

## A Politically Committed Kind of Silence. Ireland in Samuel Beckett's *Catastrophe*

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### *Abstract:*

Samuel Beckett's *Catastrophe* (1982), which is dedicated to Václav Havel, exemplifies in a direct way the idea of non-violent resistance. It is a short work in which an actor, who is going to appear before an audience under the instruction of a tyrannical director, performs an act of defiance with one simple gesture. The present article aims to explore the play's effectiveness by setting it in the context of Beckett's complex relation with Irish history. *Catastrophe*, hence, will be read from an Irish perspective, and the nature of Ireland's presence in Beckett's work will be analysed together with the subtle ways in which the author seeks to accommodate his own refusal to engage personally in a factious vision of Irish politics with a need to understand and interpret his country's contemporary history.

*Keywords:* Contemporary Theatre, Easter Rising, Ireland, Samuel Beckett, W.B. Yeats

*Catastrophe*, which according to Beckett should be pronounced *Catastroph*, "without the final e" (Gussow 1996, 39), was first written in French in the early months of 1982. It is a play about maintaining basic moral principles in the face of oppression. It presents a destitute character, with a status similar as that of a prisoner, who finds himself in an act of public humiliation but who manages to turn the tables and to assert his own dignity (by extension, human dignity) without violence and in fact without uttering a word, in "a kind of sombre, stoic, and miraculous victory" (Bernold 2015, 74).

*Catastrophe* is a short play, about ten minutes long, and shares many of the features of Samuel Beckett's later drama: it is brief, minimal, austere and reduced to its basic theatrical elements in terms of dialogue, movement, props and lighting. The action is framed within another play, in which a theatre director and his female assistant are putting the final touches to their pro-

duction in the dress rehearsal. At the centre of this play is the Protagonist, a man on a pedestal, barefoot, dressed in his pyjamas, gown and a hat, whose posture and appearance need to accommodate the wishes of the Director, presumably in order to achieve an image of helplessness in a closing scene representing pathos. There is an additional character, Luke, a technician in charge of the lights, who does not appear on stage but who we hear answering the orders from the Director to the Assistant.

Notable in the Director's design for the last scene of his play is the disrespectful way in which he treats the Protagonist, with the reluctant help of the Assistant: "Under the director's impatient instructions, his assistant manipulates the protagonist as if he were a prop, rather than a human being" (Cohn 2005, 373). The Director orders the Assistant to unclench the man's fists, to whiten his head, hands and legs, to remove his gown, regardless of the cold felt by the Protagonist, and to expose his breast. When at last the tableau is complete and the final details, such as the lighting of the Protagonist's head, are to the Director's satisfaction, something extraordinary occurs: the same person who has thus far not acted autonomously raises his head and, with that single gesture, silences the applause that the Director imagines his creation has provoked. The lights then fade and the play ends.

The circumstances surrounding the writing of *Catastrophe* are well-known: Beckett had been approached by members of the International Association for the Defense of Artists (AIDA) with the request of writing a play in honour of Václav Havel, a political dissident and writer who was at that time in jail in Czechoslovakia (a few years later he would become president of his country). The play was premiered at the Avignon Festival on 20 July 1982, and it was one of a group of plays presented at the festival that year in which authors showed their support for the imprisoned playwright. That same year Beckett translated the play into English, and it was published by Faber in 1984. Such precise information has made possible one basic interpretation of the play:

not only did he dedicate what proved to be his last stage play (if one excepts the slight *What Where* [1983]) to Havel, but he also wrote it, on one level at least, directly about Havel's plight. Indeed, writing for Havel led Beckett to open up a new political direction in his own work which time did not permit him to take further. (Elam 1994, 6-7)

The play has therefore been interpreted, quite rightly, in the context of a political tyranny imposing its ruthless power on defenceless individuals, recalling what was happening at that time in the countries of the Eastern Block under Communism: the dishevelled appearance of the Protagonist might indicate ill-treatment and perhaps torture. The light focusing on his head, for instance, is reminiscent of the techniques of interrogation. Following the orders of the Director, through instructions to his Assistant, the technician Luke "shoots" the Protagonist twice in the head in what Tyrus Miller has

defined as a “disciplined, even punitive use of lighting” (Miller 2000, 263). Rosemary Pountney is yet more incisive in her description of the historical events suggested by the play, linking the Protagonist’s raising of his head to a precise episode in Havel’s nation, as the Protagonist’s gesture would be “foreshadowing indeed the overthrow of the Czechoslovakian regime that eventually resulted in Havel’s presidency of his country” (Pountney 1992, 93-94). In addition to the helplessness of the Protagonist, additional details indicate that in the society recreated in the play, power is exerted without any restraint. The demeanour of the Director, being curt and blunt with the Assistant, together with his clothes, a fur coat and matching toque, suggests someone who is used to imposing his authority and who does not expect his subordinates to question his orders. In fact, he firmly rejects and mocks the Assistant’s timidly uttered suggestions to introduce minimal changes to the scene. He is certainly an important man, connected to the spheres of power: “Step on it, I have a caucus” (Beckett 2006, 458) he says to the Assistant at one point, urging her to hurry up with the rehearsal.

Beckett’s plays never lend themselves into an easy classification into just one category, resisting thus any unequivocal interpretation. In *Catastrophe*, apart from an obvious denunciation of human right abuses, there is another level of reference which has to do with the medium of theatre. The fact that the petty tyrant who dominates the action is a theatre director has led some scholars to believe that Beckett was also reflecting on his experience during rehearsals of his own plays: “The director” writes Ruby Cohn “is unambiguously unpleasant, and Beckett ascribes to him some of his own characteristics. The director’s cruelty to his actor parallels that of Beckett himself in the theatre, and his continual smoking mirrors Beckett’s habit” (2005, 373-374). Following this line of interpretation, we might see Beckett as seeking to establish a certain kind of parallelism between the cruel precision of torture and the mechanical, professional and carefully designed preparation required in theatre before the raising of the curtain: “One procedure is much like the other. Thus the subtext of the play is continually whispering that art is achieved by the same patience that characterizes science (as systematic brutality)” (States 1987, 16). This is particularly so in a play like this, where the final aim is to achieve a perfect image of subjugation, and to accomplish this goal the firm control of the actors’ interventions is required, removing any trace of emotion from their words, and indeed the virtual immobilisation of one of them. The content of the play aptly underlines the repressive methods that are necessary for a satisfactory outcome of the production: “It is the success of this very process for which the director might later receive congratulations and applause much as wardens are commended for their run of a prison, or as teachers are praised for their students’ good behaviour” (Jackson 1992, 26). In any case, the metatheatrical aspect of *Catastrophe* would be something common to the plays he wrote in his late period: “In their very sparse-

ness and challenges to dramatic conventions, these plays help to ‘lay bare’ the specific nature of the dramatic work and its implications for their reception” (Laughlin 1989, 20). The twist at the end of the play, the denouement that in fact constitutes the catastrophe of the title (according to the etymological meaning of the word as ‘turning point’), consisting of the Protagonist’s raising of his head and fixing his gaze on the audience, has also given way to many reflections on the role of “us”, the real audience in the theatre, who are expected to applaud after the actor playing the Protagonist has silenced the recorded applause with his gesture of defiance. Are we accomplices in the crime? For Katherine Weiss there is no question of the spectators behaving as if the play is not directly addressing their consciences: “The applause dies down and the lights go out. The viewers in the auditorium are meant to ponder whether or not they should applaud the catastrophe they have just witnessed” (Weiss 2013, 130). If we push the allegory further, this dilemma gives way to profound questions concerning our role as the spectators of the everyday atrocities presented to us in the media. Segments of such information have also been carefully filmed and edited for our consumption as viewers: images of war, famine or fleeing refugees bombard us continuously, and in *Catastrophe* Beckett makes us question a principle in theatre and in life, “that from an ‘aesthetic distance’ it is pleasurable to see and participate (voyeuristically, of course) in the pain of others” (States 1987, 18).

The strong ethical element in *Catastrophe* and the anomaly of Beckett writing a clearly political piece, together with its being dedicated to a respected and widely admired fighter for human rights, have prevented other interpretations from being explored. But I would like to consider the possibility of examining an almost hidden and deep-laid connection to Irish history in the play, prompted by a set of associations and nuances that take us back to the author’s complex relation with his home country<sup>1</sup>. It is well known that Beckett did not feel at ease in the new Irish state created after its independence from Britain in 1922. In Dublin, where he lived intermittently during the 1930s, he experienced first-hand the inadequacies of the state’s cultural policies, including the censorship of books and the recovery of Celtic myths from the past as the foundation of the nation’s culture. Furthermore, the essays he wrote in the 1930s reveal his disgust towards an established conservative policy that abolished divorce and banned the sale of contraceptives, among other curtailments of individual liberties. As a member of a dwindling Protestant class and, more acutely, as an intellectual who had been at the centre of

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the artistic avant-garde in Paris, he was highly sensitive to the provincialism of the new authorities. In 1937 he settled definitely in France and from then on his work maintained traces of an Irish upbringing, represented by images of landscapes of his childhood shrouded in the mists of time or by particular turns of phrase with an Irish resonance. But Ireland as an object of thought always haunted his imagination, however much he insisted to actors of his plays that they keep a neutral accent, or when he tried to hide the references to Irish history within universal concerns: "The more Beckett attempted to purge his writing of its Irish echoes and reliance upon an Irish context, the more these elements insinuated themselves as structural problems: the process of erosion, accretion and displacement that shape his representations of Ireland leave an indelible imprint on his brand of minimalism" (Morin 2009, 11).

The 'structural problem' presented in this play could be summed up in the question of whether it is possible to read *Catastrophe* from an Irish perspective, that is, if it can be ascertained that Beckett turned to any elements of Ireland's own history of violence in the foundations of this particular dramatic piece. It seems to me that the political significance of the Protagonist's silence in *Catastrophe* is enhanced by the author's skilful introduction of connotative elements associated with Ireland's troubled past. Some particular terms are charged with echoes of history that perhaps reveal how Beckett kept open the possibility of an interpretation of such an aseptic play within an Irish dimension. True, the Protagonist is described in the most neutral terms, as if to stress his symbolic status as a dissident who could have been arrested anywhere in the world: "P midstage standing on a black block 18 inches high. Black wide-brimmed hat. Black dressing-gown to ankles. Barefoot. Head bowed. Hands in pockets. Age and physique unimportant" (Beckett 2006, 457). Nothing in his attire might be said to refer to an Irish person. Later, when the Director gives the order and the Assistant removes the man's gown, he is revealed to be wearing some "old grey pyjamas" (*ibidem*, 458). This could be an indication that he has been taken out of bed, late at night, for his detention and arrest (Siess 1997, 51), the kind of action against agitators that unfortunately is common practice in times of unrest. Going by the Assistant's description of him, the man seems to be of a certain age: he hardly has any hair left and suffers from fibrous degeneration in the hands. His seniority, together with the fact of having been chosen as a showcase for an exemplary punishment as a "propaganda warning for *all* to see in *all* his agony" (Sandarg 1989, 141) might indicate that he is more than just a common party member. The Assistant's fear that he may speak during the performance might be indicative of his status; she seems anxious that his words might entice others to rebellion: "A: Sure he won't utter? / D: Not a squeak" (Beckett 2006, 459). But if he holds some position of power in a seditious faction against the established authority, how is that connected to an Irish context other than through mere speculation? The history underly-

ing the use of certain key words in the play would, in my opinion, point to an interpretation of the play in terms of Ireland.

The most obvious indication of this possible connection is an anatomical term. From his superior point of view, the director refers to the man's head in a clinical way: "How's the skull?" (*ibidem*, 458) he asks, and a few moments later the Assistant in turn asks him: "Like that cranium?" (*ibidem*, 459). The way they refer to the man's head, using such precise vocabulary, speaks of heated debates on the skull as the site of ideological controversy at the time just prior to Beckett's coming of age: "Late Victorian and early modernist fiction reflects a widespread fascination with the racial semiotics of the skull and the head" (Seshagiri 2007, 577). In the late nineteenth century pseudo-scientific disciplines such as craniometry and anthropometry, as part of a general theory of eugenics, had flourished with the aim of racially distinguishing deviant types of human beings: any kind of perversion or deficiency in an individual (or in an ethnic group) would be reflected in the irregularity of the cranium, according to Western eurocentric standards. In the case of Ireland, since the beginning of English colonization, it was not uncommon to find depictions of the native population with irregular, ape-like heads, with the aim of indicating their lack of development. In the usual classification of heads at the time, the long dolichocephalic type of skull corresponded to the purest white race, while the broad brachycephalic head indicated a high degree of primitivism in the genetic composition of that human group. Craniums in Ireland, as a topic, bring with them added interest in that, once mashed-up, they were used for medical purposes: "Whilst English soldiers and settlers seized Irish land, others discreetly foraged for moss-crowned skulls" (Sugg 2011, 203). The history of repressed rebellions, particularly in the west of Ireland, had left fields literally full of unburied rebels' heads and bodies. Being a nation generally considered "intrinsically backward, degenerate, and inferior" (*ibidem*, 102), their bones could be used without any qualms by the colonisers, who even exported them in the XVI and XVII centuries to other parts of Europe as medicine.

Ireland's enclosed space and homogeneous population was seen as an ideal laboratory to test ideas on racial hierarchy by Victorian ethnologists such as John Beddoe at the end of the nineteenth century. Here, the study of the skulls was essential in ascertaining the alleged backwardness of Ireland's inhabitants:

but the Connemara people are generally short, and depart in some respects from the common type, having less angularity of cheek bones and chin, and less prominence of mouth; the forehead looks broad and low; the greatest breadth of face is at the level of the eyes. Light eyes predominate, as usual; the combination of dark-gray with black hair is very common, and dark hair and complexion attain their maximum. There are in Connemara clans considered as of servile origin. (Beddoe 1885, 266)

According to Barra O'Donnabhain and E. Murphy, the further that

one travelled from Britain, the greater the perception of primitiveness: "This particular construct that the population of the west of Ireland was a relic of earlier, primitive groups is a recurring theme in the literature of the physical anthropology of Ireland" (2014, 157).

The notorious Harvard Mission (1932-1936) also considered the country of Ireland as a good object for the study of race. A group of scholars led by anthropologist Earnest Hooton implemented a very large survey of the Irish people, taking back to America a huge quantity of bodily remains found in ancient cemeteries. Although their methods were the same as earlier eugenicists, with a particular emphasis on the measurement of skulls, their aims differed from those of Victorian social scientists. Due to the growing importance of Irish descendants in American politics, they wanted to prove that the original inhabitants of Ireland were not defective in any sense: "The term 'Celtic' gradually became associated with nationalism and white supremacy and no longer with the image of the drunken apish Irishman beloved of British and American cartoonist" (Carew 2012, 40). In any case, what is evident is that the question of race was one of the key issues being discussed in intellectual and political circles when Beckett began writing and that the shape of heads was one specific focus of those debates. John Pilling (2004, 271) indicates that in the "Trueborn Jackeen" notes Beckett took in around 1934, which deal mainly with Irish history, he copied from an encyclopaedia the characteristics of the skulls of the first inhabitants of Ireland; the topic, then, was not completely foreign to him.

As time went on and fascism emerged as a strong political force in many countries of Europe, theories that favoured a drastic solution to an alleged degeneration of the race were implemented with a terrifying outcome. There is no doubt that Beckett was well aware of the adoption of a racist ideology by the Vichy regime under which he lived for two years. He and his partner Suzanne Deschevaux-Dumesnil had gone into hiding in Roussillon, in the south of France, after fleeing from Paris in September 1942 at great risk of their lives due to his membership of the Resistance. As Andrew Gibson has convincingly demonstrated, the hardships of the war, the deprivation, the permanent suspicion and fear, all these events seep through into *Waiting for Godot*, which he wrote in the final months of 1948 when his experiences of the previous years, including the purges, denunciations and executions of the dark early days after liberation, would have been vivid in his memory. Lucky's monologue in *Waiting for Godot*, normally considered a wonderfully absurd concatenation of nonsense, in fact hides a veiled critique of a state ideology that supported an improvement of the race at the cost of human suffering. The speech, with its reference to the "Acacacademy of Anthropopometry" (Beckett 2006, 42), as well as other examples of fake scientific jargon, underlines the idea "that the Vichyite and eugenicist discourses are at best irrelevant to and at worst a noxious violation of limited, deficient, suffering

human being” (Gibson 2010, 187). Lucky famously includes in his monologue a reference to “the skull the skull the skull the skull in Connemara” (Beckett 2006, 43), bringing to the fore the long history of oppression and the massacres suffered by the Irish in the west of Ireland, which Gibson interprets as Beckett’s attempts “toward an identification with the historical lament of the ‘other Ireland’” (Gibson 2010, 194).

*Waiting for Godot* was not the first work in which Beckett had playfully made use of references to Irish heads. In his first novel, written in 1932 but not published until 1992, *Dream of Fair to Middling Women*, he expressed scepticism towards the anatomical dogmatism that was rampant in official discourses on race. At the time he had not yet found the austere and minimalist style that would characterize his mature period. Beckett was, at the age of 26, mercilessly looking back at the events of his life thus far, showing a directness in his personal views that would not be found in subsequent works. There is a minor incident in the novel that takes place in a Dublin street involving a professor of Trinity College and a garage attendant. As a result of their argument, the narrator half-mockingly comments on the lack of deference shown to members of the Protestant upper-middle class by common workers in the Irish Free State, looking back with nostalgia to the days of “the Garrison” when Ireland was under British control and this kind of thing simply did not happen: “The scurvy dog has taught the snarl to his scurvy master, the snarl, the fawn, the howl and the cocked leg: the general coprotechnics” (Beckett 1992, 159). Although he, the narrator, explicitly linked in the narrative to the author by the pronoun “we”, makes clear that he does not want to revert to a previous situation of foreign control and approves of the end of British rule in Ireland, it is clear that “his enthusiasm for this event is somewhat weakened by his assessment of the alternative power” (O’Brien 1986, 353). The narrator’s afterthought is loaded with irony:

The point it seems almost worth our while trying to make is not that the passing of the Castle as it was in the days of the Garrison is to be deprecated. Not at all. We hope we know our place better than that. We uncover our *ancient Irish wedge-head* in deference to that happy ejection. Nor are we the least prone to suggest that the kennel is a less utopian community than the pen or coop or shoal or convent or any other form of natural or stylised pullulation. (Beckett 1992, 159; my emphasis)

The narrator’s comments on the kind of low-quality democracy that is now established in the land, implicit in the reference to the kennel, the pen and the coop, as well as other symbols for a coarse mass of people, indicate Beckett’s severe criticism of the “stultifying lack of social, cultural and economic ambition” (Brown 1981, 14) that characterized the Irish Free State, showing concern, at the same time “about the place of a shrinking Protestant minority in an ostensibly Catholic and Gaelic nation” (Bixby 2013, 72). But it is the reference to heads what stands out in this paragraph. He, a member



of that Protestant minority, although worried about the future, at the same time adopts the language that is typically assigned to the “other Ireland”, applying to himself the anatomical description that one would normally find in portraits of supposedly native types. This reference should, in my opinion, be interpreted as a mark of sympathy for the Irish, normally described in such terms in the specialized literature of the time, and also as a sneering remark meant to show the vacuity of this kind of discourse. It is perhaps not wide of the mark, then, to suggest that fifty years later Beckett recovered the stale and reactionary usage of the vocabulary of anthropometry, the words “skull” and “cranium” in the particular context of race distinctions, to assign a social background to the Protagonist in *Catastrophe*. On this interpretation, the individual who is the subject of the pompous Director and his Assistant’s remodellings and transformations, would belong to that huge stratum including the vast majority of the people of Ireland, those whose head shape was for centuries the subject of speculation and study. As Michael Wood writes in relation to traces of Ireland in Beckett’s late period, it is not a question of establishing neat parallelism in his texts, but of underlining the existing semantic suggestions: “Ireland in such a construction would not be a homeland or an allegiance, or a determinant of character, so much as a marker of a certain politics, even a philosophy, of style” (2010, 173). By including in his play such associations in the complex configuration of a character, Beckett would leave open the access to the realm of Irish politics and history.

Beckett’s procedure is twofold. His building-up of a character is reduced to the minimum of words, expressions which are apparently devoid of any specificity as regards nationality or historical circumstance. At the same time, in the genealogy of those same words, there are traces which reveal, in the context of his own background and biography, an ideological environment to which these words are inevitably attached. It should be noted that Beckett is not interested in validating any collective response in particular: “Despite his sense of social responsibility,” writes Robert Sandarg, “Beckett is far too pessimistic to believe in any theatre of political action or to hope for any general human emancipation” (1989, 144). The accumulation of disconcerting images, his going against the normal flow of linguistic articulation, and the presence of words loaded with a strong evocative power, create in his late plays a hazy configuration of meanings where memories of a distant past can mingle with power relations in the present: “By carefully layering stark visual images, sounds, and often only vaguely understandable dialogue, by confronting us with a clash of word and image or with substantial gaps between what is seen and what is said, Beckett’s theatre inundates us with percepts” (Laughlin 1989, 27). That is, while it is true that Beckett is dealing with universal themes, he does not prevent historical connections from being made, thanks to the complex web of echoes and allusions that revolves around his fictional constructions. Take for instance the manipulation of the Protagonist

in *Catastrophe* by the Director so that the man is finally transformed into “an icon of suffering designed to elicit maximum audience response” (Ackerley and Gontarski 2004, 85). His interest in whitening the Protagonist’s head, hands and legs previous to his appearance before the audience might apply to any situation in which a totalitarian regime is determined to erase the singularity of those who are subjugated. In this process of homogenization other elements could be included, such as vernacular languages, cultural traits or daily habits. This would reflect the universal appeal of Beckett’s work, his compromise with those who, silently and courageously, resist tyranny. My contention here is that Ireland is not excluded from this paradigm. In fact, by the almost hidden clues in the play, Beckett would be making indirect comments on Ireland’s past, something that would be in tune with the evolution of his concerns in his mature period. J.C.C. Mays, in his study of allusions to Ireland in Beckett’s late drama and narrative, remarks how Beckett suppressed any elements of local colour which would be too close to his own experience, establishing more and more distance between himself and his memories, because he was moving in the opposite direction from the kind of anecdotal and comforting fiction that he loathed. Mays cites *All that Fall* (1956) and *Embers* (1957) as examples of plays which recreate a time that he could have only known by family stories or by other documents, like old photographs. For Mays there is no doubt that “while the trilogy returned to a situation Beckett, the author, left behind with childhood, his subsequent writing pushes further back and engages with a time just before he was born” (1992, 140). Although in the present essay I do not go so far back in time, it does seem that Beckett’s *Catastrophe* continues this direction in the examination of Ireland’s contemporary history. Given the evident political nature of the play, I would suggest that echoes of the revolution and the upheaval that occurred in Ireland in the period between 1913 and 1923 can indeed be found in the work<sup>2</sup>.

Beckett was aware that any chronicle of events of the past is normally modified by official discourses in order to build a narrative that suits the ideology of those in power. In the case of Ireland, the established version would run on the lines of “a centuries-long struggle for the freedom of a Gaelic, Catholic people from English oppression” (McGarry 2010, 10). Beckett certainly would not contribute to the establishment of this construct. He would

<sup>2</sup> The presence of historical events in various works from his mature period reinforces the idea that Beckett had a keen interest in revisiting the segment of time beginning with the Easter Rising and ending with the Irish Civil War. In *Texts for Nothing*, there is a comic recreation of the street fights during the Rising (Beckett 1999, 18). Also in a satirical tone, in *Malone Dies* (1951) the narrator refers to the hunger strike of Terence MacSwiney, Lord Mayor of Cork, in October 1920 (Beckett 1979, 251); in *Mercier and Camier* (1946) the protagonists pass by the memorial of Noel Lemass in the Dublin mountains, assassinated by forces of the Irish Free State in 1923 (Beckett 2010, 82), to mention just a few examples.

find himself at loggerheads with any form of essentialist nationalism. In its schematism and abstraction, *Catastrophe* questions exactly the profusion of details that are employed to transform what happened in the past into a biased historical recreation: "It is a play that is not quite real, fixed, and certain, echoing but not fulfilling the play of the past that seemed so confident in its account of the way things were" (Pearce 1992, 87). Beckett's dramatization is consequently devoid of heroes, no names are mentioned, all the characters, except the technician, are referred to by their initials, and instead of having the Protagonist pronounce an inspiring discourse that would compel his followers to continue the fight with renewed energies, he remains silent. The Protagonist might have some position among the rebels, but he is portrayed as the image of despair: a common man, subdued, in his pyjamas, probably ill, who makes no protest at the director's whimsical orders regarding his appearance. Beckett therefore took pains to remove any sign from the play that would establish a clear reading of Irish history, focusing instead on the act of defiance. The emphasis is so well-marked that even the main character, the one who defies the established power represented by the Director, is doubly removed from reality. As Howard Pearce observes, while the Director and the Assistant are actors playing their roles, the Protagonist is "an actor playing an actor playing a character" (*ibidem*, 84), so that any identification with him becomes enmeshed in a tangle of reflections, like an image viewed through a succession of mirrors.

Deprived as he is of personal history, voice and relevant individual features, what the character of the Protagonist clearly has to offer, what he embodies and represents more than anything else, is his own person as the last vestige of humanity, his physicality. Beckett was able to erase any marks that would reveal the character's allegiances, but what was left, a single man, he could not delete, a point that Richard Begam makes about another well-known individual figure in one of Beckett's most famous plays: "Admittedly, the stage accomplishes what the radio cannot, literally thrusting Krapp before us, insisting on his corporeal reality, his inert and undeniable 'thereness'" (2002, 27). It is in the Protagonist's body, with its "unrelenting continuity" (Jackson 1992, 25), where the mesmerizing power of the play lies, as the spectator observes the manipulation that is applied to it and its minimal but significant reaction (shivering) to the orders of the Director. By the gesture of raising the Protagonist's head and showing his face for the first time, Beckett seems to be pointing to the establishment of new terms of relationship between subjugated and subjugators, which in the context of a political play written by an Irish author of Protestant origin who never ceased to negotiate acceptable images of Ireland in his work, would correspond, at least, to a recognition of an existing problem.

Beckett was of course not the first non-Catholic Irish author to reflect on the tragic events that surrounded the formation of the Irish state. The towering

figure of W.B. Yeats and his poem “Easter 1916” looms large in the literature of the troubles. In the poem we find a Protestant author who, from a sense of duty, and almost grudgingly, acknowledges the acts of courage by individuals (names of the leaders of the rebellion included) who defied a far superior force. It is not possible to think that Beckett had meant to make a revision of Yeats’s poem during the composition of his theatre play; his process of the distillation of events through the prism of time is located at the other end of the spectrum from Yeats’s specific historical grounding, his display of emotions is far more subdued and tempered than Yeats’s expansiveness, but the correspondences between the two pieces nevertheless reveal a common aim in both authors, that of paying respect to an act of courage<sup>3</sup>. If a dialogue is here imposed upon these two, very dissimilar works, it is simply to reveal that on this particular issue there might be a comparable political motivation in Yeats and Beckett. Although the latter had long embarked in a solitary and highly personal endeavour, the influence of Yeats on his mature period has been amply demonstrated: “It is here [in Beckett’s literary production of the 1970s and 1980s] that the presence of Yeats, the poet rather than the playwright, is at its most beguiling, its most haunting, and its most unequivocal” (Brater 2004, 34). In the case of *Catastrophe*, Beckett would increase further the emotional distance between the events indirectly referred to and his own view of them by changing Yeats’s “sacrifice” to “catastrophe”, introducing a less painful tone through the use of a more technical term, one taken from the field of literary criticism, as a way of removing any shadow of passion or an excessive display of feelings:

the term ‘catastrophe’ must only be understood in its original sense, the technical sense that it has in Greek tragedy: reversal, turnaround, dénouement of the action, the exact sense that it doubly assumes in the text, but from which Beckett would have liked the ideas implied by the everyday use of the word to be disassociated. (Bernold 2015, 76)

The Protagonist in *Catastrophe* is certainly someone who has been given prominence against his will in a situation of social tension and who has been chosen as an example by others without any volition on his part. In that sense he could well be one of those “unpromising souls” mentioned at the beginning of Yeats’s poem who “manage to rise to the mythical out of their matter-of-fact beginnings, achieving the tragic transformation of pity and terror” (Kiberd 1996, 214). In *Catastrophe* there is of course no description of the Protagonist’s past, but from what we know of him, he could well

<sup>3</sup> Beckett maintained an interest in Yeats’s poetry and drama throughout his life, and although he opposed Yeats’s romanticism and rejected “the legacy of Yeats the revivalist”, he admired “Yeats the mature poet and experimental playwright” (Kennedy 2013, 208).

be one of those common people in "Easter 1916" whom the poet has often met in the street, "Coming with vivid faces / From counter or desk among grey/Eighteenth-century houses" (Yeats 1990, 93), ordinary citizens who had perhaps been objects of ridicule and who acquire a new dimension (respect, dignity, public recognition) because of their participation in the upheaval. By clearly showing the face of the Protagonist at the end of the play Beckett, it could be inferred, perhaps did not want to fall into the same error as the author of the poem: "Yeats, after all, recounts his own fallacy in 'Easter 1916' in failing to recognise those 'vivid faces', coming from 'counter or desk', as the faces of men and women who were capable of heroic action" (Brannigan 2009, 79). By contrast, the final scene in *Catastrophe* would be saying, "here I am, this is my face, make no mistake, remember me". No textual evidence supports this interpretation, but it is important to stress the fact that neither are there any specific references in the text that prevent such a connection from being made, as if Beckett had left open the door for a myriad of cases from history to be applied here, instances in which the forces of repression have been brutally imposed upon individuals, with the turbulent years of the late 1910s and early 1920s in Ireland representing just one of those troubled periods in history. The connection of *Catastrophe* with the events in Ireland before Independence is tenuously made, by indirect allusion and by an almost indiscernible chain of associations, but that is so in all cases when a contextual background has been built around the incidents that are narrated in the play. No direct description of the protagonists or of the props that appear on stage transport the spectator of *Catastrophe* to a communist regime in Eastern Europe in the second half of the twentieth century, for example, save perhaps the fur coat and toque worn by the Director, reminiscent of typically Russian garments, but then again these clothes tend to be worn in any place with low temperatures. This is the way the connotative element works in a play by Beckett, the intimation of knowledge is there, but it is impossible to grasp in its entirety. Another example may also be illustrative of this point. It has been suggested earlier in this essay that the Protagonist might well have been arrested at home, taken somewhere for interrogation while still in his pyjamas, and surely Beckett was aware that this was not an uncommon practice of the security forces in Ireland during the War of Independence. In response to attacks by the IRA in the last months before the truce that led to the Anglo-Irish Treaty, the members of the RIC and the Black and Tans had intensified their repressive measures against possible suspects, as reported in a publication of the time: "'They know that women and children have to hurry out of their beds at midnight to escape from houses deliberately set on fire by the agents of law and order', including those 'dragged from their beds, stripped naked and flogged'" (qtd. by Ferriter 2015, 205). In an episode in one of the most telling literary portraits of the War of Independence, *The Last September* (1929) by Elizabeth Bowen, a British Army officer, Ger-

ald Lesworth, tells another character about the events of the previous night when the security forces went on a raid:

“We were looking for arms, really. And at night you find the most surprising people at home. We were after a fellow called Peter Connor: we got him.”

“Fight?” said Laurence eagerly.

“He was at home, in bed. These blighters think we are greater fools than we are.”  
(Bowen 2000, 131)

This specific scene is part of a rich field of resonance surrounding Beckett’s play that sends the reader or spectator to a realm of memory in which Ireland is felt as a hazy and yet indelible presence. Again, nowhere in the play is it said that the Protagonist has just been taken from his bed for his detention, but his being in his pyjamas and his absolute lack of freedom suggest that this may have been the case, and the historical events of a recent past inevitably come to mind. There is an equally enigmatic description that the Assistant makes of the Protagonist’s skull that would correspond to this series of echoes of an Irish past. She defines his head as “Moulting. A few tufts” (Beckett 2006, 458), as if the Protagonist were some kind of fowl, which takes us back to the fragment of *Dream of Fair to Middling Women* quoted above in which the author/narrator is comparing the new society established in Ireland after independence as a pen or a coop. The silent main character, it may be suggested, would be an anonymous member of this community who, through his participation in the revolt, has been transformed and is shedding his feathers, so to speak. He now stands out in the “stylicised pullulation” (Beckett 1992, 159) of his community. This line of interpretation would not invalidate other possibilities which take as a frame of reference a different set of connotations. The rather cryptic description of the colour of the Protagonist’s night attire in *Catastrophe*, as well as his head, described in both cases as “ash”, not grey, may add to his description a vague reminiscence of someone who has come out of smouldering ruins. But this is not of course the only possible way to understand that reference. The ashen colour in the body and clothes of the Protagonist has been interpreted by Elizabeth Barry in relation to Beckett’s interest in the philosophy of the Stoics and with a line in *Malone Dies* in which catastrophe is linked with the indifferent acceptance of a doomed fate: “To be buried in lava and not turn a hair, it is then a man shows what stuff he is made of” (Beckett 1979, 233). The proximity of death for the Protagonist explains, for Barry, the particular hue described in the text: “This creature is already, proleptically, beginning to resemble the ‘lava’ that buries the unfortunate in *Malone Dies*, to become inorganic like the stone that Beckett cherishes in so much of his work” (Barry 2007, 177). Far from being opposing interpretations, what these differing opinions show is that *Catastrophe* is a multi-layered play which can be accessed to from a variety of points of sensibility. After all, it

was Beckett's biographer, James Knowlson, who proposed the most haunting image represented by the Protagonist, as he "recalls images of the concentration camp or holocaust victim" (1997, 679).

The kind of links established among the characters other than the Protagonist might also contain, in the same indirect vein, elements of an Irish context that reinforce this interpretation. Between the poles of the Director and the Protagonist, their relationship being clearly expressed by "the objectification of the Other by institutionalized power" (Elam 1994, 9), lies the figure of the Assistant, ideologically in an intermediate position, something which has previously been noted:

She embodies the shrewd but stealthy aspiration of the upper subordinate to the highest power but her secret alliance with the lowest in the social hierarchy reveals at the same time that she will join, once the right momentum is given, a force subversive to the system, establishing solidarity with those in social positions even more abject than hers. (Noh 2005, 71-72)

She is the one who helps the Director in the rehearsal of the play, that is, in the preparation of the Protagonist for his final exposure before the audience, and it is her work on the man himself that the Director examines and to which he gives his approval, although introducing a number of modifications. What seems evident from her attitude is that there is a current of sympathy on her part towards the figure that she has placed on the pedestal, ready for inspection, while keeping a professional obedience to the Director. She timidly points out to the Director that the Protagonist is shivering and suggests some changes in the performance, even the possibility of the man raising his head, that would result in a better standing position for the Protagonist, reducing his humiliation in front of the audience. Beckett hardly ever explained the meaning of his work and in the play there is a curious example of this aspect of his personality, represented by a strongly expressed opinion by the Director that could well have come from the author himself: "For God's sake! This craze for explicitation! Every i dotted to death!" (Beckett 2006, 459). Yet, on one occasion, he gave Spanish scholar Antonia Rodríguez-Gago some additional information that corroborates the emotional link between the Assistant and the Protagonist. "Well, she, the Assistant," Beckett said, "has to show her clandestine love for the Protagonist to the audience, but, at the same time, she doesn't want the Director to know about it" (Rodríguez Gago 2016, 22). If her affection towards the Protagonist is made clear by her concern for him, the Director on the other hand provokes in her a feeling of dislike: she is upset at some of his remarks and even rubs the surface of the armchair which he had previously used before sitting down herself, as if she did not want to be tainted by touching the same object as her superior. A telling detail in her characterization is her particular use of

language, her “syntactic awkwardness”, which situates her on an altogether different plane from that of the Director. Her “difficulties with English verb phrase construction ... connotes foreignness” (Elam 1994, 12), as if the language that the Director so fluently and idiomatically uses was not her native tongue but a language recently acquired. Considering that the Protagonist is “a character with whom she has an identity” (Pearce 1992, 89), it is reasonable to imagine that Assistant and Protagonist perhaps once shared the same language. Furthermore, the Director treats the Assistant as a servant rather than as an assistant, continually asking her for a light for his cigar, giving her blunt orders or laughing at her suggestions. Somehow it seems as if she, a collaborator with those in high office, is secretly waiting for someone to carry out a decisive act of rebellion.

The question that may be asked at this point is how much in this universal scheme of colonization speaks to the Irish experience. Following the approach favoured in the present essay, some parallelisms may be established between the ambiguous relationship of the Assistant and the Protagonist in *Catastrophe* and the mixed emotions generated by the Easter Rising in the inhabitants of Dublin in particular and the Irish people in general. At the turn of the twentieth century it can be safely stated that most people in Ireland supported the lawfully approved politics followed by Irish MPs in Westminster in order to eventually obtain Home Rule from the British government. Life for the great majority of people went on in the normal way, accepting the lesser evil of the presence of a foreign administration in the land, because most civic liberties that made ordinary life viable in terms of education, ownership of property, freedom of religion, access to the professions, etc. had been achieved at the end of the nineteenth century. In any case, acquiescence with the powers that be was a common attitude for the vast majority of citizens: “Theirs was a history which seemed always to happen in their absence, or at least without their active participation” (Kiberd 1996, 530). The sense of feeling like strangers in their own country, as Declan Kiberd describes Irish citizens during the upheaval, strikes an uncanny chord with the character of the Assistant in *Catastrophe*. She is an able professional who dutifully carries on with her job and who, without openly voicing her disgust, accepts orders from someone whose higher position she has no option but to accept. She has nevertheless managed to create her own strategies of resistance and is able to display for herself a moderate protection from the abuses of power by the representative of authority. What happens at the beginning of the play can be connected to the period before the troubles, when ordinary citizens objected to the disruptive tactics of the revolutionaries because they could destabilize the status quo. In the play this complicated situation might be seen to be represented by the obsession of the Assistant to cover up the Protagonist’s body (i.e. to minimize the violent actions of a minority) and the willingness of the Director, here representing the official authority in Ire-



land at the time, to undress the Protagonist (i.e. to reveal the identity of the rebels and to expose the nature of their actions): "In the opening scene, before D intervenes in the setting up of the stage, it becomes clear that A has been shaping P into an image diametrically opposite to that which will be required by D" (Noh 2005, 69).

The Assistant thus feels a mixture of tenderness and disapproval with regard to the Protagonist, because he can destroy the fragile climate of cohabitation with the alien authority that she has been able to sustain until now, although at the same time he represents the possibility of breaking free from oppression. A similar sense of outrage was initially felt by the citizens of Dublin towards the insurrectionists: "The notion that a tiny band of poorly armed rebels could penetrate the heart of the British establishment in Ireland must have seemed unthinkable, to supporters and opponents of the union alike, until they actually did so" (McGarry 2010, 3). Theirs was merely a heroic gesture, but the very fact that it happened, together with the violent repression that followed, made people change their minds. Perhaps what happens on stage during the performance of *Catastrophe* may symbolize that very moment prior to the change of attitude, as the Assistant sees in the Protagonist's action the promise of unfulfilled possibilities, even if these have not yet been fully imagined and will take a long time to be achieved. Such an interpretation would account for her changing attitude towards the man in custody, sometimes concerned about his state, sometimes willing to cooperate in his torture, even suggesting the possibility of gagging him. What is beyond doubt is that it will not be "business as usual" in the representation of the play in *Catastrophe* after the Protagonist's subversive act, just as the political situation experienced a radical change in Ireland after the Rising. As David Lloyd writes, "the transformation of lout or clown into martyr that brings about the foundation of the nation, is seen to produce not reconciliation but a troubled tension" (1993, 71).

At the end of the play there is no need for the Protagonist to speak, his gesture deemed more than enough to convey the necessary meaning, because Beckett has, by this time, loaded the play with multiple connections to universal situations of human rights abuses, to dictatorial techniques in the theatre, and to crucial moments in Irish history. The Protagonist's silence is political because the context in which he is performing that silence, a timeless representation, can be related to a variety of specific situations, all having in common the clash between forces of repression and individual freedom. It is highly unlikely that Beckett was exclusively thinking in terms of Ireland when he wrote *Catastrophe*, but in the structure of the play he left open the possibility of letting Irish history creep in. Irish references would take advantage of the "tension between an aesthetics of the finished product and an alternative poetics of process" (Van Hulle 2007, 332) to occupy a shifting terrain. Perhaps Ireland was an uncomfortable presence, even inimical to

his original purpose, but as with everything else in the play, it was a source of conflicting images that Beckett could not refrain from including as part and parcel of his historic vision.

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