
“Idle Talk, Idle Talk, Idle Talk’: Samuel Beckett, Anglo-Ireland, and Heideggerian Thought”

Graham Price

NUI Maynooth, Ireland

Copyright (c) 2021 by Graham Price. This text may be archived and redistributed both in electronic form and in hard copy, provided that the author and journal are properly cited and no fee is charged for access.

Abstract. This essay analyses Samuel Beckett’s *Trilogy* and *Waiting for Godot* through the enabling theoretical lens of Martin Heidegger’s *Being and Time*. Special attention shall be paid to key Heideggerian concepts: idle talk, authenticity, and inauthenticity. A Heideggerian reading of Beckett’s influential middle period allows for a rich exploration of how his works provide a vision of the psychological state of the formerly powerful Anglo-Irish in post-independence Ireland. A Beckettian reading of Heidegger demonstrates how Heideggerian thought has been at the forefront of elucidating key challenges posed in the Twentieth Century concerning ways of being-in-the-world and being-with-others that allows for the authenticity of individual subjectivities.

Key Words. Beckett, Heidegger, Irish literature, continental philosophy, Irish drama, Irish history, Anglo-Irish, psychoanalysis.

Resumen. Este ensayo analiza la *Trilogía* de Samuel Beckett y *Esperando a Godot* a través de la lente teórica habilitadora incluida en *Ser y Tiempo* de Martin Heidegger. Se analizan especialmente los conceptos clave Heideggerianos: charla ociosa, autenticidad e inautenticidad. Una lectura heideggeriana del influyente período medio de Beckett permite una rica exploración de cómo sus obras proporcionan una visión del estado psicológico de los poderosos angloirlandeses en la Irlanda posterior a la independencia. Una lectura Beckettiana de Heidegger demuestra cómo ha estado el pensamiento heideggeriano en la vanguardia, al elucidar los desafíos clave planteados en el siglo XX con respecto a las formas de estar-en-el-mundo y estar-con-otros que permite la autenticidad de las subjetividades individuales.

Palabras clave. Beckett, Heidegger, literatura irlandesa, filosofía continental, teatro irlandés, historia irlandesa, lo anglo-irlandés, psicoanálisis.

Beckettian/Heideggerian/Anglo-Irish

This article proposes an examination of the English language versions of Beckett's prose *Trilogy* (*Molloy*, *Malone Dies*, and *The Unnamable* (1958)) and his towering dramatic achievement, *Waiting for Godot* (1953), through the lens of Martin Heidegger's seminal philosophical work, *Being and Time* (1926). It is necessary to emphasise that it is the English translations, rather than the original French texts, that shall be the primary concern of this essay because of the creative nature inherent in Beckett's translation of his work from French into English. As Paul Auster asserts: "Beckett's renderings of his own work are never literal, word-by-word transcriptions. They are free, highly-inventive adaptations of the original text – or, perhaps more accurately, 'repatriations' from one language to the other, from one culture to the other. In effect, he wrote every book twice, and each version bears its own indelible mark" (Auster vi). It shall be argued that through a consideration of these specific Beckettian texts in relation to Heidegger's conceptions of being in the world (*Dasein*), and his ideas concerning the authentic and the inauthentic, a greater appreciation of how Beckett's works illustrate the tragedy that befell the first generation of Anglo-Irish men and women in post-independence Ireland can be attained. Several works by W.B. Yeats – the artist that John McGahern credits with inventing the "Anglo-Irish identity" (McGahern 22) – shall also be considered as important precursors to Beckett's stark depictions of the Anglo-Irish people's growing estrangement from the Free State and then the Republic that Ireland became in the period from 1922 until 1948. As Ivan Nyusztay highlights in his Heideggerian reading of Beckett's *Happy Days* (1961): "While a Heideggerian reading of Beckett helps to trace the development of authentic being [in Beckett's work], a Beckettian reading of Heidegger may help to see the delight (absurdly) accompanying it" (Nyusztay 112). It shall be argued that a key message in both early Heideggerian thought – encapsulated in *Being and Time* – and in Beckett's *Trilogy* and *Waiting and Godot*, is to be found in the following passage from *The Unnamable*: "He who longs to have lived, while he was alive, let him be reassured, life will tell him how" (Beckett, *Trilogy* 347). Beckett's interest in European philosophical trends is illustrated in his posthumously published Philosophical notebooks, which accounts for why many of his texts, especially the *Trilogy*, are in essence philosophy made literary. Although focussing on primarily on literary Ireland and (Anglo-)Irish writers, this article shall demonstrate how writers such as Beckett and W.B. Yeats can be read as giving voice to that general sense of disconnection and disinheritance that permeates the Western imagination in the 20th century. The powerlessness that is felt by the Anglo-Irish community in post-independence Ireland is something to which the modern individual in war torn countries such as Germany can relate.

Beckett's texts can be characterised by a consistent attempt on his part to work through various emotional and psychological traumas, some of which are associated with his Anglo-Irish upbringing and that group's less than elevated status in post 1922/Free State Ireland. According to Beckett, the experience of trauma is linked with various factors that transcend the purely private and personal: "And that fear is truly completely incomprehensible, for its causes lie in the depths of the past, and not just in the past of the individual [...] but the family, the race, the nation, human being and nature itself" (Beckett, "Clare" 112). Beckett's tortured mental state – for which he sought help in 1933 from the eminent therapist Wilfred Bion in England – was at least partly impacted upon by the psychological pain and feelings of powerlessness experienced by the Anglo-Irish as a result of living in the foreign land that – for many of them – constituted (rightly or wrongly) Free State Ireland.

Heidegger wrote *Being and Time* during the period of German history known as the Weimar Republic; a time when the German people were experiencing a crisis in identity and self-esteem following their defeat in World War 1 and the humiliations that were visited upon them by the Versailles peace agreement (1919). This is a situation that is comparable to that

psychological state which existed for the Anglo-Irish following the creation of the Irish Free State in 1922.

The *Trilogy* and *Waiting for Godot* share many of the Heideggerian preoccupations and concerns. Indeed, these texts often repeat themes, observations, and linguistic constructions: A movement that Freud associates with the repetition compulsion in which one engages when they are trying to come to terms with certain traumas and traumatic events (Caruth 64). As Jennifer Jeffers argues in relation to the connections between the prose of the *Trilogy* and the theatrical textuality of *Waiting for Godot*:

The simultaneous composition of prose and drama [in the years immediately following World War 2] accounts for some of the repetition between the novels and the play [...] It is easy to see that Beckett desired a physicality of body in actual space after driving the novel into a representational void [...] Moving from page to stage exorcises in physical space with corporeal figures the traumatic experiences that Beckett was enfolded in his prose. (Jeffers 95)

The traumatic experiences that are literally or symbolically referenced in these works, this article shall argue, concern the experience of being part of the hyphenated group named the Anglo-Irish, in the early years of the Irish Republic. As shall be discussed in greater detail anon, Heidegger regards repetition with a difference as being one important way through which individual Daseins can experience authentic temporality in both life and literature. In writing *Being and Time*, Heidegger undertakes a partial critique of Rene Descartes' famous philosophical aphorism: "I think therefore I am". According to Heidegger, Descartes presupposed a stable subject whose consciousness and perception controls the world around him, independent of the power of external reality that being in the world and being with others exerts on all *Daseins* (Heidegger's term for human existents as well as the term he uses for the state of being in and of itself). Similarly, Hugh Kenner argues that Beckett's *Trilogy* is structured around a deconstruction of Cartesian logic: "Kenner argues "that the trilogy carries the Cartesian epistemological process backwards, beginning with a bodily *je suis* – represented by the factual recollections of Molloy – and ending with a bare *cogito*" (Imhof 23). The *Trilogy* begins with the ultra-embodied Molloy and ends with the interiority of the unnamed narrator who has been driven entirely inward into his own narrow shell of self. Following the logic of this argument, The *Trilogy* critiques Descartes' ignoring of being-in-the-world/being with others as an important focus of metaphysical thought. In his examination of the fate of subjectivity in Beckett's *Trilogy*, Derek Hand sounds a distinctly Heideggerian note in his analysis: "In negating the self, Beckett compels us to recognise, to re-know and remember, what it is to be human, what it is *to be* [my italics]" (207).

Although they may often seem surreal and disconnected from any form of stable reality, Beckett's characters are very much invested in the question of what it means to *be* in a world. As Rudiger Imhof states: "Beckett's characters are rationalists, strange as it may sound. They are rationalists who, in their mania to know and fathom everything, are constantly reasoning, discussing, and analysing" (19). This argument illuminates how Beckettian characters are extremely preoccupied with the question of *being* and all the implications associated with that state. This is particularly true in relation to Beckett's prose works after *Watt* because the third person, quasi-objective narration of those earlier texts have been replaced by first person narrative voices who rely on their world and its linguistic structures to tell their stories and make sense of their existence as Daseins thrown into being-in-the-world and being-with-others.

Conceptions of the "authentic" and the "inauthentic" are very important to Heidegger's theorising of various forms of being-in-the world. Dermot Moran has written succinctly on what authenticity and inauthenticity means to Heidegger:

Authentic moments are those in which we are most at home with ourselves, at one with ourselves. I may initiate or take up possibilities as my own; I have a deep, concrete experience of “mineness” or “togetherness”. However, in our more usual, normal, everyday, moments, we do not treat things as affecting us deeply in our “ownmost” being. Heidegger thinks we live in an inauthentic way most of the time. (239-40)

According to Heidegger, authenticity is a “modified way of seizing everydayness” (224) and it shall be argued in this essay that Beckett also conceives – within his texts – of subjectivity as being primarily inauthentic but also allows for fleeting moments of authentic being-in-the-world for his characters, something that Anglo-Irish people also desired for themselves in the new Ireland of independence. Yeats was to memorably encapsulate the dilemma connected with trying to differentiate between authentic subject-hood and an inauthentic performance of subjectivity: “How can we know the dancer from the dance?” (Yeats, “Among” 153).

One key distinction between Beckett’s and Heidegger’s conception of being-in-the-world concerns Heidegger’s privileging of humanity as the only possible form of *Dasein* because, according to Heidegger, only humans possess the gift of language and thought: Therefore, they are the only form of life that can think or ask the question “what is it to be”?:

Dasein is an entity which does not just occur among other entities. Rather it is ontically distinguished by the fact that, in its very Being, that being is an issue for it. But in that case, this is a constitutive state of *Dasein*’s Being, and this implies that *Dasein*, in its Being, has a relationship towards that Being – a relationship which is itself one of Being. And this means further that there is some way in which *Dasein* understands itself in its Being, and that to some degree it does so explicitly. It is peculiar to this entity that with and through it’s Being, this being is disclosed to it. Understanding of Being is itself a definite characteristic of *Dasein*’s Being. *Dasein* is ontically distinctive in that it is ontological. (32)

For Heidegger, humans can *be*, others entities can only *exist*: Just as only human beings can *die*, whilst all other forms of life merely *perish*.

In contrast, Beckett’s writing concerns itself with the similarities and possible forms of alliance between human, non-human, and post-human forms of being. This is apparent in Malone’s description of his bees’ method of being-in-the-world: “The purpose of the hum is not to emphasise the dance, but on the contrary to vary it. And the same figure exactly differs in meaning according to the hum that goes with it. And I had collected and classified a great number of observations on this subject, with gratifying results” (Beckett, *Three* 169). The “dance” of the bees represents a version of being-in-the-world that transcends merely existing by virtue of its being a version of a language of communication and meaning. Earlier in *Molloy*, the titular character refers to his taking on the role and purpose of a dog as a favour to its bereaved owner: “I would as it were take the place of the dog I had killed, as it for her has taken the place of a child” (Beckett, *Three* 46). This quote emphasises the interchangeability of human and non-human subjectivities that suggests the potential for the conception of a post-human identity. One could argue that Beckett’s anti-humanism is derived from his experience of identity crisis as an Anglo-Irishman in post-independence Ireland: A crisis that can be regarded as being more about internal feelings of lack of belonging than about any actual differences between Irish and Anglo-Irish, or Protestant and Catholic.

L.P. Curtis goes so far as to argue that the foundation of the Irish State represented a major crisis for the Anglo-Irish in Ireland: “Perhaps the most significant change which came over the Anglo-Irish society during and after the Great War was a growing uneasiness about its

identity and place in society. During these years a number of Anglo-Irishmen seemed to have discovered for the first time that their Irishness was being called into question” (Curtis 46). This growing uneasiness is originating as much from the collective, internal Anglo-Irish consciousness as it is from any external political or social events in Ireland at that time.

Heidegger’s description of being-in-the-world as that of an essentially “thrown” state also has great resonances with how the Anglo-Irish felt following Ireland’s attainment of independence from Britain in 1922: “[Dasein] exists fallingly as something that has been thrown. Abandoned to the “world” which is discovered with its factual “there”, and concernfully submitted to it” (Heidegger 465). In Yeats’ 1938 poem, “The Statues”, an image is created of the tragedy of Irishness that is even more appropriate when applied to the post-independence fate of the Anglo-Irish race and which anticipates Heidegger’s theorising of the “thrownness” of Dasein: “We Irish, born into that ancient sect/But thrown upon this filthy modern tide/And by its formless, spawning, fury wrecked/Climb to our proper dark, that we may trace/The lineaments of a plummet-measured face” (Yeats, “Statues” 215). These lines give the impression of a particular group of people whose ultimate goal is to create an authentic identity for themselves that will be grounded in both abstract and physical states of being. Such a goal, as we shall see, is one that many a Beckettian character will seek to achieve in their textual contexts. It is arguable that Yeats’ distrust of the modern world as a wholesome and hospitable place for those who feel a more spiritual link to another time or place might be one of the reasons for Beckett’s affinity with this fellow Anglo-Irish author since that same feeling of alienation from being in the world and being with others is equally present in Beckett’s artistic oeuvre as it is in Yeats’. Molloy’s relationship with his external existence also replicates the Yeatsian and Heideggerian sense of being “thrown” or “flung”:

And without going so far as to say that I saw the world upside down (that would have been too easy) it is certain I saw it in a way inordinately formal, though I was far from being an aesthete, or an artist. And of my two eyes only one functioning more or less correctly, I misjudged the distance separating me from the other world, and often I stretched out my hand for what was beyond my reach. (Beckett, *Three* 50)

These lines uncannily replicate Heidegger’s argument that being-in-the-world entails every Dasein bringing people and things either closer or keeping them at a distance because of the fact that we inhabit space with others concretely as opposed to abstractly (Heidegger 136). From the opening lines of Beckett’s first published novel, *Murphy* (1938), we are given a picture of a formally constructed world of deadening habit that is a feature of Beckett’s entire literary oeuvre: “The sun shone, having no alternative, on the nothing new” (Beckett, *Murphy* 3). From *Murphy* onwards, Beckett’s prose works are inhabited by entities that are at the mercy of the “closed systems” of these Heidegger-inflected worlds in which they must attempt to negotiate temporary moments of authentic being-in-the-world for themselves.

Heidegger’s considerably modern conception of the self as being always already “other” (Heidegger 155) is particularly apt when considering the Anglo-Irish community’s problematic relationship with both Ireland and England. As Vivian Mercier observes: “The typical Anglo-Irish boy [...] learns that he is not quite Irish almost before he can talk; later he learns that he is far from being English either” (Mercier 26). Thus, the Anglo-Irish are forced to live in a state of permanent aporia: A form of existence that the unnamed/unnameable narrator in *The Unnamable* refers to as being the only way through which humanity as a whole can proceed in any structured or coherent sense of being (Beckett, *Three* 291).

This contradictory mode of living is also a problem that Molloy experiences during his everyday existence: “For in me there have always been two fools, among others, one asking nothing better than to stay where he is and the other imagining that life might be slightly less

horrible further on” (Beckett, *Three* 48). It is fair to contend that Beckett departs from Heidegger’s conception of intersubjectivity in that Beckett narrates the self in the process of “becoming” other – which is what is happening for Malone throughout the second half of *Molloy* – rather than totally conforming to Heidegger’s conception of the self as being always already totally other. However, it is important to acknowledge that both Heidegger and Beckett see being-in-world as always co-existing with being-with-others, which necessitates a rethinking of stable notions of selfhood because of one’s permanent contact with others.

One famous biographical incident, partially retold in *Krapp’s Last Tape*, illustrates the importance of Beckett’s Irish home and his Anglo-Irish background to the development of his literary aesthetics: In 1945, following World War 2, Beckett returned to Ireland to visit his mother. During this visit, he had his famous “revelation” – which he made clear to James Knowlson had occurred in his mother’s bedroom – that from henceforth he must only write in “impoverishment, in lack of knowledge and in taking away, in subtracting rather than adding” (Knowlson 352). By returning to his native home, Beckett re-experienced the characteristically modern sense of isolation and homelessness that was also the shared experience of many Anglo-Irelanders in the then Irish Free State. He realised that this negative sense of being-in-the-world was what he must communicate in his literary works from then on. The first two major works that Beckett wrote in the aftermath of this moment of epiphany were the *Trilogy* and *Waiting for Godot*.

Wasting Time in Idle Discourse

One symbol of Beckett’s alienation, and the Anglo-Irish more generally, from the rest of Ireland is the spectre of the Irish language, with which neither felt no great sense of kinship. As Molloy famously asserts: “Tears and laughter, they are so much Gaelic to me” (*T*, 36). In *Waiting for Godot*, Estragon expresses his affiliation with English forms of language which marks him out as being in possession of an Anglo-Irish sensibility: “Calm ... calm ... The English say cawm” (Beckett, *Waiting*, 17).

In *All That Fall*, Mrs Rooney, in conversation with her husband, links the Irish language with other forms of linguistic instability and finitude:

MR ROONEY: Never Pause ... safe to heaven Do you know, Maddy, sometimes one would think you were struggling with a dead language.

[...]

MRS ROONEY: Well, you know, it will be dead in time, just like our own poor dear Gaelic, there is that to be said. (Beckett, *All* 194)

Both Beckett and Heidegger view language as an unstable guarantor of the world as a known and knowable, but also that because one’s relationship with the world depends on one’s relationship with a received vocabulary.

Heidegger’s understanding of average, everyday language is encapsulated in the concept which he refers to as “idle talk”:

The expression “idle talk” [“Gerede”] is not to be used here in a “disparaging” signification. Terminologically, it signifies a positive phenomenon which constitutes the kind of Being of everyday Dasein’s understanding and interpreting. For the most part, discourse is expressed by being spoken out, and has always been so expressed; it is language. But in that case understanding and interpretation already lie in what has thus been expressed. (211)

In essence, Heidegger defines idle talk as language that fundamentally assumes that everything it signifies is already known, understood, and accepted.

The following are two examples of idle talk in Beckett, one from *Waiting for Godot* and one from *Happy Days*:

ESTRAGON: What am I to say?

VLADIMIR: Say, I am happy.

ESTRAGON: I am happy.

VLADIMIR: So am I.

ESTRAGON: So am I.

VLADIMIR: We are happy.

ESTRAGON: We are happy. (*Silence.*) What do we do now, now that we are happy? (Beckett, *Waiting* 56).

WINNIE: Oh this is a happy day, this will have been another happy day. (Beckett, *Happy* 168)

In both of these examples, the words – as spoken by the characters often in a somewhat mechanical tone of voice – express a reality that is not questioned or examined by the characters onstage but one of which the audience have a right to be suspicious. Idle talk might assume the truth, knownness, and authenticity of what it expresses, but that certainly does not mean that it is infallible or must be accepted by its hearers. Living in a world of Heideggerian idle talk also means that, as Estragon says, you spend your days rather meaninglessly “blathering about nothing in particular” (Beckett, *Waiting*, 61).

In a more negative vein than Heidegger, one to which Beckett certainly subscribes, Michael Gelven defines Heideggerian idle talk as the signifier of an inauthentic, always already prescribed world and of being in that world:

Idle talk also refers to those who constantly present a great number of facts and statistics as substitute for rational inquiry, as if through some magic a more exact statistical rendering of what is an obvious fact will somehow generate of itself an understanding of what the problem is or what ought to be done [...] It is the manner in which the inauthentic they-self articulates its subtle smoke screens, which hide the genuine skill of language to expose the workings of what it means to be. (107)

In Yeats’ “Easter 1916”, the opening stanza paints a picture of what living in a world dominated by communication via idle talk is like: “I have passed with a nod of the head/Or polite meaningless words/Or have a lingered awhile and said/Polite meaningless words” (Yeats, “Easter” 119) . Like the characters in *Waiting for Godot*, this poetic voice seems to waste much of his time “in idle discourse!” (Beckett, *Waiting* 74). Unlike Yeats’ polite meaningless words, however, Heideggerian and Beckettian discourse is often regarded by them as being super-saturated with meaning, to the extent that nuance and multiplicity of interpretations are often denied entry.

In *The Unnamable*, the unnamed narrator describes his existence as one that is forever consumed by “Idle talk, idle talk, [and] idle talk” (Beckett, *Three* 314). Thus, it is apparent from these examples that Anglo-Irish writers in the years preceding and succeeding Ireland’s independence view their relationship with language through a prism that can now be termed Heideggerian. Their sense of alienation from the new and emerging Ireland is made intelligible through their sense of detachment from the linguistic constructions through which the world is made known and knowable. One could argue that, by repeating the words “idle talk” three

times, Beckett is proposing that, in order for authenticity to be linguistically and physically constituted, a middle ground of synthesis must be found between the thesis of the inauthentic, public world of being and the antithesis of the private existence through which authenticity can originate. This aspiration, according to Beckett's texts, is one that is extremely difficult to realise in an existence that is characterised by average everydayness and the prevalence of idle talk.

In "Tal Coat", Beckett encapsulates the predicament inherent in living in a world that is capable of being mediated through idle talk: "The expression that there is nothing to express, nothing with which to express, nothing from which to express, no power to express, no desire to express, together with the obligation to express" (Beckett, "Tal" 103). As Estragon and Vladimir agree from the very outset of *Waiting for Godot*, there truly is: "Nothing to be done" (Beckett, *Waiting* 11).

Language must express the world and make it knowable: Yet, when the world and linguistic tools used to signify it are always already known and understood, then we have reached an end of history where living and talking have lost the sense of possibility for encountering the new and the idea of progress via doing new things is evacuated. This sense of weariness is appropriate for an Anglo-Irish vision of being-in-the-world when that space is one from which they feel alienated, despite the fact that the world and its linguistic signifiers are supposed to be saturated with an overabundance of recognisable meaning.

In the *Trilogy*, the various narrators, starting with Malloy, express their feelings of being defeated by language because of its inability to express stability or performatively create newness: "Saying is inventing. Wrong, very rightly wrong. You invent nothing, you think you are inventing, you think you are escaping, and all you do is stammer out your lesson, the remnants of a pensum one day got by heart and long forgotten" (Beckett, *Three* 32). The issue here is not that language is meaningless; on the contrary, it is that it is overdetermined by always already existing meaning that does not allow for compromise and re-evaluation.

In *The Unnamable*, the narrator is constantly fighting a losing battle between inauthentically expressing idle talk/discourse and his desire for authentic reticence or silence: "The fact would seem to be, if in my situation one may speak of facts, not only that I shall have to speak of things of which I cannot speak, but also, which is even more interesting, but also that I, which is if possible even more interesting, that I shall have to, I forget, no matter. And at the same time I am obliged to speak. I shall never be silent. Never" (Beckett, *Three* 291). The narrator reveals a further dissatisfaction with speaking when he asserts – as most Anglo-Irish people in the twentieth century and even slightly before would agree – that he can never authentically narrate himself via the linguistic contours currently at his disposal: "All these Murphys, Molloys, and Malones do not fool me. They have made me waste my time, suffer for nothing, speak of them when, in order to stop speaking, I should have spoken of me and me alone" (Beckett, *Three* 303). The sense of having to rely on an alien discourse in order to know his own identity and story is made clear in the following lines: "What puzzles me is the thought of being indebted for this information to persons with whom I can never have been in contact" (Beckett, *Three* 297). For the unnameable narrator, information is mediated to him via a foreign, unknown, and probably unknowable entity. As a result, he never seems to be able to authentically speak of himself as a viable subject: 'I shall not say I again, ever again, it's too farcical' (Beckett, *Three* 355). This feeling of having one's life story being told both by and for an other – a predicament with which the narrator in *How It Is* (1961 and 1964) is also confronted – can be said to be that which was faced by the Anglo-Irish in an Irish Republic that no longer valued its identity or history.

In *Waiting for Godot*, the character of Lucky provides his audience with a virtuoso performance of idle talk that pushes this form of communication to its limits in a style of *reductio ad absurdum*:

Beckett, can be regarded as quintessentially connected to the general feelings of trauma and placelessness that occurred in various places and peoples throughout the Twentieth Century.

In Simon Critchley's 18 part podcast, "Apply-Degger: Heidegger's Thinking in *Being and Time*" (serialised on YouTube during the 2020 Coronavirus lockdown), Critchley describes *Waiting for Godot* as existing in an inauthentic temporality and a non-rapturous present as a result of the lack of connection between the play's present time and the past that preceded the dramatic moments that occur onstage. Heidegger's description of an inauthentic temporality that consists of constantly awaiting an inauthentic future (Heidegger 387) can also be said to encapsulate the two acts of *Waiting for Godot*. In terms of his representation of inauthentic and non-progressive time, Beckett may have gained inspiration from Yeats' late play *Purgatory* (1938) in which the decline of an Anglo-Irish family and Big House is dramatised in the context of a circular, repetitious temporality which allows for little hope of renewal or redemption: As is also the case with the "accursed time" in *Waiting for Godot*.

Declan Kiberd's reading of *Waiting for Godot* links history, forgetting, and habit together as equally important driving forces for the style and events occurring in the play: "On the stage of *Waiting for Godot* is enacted the amnesia which afflicts an uprooted people [...] Such lost souls can, paradoxically, be as deadened by habit as by forgetfulness [...] As a victim of a history which he does not understand, Gogo must deal with every situation as if it were a wholly new event. In the face of that terror, he enacts [...] the invention of traditions" (Kiberd 539). Although Kiberd does not name the "people" to whom he refers as specifically Anglo-Irish, his reading of the play aligns perfectly with an interpretation of the drama as an allegory for the experience of historical, personal, and temporal dislocation that was experienced by the Anglo-Irish in Ireland post-1922.

Several textual examples of amnesia are available from the script of *Waiting for Godot*:

VLADIMIR: What was it you wanted to know?

ESTRAGON: I've forgotten. (*Chews.*) That's what annoys me. (Beckett, *Waiting* 21)

POZZO: My memory is defective. (Beckett, *Waiting* 38)

ESTRAGON: How long have we been together all the time now?

VLADIMIR: I don't know. Fifty years maybe. (Beckett, *Waiting* 51)

These pieces of evidence emphasise the extent to which the characters in *Waiting for Godot* are passive victims of a tyrannically oppressive history that they cannot remember and therefore are incapable of interpreting or understanding. As a result, their experience of time is one that can be interpreted as one of Heideggerian inauthenticity where they are forced to wait for an inauthentic future that is not of their own making.

The narrator in *The Unnamable* has an equally uncomprehending feeling with regards to the nature of the temporal world in which he finds himself:

It's the end that is the worst, no, it's the beginning that is the worst, then the middle, then the end, in the end it's the end that is the worst, this voice that, I don't know, it's every second that is the worst, it's a chronicle, the seconds pass, one after the other, jerkily, no flow, they don't pass, they arrive, bang, bang, they bang into you, bounce off, fall and never move again. (Beckett, *Three* 395)

In contrast to the Heideggerian view, this narrating voice regards time as being a series of incomprehensible successions as opposed to a holistic entity. As a result, he feels no connection with the temporally-constituted state of being in which he find himself. Again, this echoes the

disorienting feeling experienced by the Anglo-Irish when they found themselves thrown into a “new” Ireland that wished to remove unwanted pasts and traditions from its collective, cultural consciousness.

As Declan Kiberd (quoted above) argues, Beckettian characters are frequently forced to create from nothing new traditions and ways of being for themselves because of their having been separated from their past and having been denied a sense of a coherent and authentic selfhood by the Irish, predominantly Catholic, orthodoxy. This is apparent in two connected moments in *Waiting for Godot* and *The Unnamable* during which similar songs are composed and recited by Vladimir and the unnamed/unnameable narrator in an attempt to express themselves in a style that might even approximate to authenticity: “A dog came in – *Having begun too high he stops, clears his throat, resumes*: A dog came in the kitchen And stole a crust of bread. Then cook up with a ladle And beat him till he was dead. Then all the dogs came running. And dug the dog a tomb – “(Beckett, *Waiting* 53). In *The Unnamable*, almost exactly the same lyrics are delivered: “A dog crawled into the kitchen and stole a crust of bread, then cook up with I’ve forgotten what and walloped him til he was dead” (Beckett, *Three* 379). The fact that the narrator seems to forget what he is meant to be singing implies his unease with the linguistic constructions that are meant to enable his new and authentic voice/self to emerge. In Beckett’s work, the struggle for the realisation of any form of authenticity in the Heideggerian model is never easy because of having to do so in the context of restrictive and limiting forms of language and conceptions of time.

Authentic Anxiety and Being-Toward-Death

A large number of Beckett’s characters achieve moments of authentic selfhood and authentic being-in-the-world/being-with-others as a result of experiencing two important Heideggerian concepts, anxiety and being-towards-death. Heidegger defines an authentic selfhood as a living state that is still inextricably linked to the condition of being always already “thrown” into a world of people and things: “*Authentic Being-one’s-Self* does not rest upon an exceptional condition of the subject, a condition that has been detached from the “they”; it is rather an existential modification of the ‘they’; *it is rather an existential modification of the ‘they’ – of the ‘they’ as an existent existentiale*” (168, emphasis in original). Anxiety and being-towards-death, as they occur in the world of individual Daseins, can enable a unique perception and experience of the world:

Hopelessness, for instance, does not tear Dasein away from its possibilities, but is only one of its own modes of Being towards these possibilities. Even when one is without Illusions and “is ready for anything” [...] here too the “ahead-of-itself” lies hidden [...] It is essential to the basic constitution of Dasein that there is constantly something still to be settled [...] Such a lack of totality signifies that there is something still outstanding in one’s potentiality-for-Being. (Heidegger 279)

Hannah Cloninger’s consideration of what Heidegger’s conception of anxiety means for authentic being-in-the-world highlights a positive as opposed to a negative form of being-anxious-in-the-world: “The anxiety which an individual Dasein experiences cannot be fully echoed or replicated by any other Dasein. Once again, anxiety is of course subject to idle talk, but the fundamentally inauthentic ontical existence of idle talk makes the communication of a fundamentally authentic experience impossible between one Dasein and other Daseins through said medium” (Cloninger 58). Even in a world of idle talk, there can be moments of uniquely authentic experienced emerging from the always already established tools of existence and communication. Being anxious, as a unique experience, is also comparable to being-towards-

death because, according to Heidegger, death is something that can only be experienced as a singular event by individual Daseins: One cannot die for/as another. Crucially, being-towards-death does not mean *being consumed by death*: It is rather a state of being that orientates one towards death as a major part of life and through this orientation we can experience Dasein in a way that allows for individual, somewhat unique, authenticity. Yeats also wrote about the connection between privacy, authenticity, and death when he wrote in his *Autobiographies*: “The knowledge of reality is always in some measure a secret knowledge. It is a kind of death” (Yeats, *Autobiographies* 482).

At the beginning of *Molloy*, the titular character declares: “What I’d like to do now is to speak of things that are left, say my goodbyes, finish dying” (Beckett, *Trilogy* 7). This assertion encapsulates the desire to live in constant awareness of life’s orientation towards death which is a wish that Molloy shares with many other Beckettian characters. Being-towards-death is a state of being that is signalled at the beginning of *Malone Dies*: “I shall soon be quite dead at last in spite of all. Perhaps next month. Then it will be the month of April or of May” (Beckett, *Three* 179). As Simon Critchley argues: “In Heideggerian terms, the voice [in *Malone Dies*] gives itself the possibility of death as possibility on the first page of the text” (Critchley 118). The use of the word “possibility” in this quote correctly highlights that, for Beckett as much as for Heidegger, death is not always an absolute presence, but rather, is something to be acknowledged as permanent “perhaps” for every Dasein’s ongoing average everydayness.

As he approaches what is assumed to be the end of his life, Malone experiences a moment of authentic vision via a memory from his childhood in the Dublin mountains: “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 stonemasons ring all day long like bells” (Beckett, *Three* 286). This moving passage conveys the sense of an individual’s unique relationships with the landscape of his childhood that is achieved through memory prompted by Malone’s being-towards his impending death.

In *Waiting for Godot*, death serves both the comedic and the serious role of bringing authenticity and purpose to the lives of the play’s characters. Vladimir and Estragon flirt with the idea of committing suicide, supposedly because they believe it will provide them with something approaching an experience that is outside the realm of their everyday habits:

ESTRAGON: What about hanging ourselves?

VLADIMIR: Hmm. It'd give us an erection.

ESTRAGON: (*highly excited*). An erection! (Beckett, *Waiting* 18)

In this interaction, being-towards-death is regarded as an option that would provide a certain degree of relief from the sterility of the deadening habits into which Vladimir and Estragon’s lives have fallen. The use of this literal and metaphorical gallows humour also allows for a degree of authentic expression on the part of Vladimir and Estragon that evades the deadening performance of rote words and actions.

The character of Pozzo, one of the most explicitly Anglo-Irish figures in Beckett’s works, experiences an authentically original moment of insight and being-towards-death when he loses his sight and he communicates this blind vision to Vladimir:

POZZO: (*suddenly furious*.) Have you not done tormenting me with your accursed time! It's abominable! When! When! One day, is that not enough for you, one day he went dumb, one day I went blind, one day we'll go deaf, one day we were born, one day we shall die, the same day, the same second, is that not enough for you? (*Calmer*.) They

give birth astride of a grave, the light gleams an instant, then it's night once more. (Beckett, *Waiting* 83)

Although this monologue is very bleak in terms of its metaphysical implications, it does permit Pozzo to feel a degree of “calm”, as the stage directions make clear. According to Heidegger (quoted above), anxiety is as much about feeling calm in the face of being-in-world as it is about feeling worry about the challenges and confusions of Dasein.

After Pozzo exits the stage, it is Vladimir's turn to experience his own authentic epiphany that occurs as a result of his having been-with Pozzo:

VLADIMIR: Was I sleeping, while the others suffered? Am I sleeping now? Tomorrow, when I wake, or think I do, what shall I say of today? That with Estragon my friend, at this place, until the fall of night, I waited for Godot? That Pozzo passed, with his carrier, and that he spoke to us? Probably. But in all that what truth will there be? (*Estragon, having struggled with his boots in vain, is dozing off again. Vladimir looks at him.*) He'll know nothing. He'll tell me about the blows he received and I'll give him a carrot. (*Pause.*) Astride of a grave and a difficult birth. Down in the hole, lingeringly, the grave digger puts on the forceps. We have time to grow old. The air is full of our cries. (*He listens.*) But habit is a great deadener. (*He looks again at Estragon.*) At me too someone is looking, of me too someone is saying, He is sleeping, he knows nothing, let him sleep on. (*Pause.*) I can't go on! (*Pause.*) What have I said? (Beckett, *Waiting* 84-5)

The calming effects of anxiety offer Vladimir a fleeting moment of authentic insight that is also linked to a realisation of his existence being bound up with being-towards-death, even when he is amidst life. Because this moment of authentic subjecthood is achieved via the dramatic medium of soliloquy, it is private and brief: When he concludes this moment of personal contemplation, Vladimir then returns to the world of inauthentic temporality and being-with-others.

Waiting for Godot's closing moment, when Vladimir and Estragon decide to go from the stage and yet do not move, echoes the final lines of *The Unnamable*: “I can't go on, I'll go on” (Beckett, *Three* 414). This state of aporia in which movement and paralysis come together in a dialectical movement encapsulates the conflict with which Vladimir and Estragon are faced and can be regarded as symbolising the dilemma that confronted the Anglo-Irish in post-independence Ireland: Remain in a country that no longer seemed like home, or choose exile as Beckett himself did in 1937.

Maria K. Caruso's reading of the conclusion of Beckett's *Endgame* (1957) – when Clov is undecided about whether he should *go on* and leave Hamm or not – is of definite pertinence to a consideration of the conflict encountered by the two main characters at the end of *Waiting for Godot* and its audience: “The brilliance of this final scene lies in the fact that the audience must make that leap of faith for Clov. With no concern for death because death is inevitable, the audience must choose between an existence of certainty or an existence of possibility” (Caruso 7). *Waiting for Godot* ends with the same question concerning whether or not Vladimir and Estragon are going to decide that they cannot go on or whether they will ultimately take the leap and go on. Invoking the title of Emmanuel Levinas' magnum opus, *Totality and Infinity* (1961), the conclusion of many Beckettian texts give their viewers and readers a choice between the inauthentic totality of not going on, and the authentic infinity of going on. The adjudication upon this undecidable choice is ultimately left to the consumer/producer of the dramatic or theatrical text.

Samuel Beckett's works continue to engage with Heideggerian forms of authenticity and inauthenticity until the end of his prolific artistic career. His last play, *What Where* (1983),

consists entirely of what can be termed idle talk, as its final lines encapsulate: “I am alone/In the present as were I still/It is winter/Without journey/Time passes” (Beckett, *What* 476). The language in this play consists entirely of words and sentences that are used to express and convey superficial information about characters and place without ever seeking to delve into deeper themes or issues. In stark contrast, the play *Breath* ((1969) leaves language behind and focuses its minute duration time on the physical act of taking a breath and visually depicting a scene of detritus and squalor. In this work, Beckettian textuality succeeds in achieving a silent reticence that Heidegger argues for as being important for the achievement of authentic being-in-the-world. By analysing Beckett’s works in light of his Anglo-Irish heritage, and with an awareness of the cultural cache that Heidegger’s work carried during the time Beckett was writing, historical, aesthetic, and philosophical readings of his texts can come together to the mutual benefit and enrichment of these forms of textual engagement and encounter.

Works cited

- Auster, Paul. “Editor’s Note”. *Samuel Beckett, The Grove Centenary Edition. Volume II: Novels*. Ed. Paul Auster. New York, NY: Grove Press, 2006. vi-viii.
- Beckett, Samuel. *All That Fall. The Complete Works*. London: Faber and Faber, 1986a. 169-200.
- _____. Samuel Beckett. *Happy Days. The Complete Works*. London: Faber and Faber, 1986b. 135-68.
- _____. *Murphy*. London: Faber and Faber, 2008.
- _____. *Three Novels*. New York: Grove Press, 1958.
- _____. “Tal Coat”. *Proust & Three Dialogues with Georges Duthuit*. London: Calder & Boyars, repr. 1970. 103.
- _____. “The Clare Street” notebook. Trinity College Dublin. RUL MS 5003.
- _____. *Waiting for Godot. The Complete Works*. London: Faber and Faber, 1986c. 7-88.
- _____. *What Where. The Complete Dramatic Works*. London: Faber and Faber, 1986d. 466-76.
- Caruso, Maria K. “Outside of Here There’s Hope: A Heideggerian Analysis of Beckett’s “Endgame””, *Colonial Academic Alliance Undergraduate Research Journal* 2.8. <https://scholarworks.wm.edu/caaurj/vol2/iss1/8>
- Caruth, Cathy. *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*. Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1996.
- Cloninger, Hannah. “Idle Talk, The ‘They’, Death, and Anxiety as Subjects of Language Necessary to Dasein’s Hermeneutic of the Self,” *Explorations | Humanities*. <https://uncw.edu/csurf/explorations/documents/hannahcloninger.pdf>
- Critchley, Simon. “Apply-Degger: Heidegger’s Thinking in *Being and Time*” episode 17. (2020). <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VEkllaM11Pw>.
- _____. “Who Speaks in the Work of Samuel Beckett?”. *Yale French Studies* 1998: 93, The Place of Maurice Blanchot (1998): 114-30.
- Curtis, L.P. Jr. “The Anglo-Irish Predicament”. *20th Century Studies* 4 (1970): 37-63.
- Gelven, Michael. *A Commentary on Heidegger’s Being and Time*. New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, Inc, 1970.
- Hand, Derek. *A History of the Irish Novel*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011.
- Heidegger, Martin. *Being and Time*. Transl. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson. London: Blackwell Publishing, 1962.
- Imhof, Rudiger. *The Modern Irish Novel: Irish Novelists after 1945*. Dublin: Wolfhound Press, 2002.

- Jeffers, Jennifer. *Beckett's Masculinity*. London and New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2009.
- Kiberd, Declan. *Inventing Ireland*. London: Vintage, 1996.
- Knowlson, James. *Damned to Fame*. London: Bloomsbury, 1996.
- McGahern, John. "The Solitary Reader". *Canadian Journal of Irish Studies* 17.1 (1991): 19-24.
- Mercier, Vivian. *Beckett/Beckett*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977.
- Moran, Dermot. *Introduction to Phenomenology*. London: Routledge, 2000.
- Nyusztay, Ivan. "The Merry Sufferer: Authentic Being in Samuel Beckett's *Happy Days*". *Philosophy and Literature* 42.1 (2018): 112-24.
- Whelan, Kevin. "The Revisionist Debate in Ireland". *Boundary 2* 31.1 (2004): 179-205.
- Yeats, William Butler. "Among Schoolchildren". *Selected Poems*. Ed. Timothy Webb. London: Penguin Books, 2000a. 151-3.
- _____. *Autobiographies*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1999.
- _____. "Easter 1916". *Selected Poems*. Ed. Timothy Webb. London: Penguin Publishing, (2000b). 119-22.
- _____. "The Statues". *Selected Poems*. Ed. Timothy Webb. London: Penguin Publishing, (2000c). 214-5.

Received: 9 September 2020

Revised version accepted: 21 January 2021

Graham Price lectures in the Department of English at NUI Maynooth. He recently lectured in modern Irish and British Literatures at the University of Limerick. He has supervised B.A. and M.A. theses on film studies, queer theory, Irish studies, and Irish drama. His monograph, *Oscar Wilde And Contemporary Irish Drama: Learning To Be Oscar's Contemporary*, was published in 2018 and is the first book-length examination of the Wildean strand in contemporary Irish theatre. Price's co-written book (with Darragh Greene), *Film Directors and Emotion: An Affective Turn In Contemporary American Cinema*, was published in 2020 by McFarland Press. He is currently transcribing and editing Frank McGuinness's upcoming version of Euripides's *The Bacchae* for Faber and Faber.

grahamfmprice@gmail.com

Praise be to Allah, The Almighty, Who created man in a balanced form. He inspired and adorned him with the beautifying light of faith and taught him eloquence and made him a pioneer and superior being, providing him with a tongue to articulate what is in his heart. Truly, from among the greatest blessings of Allah, The Almighty, the tongue, is one of His most sophisticated and unique creation of all organs in the body. Although small in size, its impact is paramount. Faith and disbelief, which stem from obedience and disobedience, respectively, cannot be known except through the testimony of this very organ. Idle talk is characterized as the perversion of the act of disclosing as it is in communication and the subsequent uprooting of Dasein's understanding of the world. This characterization of idle talk is followed by an analysis of the phenomenon that is Dasein's motivation towards such an act of disclosing. This motivating phenomenon which Heidegger lays out as a tendency towards finding truth in a mere beholding of the world is called curiosity. Lastly, Heidegger characterizes the resulting intelligibility. Genuine understanding would come about through active involvement with the world, while idle talk, made manifest through lack of involvement, produces an understanding that Heidegger claims to be "groundless". Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* occupies a reverend domain in literary history for reasons critics are quick to mention when the need arises. From its first premiere in 1953 to this current day, the text is still being highly reputed. more. Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* occupies a reverend domain in literary history for reasons critics are quick to mention when the need arises. From its first premiere in 1953 to this current day, the text is still being highly reputed. "Idle Talk, Idle Talk, Idle Talk": Samuel Beckett, Anglo-Ireland, and Heideggerian Thought Estudios Irlandeses 16, pp. 13-27. Save to Library. Download. "Idle Talk, Idle Talk, Idle Talk": Samuel Beckett, Anglo-Ireland, and Heideggerian Thought estudios.irlandeses2021-03-16T17:15:10+02:00. In *Dialogue with Writing*. Clare Boylan's Non-Fiction. "Echo's Bones and Samuel Beckett's Early Aesthetics: The Vulture, the Alba and the Dortmund" as Poetic Manifestos estudios.irlandeses2020-03-17T14:15:22+02:00. The "Production" of "Reflection": Adolescent Choices in John McGahern's *The Dark*. estudios.irlandeses2020-03-16T14:31:09+02:00.