Benn’s “The Structure of the Personality”, an essay that appeared in the momentous 21st issue of transition and outlined a geology of the self while taking into account recent advances in neuro-psychology, and, in fact, a table of geological periods appears in Beckett’s Whoroscope Notebook. In the early drafts of Watt, the stated intent is ‘autospelioLOGY’, the desire to plummet “deep down in those palaeozoic profounds, midst mammoth Old Red Sandstone phalli and Carboniferous pudenda . . .” (qtd. in Ackerley, 179). James Knowlson even acknowledges that in Beckett’s later work, “there is an obsession with decay and with petrification, with stone and with bone” (29).

There are simply too many references to stone in Beckett’s oeuvre to list and explore within the parameters of this essay, but the more representative examples range from seemingly frivolous episodes to sustained narratives of profound mythological import. One of the more outwardly humorous episodes, though still mythologically poignant, occurs when Lady McCann hurls a stone at Watt’s head for no discernable reason, thereby causing his hat to fall on the ground:

Here, faithful to the spirit of her cavalier ascendants, she picked up a stone and threw it, with all her might, which, when she was roused, was not negligible, at Watt [. . .] for the stone fell on Watt’s hat and struck it from his head, to the ground. This was indeed a providential escape, for had the stone fallen on an ear, or on the back of the neck, as it might so easily have done, as it so nearly did, why then a wound had perhaps been opened, never again to close, never, never again to close, for Watt had a poor healing skin [. . .]

(32)

This scene foreshadows an event in “The End” where the narrator suffers a similar unfortunate experience: “The little boys jeered and threw stones, but their aim was poor, for they only hit me once, on the hat” (88). As Mircea Eliade, an historian of religion and myth, ex-