INTRODUCTION TO “HISTORICISING BECKETT”

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The essays collected here constitute a selection of the papers delivered on the subject of “Historicising Beckett” at the annual conference of the International Association for the Study of Irish Literatures (IASIL), which was held at the National University of Ireland, Galway in July 2004. We are grateful to the organisers for allowing us to participate in a highly memorable conference, and we are also grateful for an opportunity to publish a selection of the proceedings here.

The overwhelming response to the initial call for papers may be taken as one indication of a growing sense of unease among scholars regarding the consensus that Beckett was a profoundly ahistorical writer. All too often, Beckett is read as an artist from nowhere, one whose imagination functioned outside history, and there is evidence of an implicit consensus that Beckett scholars would do better to focus their efforts on his complex relationship with a European philosophical and/or literary tradition. The counter-claim made here is that Beckett’s writings do not function outside history, although, as S.E. Gontarski indicated many years ago, they do incorporate an “intent of undoing” to make them appear as though they might. Gontarski shows how Beckett painstakingly excised social and cultural determinants from successive drafts of his dramatic works in order to achieve the austere semblance of deracinated aesthetic.

It seems that Beckett consistently devalued content in favour of form as he revised his work, and this has meant that the social content of Beckett’s writings is often viewed as an entirely ancillary concern. “It is the shape that matters,” as Beckett observed many times to his various directors and interpreters, so it is reasonably claimed that the various deterritorialised readings of Beckett’s texts are only honouring the terms of engagement set by Beckett himself.

The fact that Beckett’s work has been subject to a radical deterritorialisation, then, can be attributed in no small part to his own behaviour. A refusal to be tied down seems to have had the status of a
personal imperative for Beckett even as a young writer, as Lionel Fleming’s recollections of him during the nineteen-thirties suggest:

One never really did know where one would find Sam. Since Trinity he had been vaguely, almost deliberately rootless. He had produced what some of us thought a really brilliant book on Dublin (More Pricks than Kicks) and had then disappeared to Paris, where he was said to be working as a kind of secretary to James Joyce and translating Finnegan’s Wake [sic] into French – or, as some other versions had it, into English. And yet he would suddenly be seen again in Dublin, and when asked why, would answer: “But I live here.” He would turn into the Palace, or more likely, some quieter pub, and drink two pints with one in almost utter silence. Next time, it might be London that one ran across him, and he would still say: “But I live here.”

If Beckett was an elusive figure even at this early stage, then his departure for France and decision to write in French served only to compound the problems faced by anyone trying to place him in terms of national or cultural affiliation. Beckett may well have chosen to write in French because he found it easier to write sans style, but this choice also had the happy effect of obscuring his ongoing, ambivalent and conflicted relationship with his Irish family and the Irish Free State. This distancing effect was one that Beckett compounded later in his self-translations: an early French reader of Malone Meurt, for example, might have been confused by the reference to the Glasnevin cemetery, which a footnote informs us is the “Nom d’un cimetière local très estimé” (168). However, an Irish reader of the English translation, Malone Dies, would not encounter the reference at all. Changes like these suggest that Beckett’s intent of undoing was not only aimed at achieving an aesthetic of lessness: it was also Beckett’s way of situating himself in oblique relation to his own personal and cultural history. The aim of the papers selected below is to render that relationship somewhat less obscure.

To read Beckett texts in historical context is not to suggest that they are somehow reducible to that context, or to make them the inevitable mouthpiece of a given set of social relations. Denis Donoghue is justly skeptical of what he terms the “political turn” in literary criticism and has questioned the integrity of materialist readings