THE FIGURE IN THE LANDSCAPE IN JACK YEATS
AND IN SAMUEL BECKETT

Joanne Shaw

In this essay, I look at the influence of Jack Yeats’s paintings of the 1930s and 40s on Beckett’s Texts for Nothing written in the 50s. I examine how Beckett’s perception of Yeats’s portrayals of figures in the urban and rural landscape resonates with Beckett’s own portrayals.

Dans cet essai, je vérifie l’influence qu’ont pu exercer les tableaux de Jack Yeats (des années 1930 et ’40) sur les Textes pour rien que Beckett a écrits dans les années ’50. J’examine comment Beckett perçoit les portraits de figures que Yeats place dans le paysage urbain et rural et dans quelle mesure ils trouvent un écho dans les portraits qu’élabore l’auteur.

As James Knowlson pointed out in Damned to Fame, Beckett was keenly interested in paintings and painters. Now that the first two volumes of Beckett’s letters are published, especially through the letters written between 1930 and 1937 to his friend Thomas McGreevy, we can follow Beckett’s thoughts on art. In his studies of the Romantics such as John Constable and J. M. W. Turner, Beckett understood the landscape to be portrayed as interacting with humanity, either to protect or destroy it. As he writes to McGreevy, for Constable, “the landscapes shelters or threatens or serves or destroys, his nature is really infected with ‘spirit’, ultimately as humanised & romantic as Turner’s was” (SB to TM, 14 Aug. 1937; 2009, 540). In contrast, in Beckett’s studies of the paintings of the Expressionists such as Edvard Munch and Emil Nolde, he understood the landscape to be expressing the same emotions as the humans in it. However, he admired Paul Cézanne for portraying a landscape which was separate from humanity: “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” (SB to TM, 8 Sept. 1934; 2009, 222). For Beckett, he conveyed a landscape that was not concerned with humanity and a humanity that could not have any affinity with landscape. Rather than this being a
negative concept, Beckett saw it as an affirmation of a truth that he felt himself. As he writes to McGreevy a few days later, “I do not see any possibility of relationships, friendly or unfriendly, with the unintelligible” (SB to TM, Sunday [16 Sept. 1934]; 2009, 227). Also, he writes: “What a relief the Monte Ste. Victoire after all the anthropomorphised landscape […]], after all the landscape promoted to the emotions of the hiker, postulated as concerned with the hiker” (SB to TM, 8 Sept. 1934; 2009, 222). Further, in the same letter, as well as applauding the fact that Cézanne sees no emotional connection between landscape and human, Beckett approves of his depiction of a landscape that is itself insensitive, completely lifeless, stonelike, an “atomistic landscape with no velleities of vitalism”.

Yeats’s and Beckett’s Two Solitudes: Landscapes and Figures Unrelated
Beckett’s relationship with Jack B. Yeats’s landscapes and figures was a more personal one than his relationship with Cézanne’s. Beckett met Jack Yeats in 1930 (introduced by McGreevy), visited him regularly throughout the 1930s and 40s and greatly admired his paintings, even buying A Morning (1935-1936), Corner Boys (1910) and Regatta Evening (1944). In a letter to McGreevy dated 3 February 1931, Beckett writes: “Last Saturday I went with Pelorson to see Jack Yeats. He was alone and we had two delightful hours looking at a lot of pictures we had not seen and talking” (2009, 65).

What Beckett admired in Jack Yeats’s paintings of the 1930s and 40s was the juxtaposition, not the linkage, of landscape and figures – that his figures were totally isolated from each other and from nature, and the landscape was impersonal and indifferent to the creatures in it, “a painting of pure inorganic juxtapositions, where nothing can be taken or given & there is no possibility of change or exchange” (SB to TM, 14 Aug. 1937; 2009, 540; see also Oppenheim, 112). This reflected Beckett’s own feelings and, as I hope to show, influenced, or at least was inherent to, his treatment of Textes pour rien, the thirteen prose fragments written in French in the early 1950s and translated into English by Beckett as Texts for Nothing. I want to examine how Beckett’s perception of Yeats’s portrayals resonates with Beckett’s portrayals of his own characters in their landscapes. I am using the term ‘landscape’ to describe the settings or environments Beckett places his characters in because I think Beckett ‘saw’ their surroundings in a visual way akin to that of a visual artist, even though he depicted his scenes through