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CHAPTER 16

Invoking Beckett

Samuel Beckett's Legacy in Northern Irish Poetry

Hannah Simpson[1]

Contemporary Northern Irish poets have repeatedly, even obsessively, invoked Samuel Beckett's name in their work, from Paul Muldoon's mock-heroic 'His Nibs Sam Bethicket' and Derek Mahon's 'Beckett's bleak reductio', through Leontia Flynn's grotesque blazon of Beckett's 'palpitations, panic attacks, diarrhoea' and Padraic Fiacc's assurance that 'Beckett welcomes you to Paris', to Howard's Wright's foul-mouthed 'Beckett in Belfast'. While Beckett's more generalised influence on the lyrical form and language of contemporary poets has received some scholarly attention, the act of invocation more specifically has been less fully explored, particularly within an explicitly Northern Irish context. To 'invoke' – to call by name, to appeal to for witness or aid, to utter as a sacred name, or to summon in prayer – is a performative gesture, drawing Beckett's presence into dynamic interaction with the poem itself. This chapter will explore precisely what force these poems seek to summon by invoking Beckett's name.

The work of Northern Irish poets has often been elided under the catch-all term 'Irish poetry' in previous scholarship, and the link between Beckett and these poets structured along the dubious lines of shared nationality.[2] Yet although Beckett spent many of his formative years in Northern Ireland, he was not himself Northern Irish – and contemporary Northern Irish poets cannot but be starkly aware of their own status as

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[1] With thanks to Louise Simpson for her contribution to developing this work.

[2] This is particularly the case regarding Derek Mahon and Paul Muldoon; see, for example, Stephen Watt, *Beckett and Contemporary Irish Writing* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), Mark Nixon, 'A Brief Glow in the Dark: Samuel Beckett's Presence in Modern Irish Poetry', *The Yearbook of English Studies* 35, no. 1 (2005): 43–57; and Terence Brown, 'Mahon and Longley: Place and Placelessness', in *The Cambridge Companion to Contemporary Irish Poetry*, ed. Matthew Campbell (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 133–148. For notable exceptions, see Paul Lawley, 'Splitting the Rocks: Derek Mahon's Beckett', *Samuel Beckett Today/Aujourd'hui* 25 (2013): 141–156; and Peter McDonald, *Mistaken Identities: Poetry and Northern Ireland* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997).

'not exactly Irish'. (Or, in the case of more Unionist-inflected discourse, resolutely *not* Irish.) The unstable lines that simultaneously connect and divide Northern Irish and Irish identity are a recurrent topic of much contemporary Northern Irish poetry itself, and the poems that invoke Beckett's name likewise often interrogate this fracture. It means something different, this chapter contends, for a Northern Irish poet to invoke Beckett's name than it does for an Irish poet, particularly during the Northern Irish Troubles and their long aftermath.

Beckett's own relationship to his Irish identity was a complicated and often fractious one. As a Protestant, Beckett was in a minority in the predominantly Catholic south of Ireland; as an Irishman, he was in a minority in the predominantly Unionist north during his time at Portora Royal School in Enniskillen and Campbell College in Belfast. In either terrain, then, he was to 'fin[d] himself excluded from an immediate and convenient identity', as Rod Sharkey observes,[3] and this conflicted dynamic would become only more pronounced with the hardening of national identity politics that accompanied the establishment of the Irish Free State and Northern Ireland between 1920 and 1925. Beckett's own sense of dislocated isolation from either side of the Irish identity divide furnishes a paradoxically appropriate perspective on the issues of performative national identity and exclusion which often concerns Northern Irish poetry. Beckett's poetic presence thus offers a particularly complex but generative source for Northern Irish poets: he is a momentous Irish literary legacy to whom the Northern Irish poet can claim only partial allegiance, and also a figure of recognisably fluid national identity. Lifelong holder of an Irish passport and yet a voluntary exile, rooted domestically and culturally in France, Beckett offers a compelling model of the liminal, contested sense of national identity. He is, then, a very fitting figure to summon up as witness or aid for the Northern Irish poets' scrutinising of their own sense of relative belonging, and their own endurance within the shadow of Beckett's legacy.

Beckett in Ireland: Paul Muldoon and Derek Mahon

Paul Muldoon (b. 1951) and Derek Mahon (b. 1941) were both born and raised in Northern Ireland, each completing their high school education in Belfast. Although Mahon would spend time in North America and

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[3] Rod Sharkey, 'Singing in the Last Ditch: Beckett's Irish Rebel Songs', *Samuel Beckett Today/ Aujourd'hui* 3 (1994): 67.

England during his early adulthood before settling in Ireland, and Muldoon in East Anglia before moving to the USA, both stand as figureheads of the so-called Ulster Renaissance in 1970s Northern Irish poetry. Yet Mahon and Muldoon have each testified to their own ambivalence regarding the identity politics of being categorised as Northern Irish poets – as fellow Belfast poet Edna Longley would succinctly put it in *The Honest Ulsterman* in 1975, 'DEREK MAHON / Is doing all he can / To rid his imagination / Of the Northern Irish situation'[4] – and both have repeatedly grappled with the political and personal complexities of inscribing themselves in the Irish literary tradition.

In turn, Mahon and Muldoon invoke Beckett's name in their poetry as a recurrent emblem of national or geographic liminality. They rewrite the 'Lord of Liminality' and his legacy[5] to their own ends: Mahon's 'Burbles' series, loose translations of Beckett's *mirlitonnades*, waywardly reworks the original poems into something closer to a transposition or adaptation, for example; Muldoon's 2010 poem 'Lines for the Centenary of the Birth of Samuel Beckett' rescripts *Waiting for Godot* as 'a couple of gadabouts at a loss // as to why they were at the beck and call / of some old crock soaring', and evokes Beckett's name only indirectly in the phonic echoes of 'at the beck and call' and the repeated word 'bucket'.[6] But it is in the most direct invocations of Beckett's and his characters' names in Mahon and Muldoon's work that we can find their clearest response to Beckett's literary legacy. Mahon's 'Beyond Howth Head' and Muldoon's 'The Prince of the Quotidian' and 'Incantata' invoke Beckett's name as an expression of Irish literature removed from or destabilised within its recognisable Irish context in these poems: Beckett is transplanted to America, repeatedly traverses the border between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland, and appears as part of an Ireland increasingly eroded by competing international influences. Adrienne Janus has argued that 'both Mahon and Muldoon find in Beckett's work a precedent in the attempt to negotiate the limits of an English literary tradition to which they do not fully belong',[7] but here Beckett's name appears rather as a part of Mahon and Muldoon's attempt to negotiate the limits of a specifically *Irish* literary tradition to which they only partly belong – limits which may, in fact, need to be thrown off in order to permit Mahon and Muldoon's own coming into voice.

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[4] Cited in Christopher Steare, *Derek Mahon: A Study of His Poetry* (London: Greenwich Exchange, 2017), 16.

[5] Paul Muldoon, *To Ireland, I* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 12.

[6] Paul Muldoon, *Maggot* (London: Faber and Faber, 2010), 57.

[7] Adrienne Janus, 'In One Ear and Out the Other: Beckett. . . Mahon, Muldoon', *Journal of Modern Literature* 30, no. 2 (2007): 181.

In 'The Prince of the Quotidian' (1994), Muldoon invokes Beckett's name within a long line of Irish writers:

> After two days grading papers from the seminar I taught
> on Swift, Yeats, Sterne,
> Joyce, and Beckett,
> I break my sword across my iron knee[8]

The poem is explicitly concerned with the process of literary inheritance, the channels by which 'these images fresh images beget',[9] and Muldoon very literally begets new poetry out of the 'images' of established Irish literature. The extended mapping of Irish literary allusion acts as an index of Muldoon's own inherited authority over the Irish literary material that he invokes, and indeed over those who cannot parse the glancing references elsewhere in the poem to Joyce's Michael Furey, to Swiftian 'Dean', and 'one James Butler, Corporal Trim' from Lawrence Sterne's *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman* (1759–1767). The opening lines of the poem see Muldoon insert himself at the end of the line of canonical Irish writers, directly following Beckett himself: 'Joyce, and Beckett / I'.[10] The self-establishing gesture is reiterated later in the poem, when Muldoon embeds his own name in the final stanza by way of the Irish Gaelic language. Muldoon narrates Jonathan Swift as having 'embarked on *Immram Curaig Mael Duin*'; the Gaelic term refers to *The Voyage of Máel Dúin's* Curach, the longest known example of the traditional Irish *immram* or 'travel tale', written in Old Irish at the end of the first millennium AD and featuring 'Máel Dúin' as its hero. The phonetic similarity between 'Máel Dúin' and 'Muldoon' is obvious, even before we take into account Laura O'Connor's discovery that a younger Muldoon would occasionally sign his work with the similarly Gaelicised rendering of his name 'Pól Ó Maoldúin'.[11] At first blush, then, Muldoon seems to insert himself firmly within an Irish literary tradition, following on both literally and artistically from Beckett himself.

However, Muldoon's own covert resistance to being inscribed within the Irish literary tradition complicates this reading. His apparent claim to Irish literary identity is counterbalanced by the poem's semi-concealed setting in the USA and Muldoon's absence from Ireland itself, teaching at Princeton University between 1987 and 1999. The violence of the phrase 'I break my sword across my iron knee' in response to the invocation of canonical Irish authors further undermines any easy sense of continuity. The weight of the canonical Irish names that open the poem are positioned now as a heavy burden that must be resisted to ensure survival, and the line break between 'Joyce and Beckett' and Muldoon's subsequent 'I' works equivocally to both connect and divide Muldoon's own poetic identity and the invoked names. The alignment of violence and contested Irish identity frustrates any simple line of inherited literary continuity between Muldoon and his Irish predecessors, amid whom Beckett sits as one notable figurehead. In Muldoon's grappling with the challenge of a simultaneously 'Irish' yet 'not Irish' liminal literary identity, Beckett's name is a site of uncomfortably coexistent inheritance and resistance.

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[8] Paul Muldoon, *The Prince of the Quotidian* (Dublin: The Gallery Press, 1994), 24.

[9] Muldoon, *Prince*, 24.

[10] Muldoon, *Prince*, 24.

[11] Laura O'Connor, 'The Bilingual Routes of Paul Muldoon/Pól Ó Maoldúin', *Irish Studies Review* 19, no. 2, (2011): 135.

Beckett's and his characters' names also play a crucial structuring role in Muldoon's 'Incantata' (1994), written for Muldoon's former partner, the American artist Mary Farl Powers who lived in Dublin from 1951 onward and died from breast cancer at the age of forty-three. It is jarring to find a mock-heroic reference to 'His Nibs Sam Bethicket' appearing early in so intensely personal a poem, particularly given the convoluted intellectualism of the invocation, which echoes James Joyce's distortion of Beckett's name in *Finnegans Wake* (1939): 'You most shouts out: / Bethicket me for a stump of a beech'.[12] Further invocations of Beckett and his characters recur at regular intervals throughout the poem, with Krapp, Vladimir and Estragon, Nagg and Nell, Watt and Knott, and Lucky and Pozzo all making an appearance. These Beckettian references are intertwined with personal memories of his former partner, as for example the memory of 'your delight, so, in eating a banana as ceremoniously as Krapp',[13] or when Krapp's pondering of widowhood is tied to Muldoon's regret as to his earlier treatment of Powers:

> I can hardly believe that, when we met, my idea of 'R and R'
> was to get smashed, almost every night, on sickly-sweet Demarara
> rum and Coke: as well as leaving you a grass widow
> (remember how Krapp looks up 'viduity'?)[14]

The regret evoked by Muldoon's memory of abandoning Powers to go drinking during their early relationship is intensified here by the dark doubling of Krapp's own mournful 'widowhood'. Similarly, Muldoon's invoking the tensely static relationships between Beckett's pseudo-couples amplifies the agonised sense of jealous resentment that comes between Powers and Muldoon, bringing them to 'a standstill worthy of Hamm and Clov':

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[12] Paul Muldoon, *The Annals of Chile* (London: Faber and Faber, 1994), 14.

[13] Muldoon, *Annals*, 26.

[14] Muldoon, *Annals*, 14.

> Hamm and Clov; Nagg and Nell; Watt and Knott;
> the fact is we'd been at a standstill long before the night
> things came to a head,
> [. . .]
> and I let slip a name – her name – off my tongue
> and you turned away [. . .][15]

Later, in the central stanza of the poem, Muldoon affiliates himself with several of Beckett's characters, adopting their words in order to convey his confused grief at Powers' refusal to accept conventional medical treatment for her cancer:

> The fact that you were determined to cut yourself off in your prime
> because it was *pre*-determined has my eyes abrim:
> I crouch with Belacqua
> and Lucky and Pozzo in the Acacacac-
> ademy of Anthropopopometry, trying to make sense of the '*quaquaqua*'[16]

Muldoon borrows the absurd language of Beckett's characters as he attempts to make sense of the senseless in his own life: Powers' early death, and her acquiescence to that death. In contrast to the distinctly resistant aligning between Muldoon and Beckett in 'The Prince of the Quotidian', in 'Incantata' Muldoon positions himself far more directly and indeed self-critically alongside Beckett's characters, 'crouch[ing] with' them in a posture of grieving self-abasement. Where 'The Prince of the Quotidian' sees Muldoon performatively break the literary line of continuity between Beckett and himself, in 'Incantata' he draws on Beckett's and his characters' names to convey an intensely personal strength of feeling.

However, Muldoon's elegy elegy and his associated invocations of Beckett's characters are also entwined in 'Incantata' with an extended meditation on the Northern Irish Troubles and the contested border between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland, historically the site of political wrangling and civil bloodshed. Much of the River Foyle, cited in the poem's penultimate stanza, runs along the border between Londonderry in Northern Ireland and County Donegal in Ireland, for example; the image of Powers and Muldoon sitting on the Enterprise, the cross-border train service linking Dublin and Belfast, 'somewhere just south of Killnasaggart' leaves us uncertain whether the couple are halted in the North or the Republic, since Killnasaggart itself lies just north of the Irish border.[17] The 'standstill worthy of Hamm and Clov' that Muldoon uses to describe his stalled relationship with Powers is first evoked here as a literal and intensely politicised 'standstill', as the couple sit on the halted Enterprise train in the aftermath of a 'bomb-blast / further up the track', which will become the emotional 'standstill' redolent of 'Hamm and Clov; Nagg and Nell; Watt and Knott' that appears in the line following this stanza:

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[15] Muldoon, *Annals*, 16–17. [16] Muldoon, *Annals*, 20.

> [. . .] I myself was shaking like a leaf
> as we wondered whether the I.R.A. or the Red
> Hand Commandos or even the Red
> Brigades had brought us to a standstill worthy of Hamm and Clov.[18]

Here, the bleakly comic medley of Irish Nationalist (IRA), Ulster loyalist (Red Hand Commandos) and Italian far-left (Red Brigades) paramilitary groups reinforces Muldoon's studied muddling of national identity and violent conflict. Similarly, the image of Muldoon 'crouch[ing] with Belacqua / and Lucky and Pozzo' is aligned with the 'eighteen soldiers dead at Warrenpoint' in the next stanza,[19] a reference to the Warrenpoint Massacre in August 1979 in which IRA insurgents staged a guerrilla attack on occupying British Army troops on the banks of the Newry River at the border between Northern Ireland and the Republic. Their deaths are merged into the incomprehensible 'quaquaqua' of which the poem struggles to make sense, a coalescing of personal and national tragedy. Throughout 'Incantata', Muldoon invokes Beckett's work as a mediating structure for aligning the breakdown of both intimate and political relationships.

Derek Mahon's poetry stages a still more equivocal relationship with Beckett as a literary forebear, and one tightly intertwined with his similarly ambivalent relationship with his own Northern Irish identity. Mahon was born to a Protestant family in Belfast with ties to the historically Protestant Harland and Wolff shipyards in the city, but he would move to Dublin in the Republic of Ireland to take up undergraduate study at Trinity College. From here, Mahon's life evinces a number of uncanny parallels with Beckett's own early years: after studying French at Trinity College

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[17] Muldoon, *Annals*, 17.

[18] Muldoon, *Annals*, 16.

[19] Muldoon, *Annals*, 20–21.

Dublin, Mahon would spend time in both London and Paris, as well as an unhappy period teaching in a Belfast secondary school. Indeed, where Beckett famously derided his own Belfast students as '*la crème de la crème*. . . rich and thick',[20] Mahon offered a similarly sardonic rejection of the Belfast milieu. In repudiating the oft-made claim that he was part of the 'Belfast Group' or 'Belfast School' – a creative writing group founded at Queen's University Belfast in 1963 by poet and professor Philip Hobsbaum, credited with nurturing the early talent of Seamus Heaney, Michael and Edna Longley, James Simmons and Bernard MacLaverty, among others – Mahon aligns himself instead with an Irish-based but distinctly international coterie, in which he includes Beckett's influence: 'The critics have decided we were all (Heaney, Longley, Mahon) Belfast students together, happily anti-modernist at Hobsbaum's feet, when at least one of those mentioned was sitting in Dublin reading [Robert] Graves, [Hart] Crane and Beckett'.[21] Yet despite his resistance to any neat categorisation as a 'Northern Irish poet' – and even to the concept of a discrete demographic of 'Northern Irish poetry'[22] – Mahon admits to having 'never been very sure' of his place in any specific literary or political landscape.[23] He has lamented lacking the natural audience that he cites as the advantage of the Irish poet who 'knows exactly who he's writing for',[24] and the manner in which Belfast represents 'the final anathema for the traditional Irish imagination': 'A lot of people who are regarded as important in Irish poetry cannot accept that the Protestant suburbs in Belfast are a part of Ireland, you know. At an aesthetic level they can't accept that'.[25] This 'lingering feeling of regret about belonging to one's own' which Kathleen Shields has identified in Mahon's poetry parallels Beckett's own distinctly ambivalent relationship with Ireland itself,[26] and Mahon cites Beckett specifically as a figure resistant to any easy sense of national belonging in his 1986 essay 'A Tribute to Beckett on his Eightieth Birthday':

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[20] Cited in Muldoon, *To Ireland*, 14.

[21] Derek Mahon, 'Modernist Poets', *Irish Times*, 16 July 1987, 9.

[22] Peter Fallon and Derek Mahon, 'Introduction' in *The Penguin Book of Contemporary Irish Poets* (London: Penguin, 1990), xx.

[23] Derek Mahon, 'Each Poem for Me Is a New Beginning', interview by Willie Kelly, *The Cork Review* 2, no. 3 (1981): 11.

[24] Derek Mahon, 'An Interview with Derek Mahon', interview by Terence Brown, *Poetry Ireland Review* 14 (1985): 11.

[25] Derek Mahon, 'Harriet Cooke Talks to the Poet Derek Mahon', interview by Harriet Cooke, *Irish Times*, 17 January 1973, 10.

[26] Katherine Shields, 'Derek's Mahon's Poetry of Belonging', *Irish University Review* 24, no. 1 (1994): 76.

> What makes Beckett such a puzzle? Wherein lies the curiosity value? Why do we want to know all we can about him? The answer, I believe, lies at least partly in a widespread inability to 'place' him, both in the conventional English sense [. . .] and in a sense intended by the American student who says, 'I don't know where you're coming from.'[27]

It is Beckett's apparent rootlessness, the difficulty of locating him conclusively in any discrete national tradition, that rouses Mahon's interest; Beckett offers him a useful vehicle through which to explore the comparable liminal status of the Northern Irish writer's identity.

Mahon's poem 'Beyond Howth Head' evinces the same liminal state of intercommunion as Muldoon's Irish-Northern Irish body in 'Incantata', staging the ongoing dissolution of any neatly circumscribed Irish cultural or even geographical identity.[28] The poem's references to canonical Irish literary sources – Kemoc, 'Yeats's hill-men' and the swans of Lir, James Joyce's Anna Livia and Martello tower, Beckett's own Molloy – merge in these stanzas with Dylan Thomas, Henry David Thoreau, Japanese poet Chomēi at Tōyama, *l'outre-tombe* and *realpolitik*. Ireland's 'crumbling shores' at Howth Head cannot maintain their structural integrity against external forces of influence.[29] Mahon, as himself a 'not quite Irish' poet, writes a 'not quite Irish' poem, emphasising the porous borders of national identity – and once again the invocation of Beckett's work structures this state of liminal breach and decay. Following an evocation of the English BBC, the German Volkswagen and the French *joie de vivre*, "the poem declares: 'The pros outweigh the cons that glow / from Beckett's bleak reductio'" to "the poem turns to the 'glow / from Beckett's bleak reductio'".[30] Mahon has elsewhere explained his admiration for the Beckettian *reductio*: 'I've always been struck by the line in *Waiting for Godot*, "They give birth astride of a grave, the light gleams an instant, then it's night once more" – in fact I've written a poem about it'.[31] The poem that Mahon references here is 'An Image from Beckett', published alongside 'Beyond Howth Head' in the 1972 volume *Lives*, which imagines 'the gravedigger / Putting aside his forceps. // Then [. . .]

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[27] Derek Mahon, *Journalism: Selected Prose 1970–1995*, ed. Terence Brown (Dublin: The Gallery Press, 1996), 62.

[28] 'Beyond Howth Head' was originally published in Mahon's 1972 volume *Lives* and was later revised for subsequent publication. This chapter cites from the revised version.

[29] Derek Mahon, *Selected Poems* (London: Penguin, 2005), 17.

[30] Mahon, *Selected Poems*, 18.

[31] Mahon, interview by Kelly, 11.

darkness once again'.[32] Whereas in 'An Image from Beckett' the Beckettian gleam offers an 'instant' of revelatory 'sweetness and light' – which is only slightly caveated by the poem's ambivalently hesitant ending in which Mahon hopes that ensuing generations are also left 'light enough, to read'[33] – in 'Beyond Howth Head' the *reductio* gleam becomes a gloomier phenomenon. Here, the emphasis falls on the inevitable coming of darkness rather than the momentary flash of light: the Atlantic wind 'shivers the dim stars' of Ireland, where figures 'fumble with the matches' and 'old fiery instincts dim'. The intermittent winking of the Baily lighthouse meanwhile warns of danger in 'the troubled / waters' that lie between Ireland and Britain.[34] Mahon invokes Beckett's *reductio* as a self-referential harbinger of the steady demise of the Irish literary and cultural landscape.

Even Beckett's Molloy gets overwritten in Mahon's bleak rescripting of the Irish landscape:

> Roaring, its ten-lane highways pitch
> their naked bodies in the ditch
> where once Molloy, uncycled, heard
> thin cries of a surviving bird[35]

There is an echo here of an anecdote which J. C. C. Mays recounts of Beckett's own bleak vision of Irish artistry:

> [H]e was asked by an American reporter why such a small country as Ireland had produced so many writers in such a short time – himself, Joyce, Yeats, Synge, O'Casey, Shaw, and so on. Without hesitation, Beckett leaned forward and whispered: 'When you are in the last ditch, there is nothing left but to sing.'[36]

Mahon retains the ditch, but refigures the defiant song into feeble 'thin cries', which are in turn silenced. In this restively resistant recasting, Beckett's Molloy is evoked only to be ruthlessly dispatched again. Mahon's dark revisioning of the Beckettian gleam of light climaxes in the poem's acerbic image of the 'blithe' disregard of the man who

> placed, in Co. Clare, a sign:
> 'Stop here and watch the sun go down'.
> Meanwhile, for a word's sake, the plastic
> bombs go off around Belfast[37]

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[32] Mahon, *Selected Poems*, 14.
[33] Mahon, *Selected Poems*, 14, 16.
[34] Mahon, *Selected Poems*, 17, 19, 21.
[35] Mahon, *Selected Poems*, 21.
[36] J. C. C. Mays, 'Young Beckett's Irish Roots', *Irish University Review* 14, no. 1 (1984): 20.
[37] Mahon, *Selected Poems*, 21.

Here, the romanticising of the Irish sunset's dying gleam is placed in stark juxtaposition with another momentary flash of light: the exploding bombs of the Northern Irish Troubles across the Irish border. Beckett's already fatalistic glimpse of light is transmuted from derided Irish romanticism to destructive inter-border explosion, and finally into the bleak resolution of the poem's concluding couplet: 'I put out the light / on shadows of the encroaching night'.[38] Mahon's invocation of Beckett's 'bleak reductio' offers only briefly lit visions of Ireland and the Irish literary canon, denying any sense of Irish exceptionalism or of the redemptive influence of Irish art. Even Beckett's Molloy, framed in the poem as an exemplar of an Irish literary canon, is rapidly dispossessed of any illusion of cultural stability or endurance. Mahon and Muldoon, then, regularly invoke Beckett's name in their poetry as a means of both drawing on and resisting the Irish literary legacy. Beckett offers a useful evocation of a national liminality, and is simultaneously a central figure of the Irish literary canon to which they do not, cannot, quite belong.

Beckett in Paris: Padraic Fiacc and Leontia Flynn

If Mahon and Muldoon anxiously probe their claim to allegiance with Beckett's legacy, Padraic Fiacc and Leontia Flynn reckon more confidently with the pressures of that Beckettian legacy on their own poetic practice and cultural identity. In invoking Beckett's name and imagined voice in their poems, both Fiacc and Flynn testify to an ongoing relationship with their famous forebear, made manifest via the apparition of Beckett himself in his Northern inheritors' poems. However, where Fiacc's forcible sense of inheritance renders Beckett's presence a weighty, somewhat oppressive one within his poetry, Flynn's more irreverent treatment sees her restate a generative margin of difference between Beckett's legacy and her own poetic development.

Padraic Fiacc was born in Belfast in 1924 and moved back and forth between Northern Ireland and New York during his childhood and young adulthood, eventually settling permanently in Belfast in 1956. Most of his work was published by the Belfast-based Blackstaff Press and Lagan Press, although he was also a member of Aosdána, the Irish Arts Academy, rendering him a particularly neat exemplar of the frequently dual cultural identity of the Northern Irish writer.[39] Fiacc's 1999 poem 'A Good Shot' is dedicated to the Irish photographer John Minihan, who photographed Fiacc in Minihan's hometown of Athy, County Kildare. Minihan had previously photographed Beckett in London in 1980 and 1984 and in Paris in 1985, and Fiacc's poem begins:

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[38] Mahon, *Selected Poems*, 24. In *Lives*, the final stanza opens and closes with explicit literary references, beginning 'and here I close my *Dover Beach* / scenario', and ending, 'as I put out the light / on Mailer's *Armies of the Night*'. Mahon's revision of the poem erases these pan-Anglophone references to establish a conclusive final vision of a troubled and decaying Irish landscape.

> Beckett welcomes you to Paris. 'So
> Long as you don't bring a camera.'
> Beckett finds you and not you
> Him.[40]

Fiacc here summarises Minihan's interaction with Beckett in Paris. Having already sat for Minihan in London in 1984, Beckett agreed to meet the photographer again in December 1985, but only if Minihan left his camera at home. The two talked at the Petit Café PLM on the Boulevard Saint-Jacques, and Beckett agreed to allow Minihan to take his photograph there the following day; the result was Minihan's famous image of the elderly Beckett sitting in the covered terrace of the café before two empty coffee cups and a full ashtray. The photograph has attained iconic status, aided by Minihan's own deferential recounting of Beckett's role in the image's composition: 'Sam directed the whole scene. He wanted it to say: "This is who I am"'.[41] Fiacc's poem accords Beckett a similarly mythologised stature. The fantasy of Beckett's own voice echoes authoritatively in the opening stanza, the invocation of Beckett's name having seemingly summoned his presence into Fiacc's poem.[42] Beckett is accorded an intensely puissant afterlife here. The line 'Beckett finds you and not you / Him' accords active power to Beckett rather than to his inheritors, and the unexpected line break between 'you' and 'Him' occasions the reverential capitalisation of 'Him', syntactically granting Beckett's invoked identity a deity-like degree of iconographic significance.[43] 'A Good Shot' positions

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[39] Fiacc has testified powerfully to his own sense of muddled national identity, recounting a trip to the dole office in Ireland in 1948 'with my Irish passport that says Belfast, Éire [. . .]. "This gentleman is under three flags!" The dole clerk freezes. "I know that, I know that, but what is he, Irish, British, or American?" It dawns on me that even I don't know' (2002, 19).

[40] Padraic Fiacc, *Semper Vacare* (Belfast: Lagan Press, 1999), 26.

[41] John Minihan, 'John Minihan's Best Shot: Samuel Beckett', interview by Sarah Philips, *Guardian*, 15 August 2012, www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2012/aug/15/john-minihan-best-photograph.

[42] 'To invoke' can be defined as 'to utter a sacred name' and 'to summon in prayer', and Fiacc attaches the epigraph '*A poem is a prayer* – Samuel Beckett' to his 1994 poem 'At Autumn Birds of Passage' (*Woe to the Boy*, 45).

[43] Fiacc, *Semper Vacare*, 26.

Beckett as an enduring force of inheritance: an inescapable literary origin for both the Irish photographer and the Northern Irish writer, whose voice resonates through subsequent poetry, and who 'finds you' wherever you should roam.

Indeed, although Fiacc's poem ostensibly opens in Paris, it quickly draws an originary connection to the Irish town Athy, where Minihan was born and to which Fiacc travelled to be photographed by him: 'He finds you in the time mirror // Of your own home town of Athy'.[44] Several scholars have noted the deep-running influence of Beckett and a 'Beckettian anti-aesthetic' on Fiacc's poetry,[45] and Fiacc projects a similarly compulsive alliance on to Minihan in 'A Good Shot'. In Athy, 'you were only looking for your old / Young self', Fiacc acknowledges,[46] but the Beckettian legacy haunts the artist even here, darkening the second half of the poem into something more viscerally unsettling. The closing stanzas of 'A Good Shot' evoke 'the dead in the bury hole', and a Mahon-esque evocation of the Beckettian *reductio* gleam of light by way of 'the black // Hole that buries a dead star'.[47] As with Mahon's Beckettian '*reductio*', in 'A Good Shot' Fiacc's initial vaunting of his Irish literary predecessor gives way to a bleak poetic afterlife, characterised primarily by deterioration and death. Fiacc's poetry repeatedly evokes a similar sense of miserably inescapable alliance with his birthtown Belfast, Ulster – or 'Hellfast, Ulcer' as he sardonically terms it.[48] 'I'd like to set you free from / Bitch Belfast', he tells his daughter in 'Goodbye to Brigid',[49] and laments being 'born lying in / This ditch of a cold Belfast dawn' alongside the corpses of the Troubles from which he 'can't / Get away'.[50] Fiacc narrates an overwhelming force of alliance that repeatedly wrests Minihan back both to Beckett and to Athy wherever he goes – for better or for worse – and this exigent pressure in 'A Good Shot' parallels the comparably inescapable shadow of both Beckett and Belfast across Fiacc's own poetry. As in Muldoon's Irish-haunted work, Beckett's iconic literary legacy pursues even these wandering emigrant artists across their geographic and cultural lives.

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[44] Fiacc, *Semper Vacare*, 26.

[45] Aidan Tynan, 'A Season in Hell: Paradox and Violence in the Poetry of Padraic Fiacc', *Irish University Review* 44, no. 2 (2014): 346.

[46] Fiacc, *Semper Vacare*, 26. [47] Fiacc, *Semper Vacare*, 26.

[48] Padraic Fiacc, 'Name Droppings', *Fortnight* 405 (June 2002): 19.

[49] Padraic Fiacc, 'Goodbye to Brigid', *Fortnight* 328 (May 1994): 49.

[50] Padraic Fiacc, 'The Ditch of Dawn', *The Poetry Ireland Review* 83 (2005): 77.

Belfast-based poet Leontia Flynn (b. 1974) likewise scrutinises Beckett's enduring literary inheritance – but Flynn's marked poetic iconoclasm establishes an expedient distance between forerunner and follower. Flynn invokes Beckett's name repeatedly across her 2008 volume *Drives*, which is replete with intertextual allusions to and direct invocations of other modernist writers: Virginia Woolf, Elizabeth Bishop, Robert Lowell and George Orwell also feature, for example, but Beckett's name recurs more frequently than any other. In her poem 'Paris', Flynn initially enacts a hero-worship similar to that of Fiacc's 'A Good Shot', but she does so with a subversive twist. Flynn locates herself as one of the 'skilled voyeurs' holidaying in Paris, engaged on a 'leisured and Euro-ed' tour of the city,[51] undercutting the poem's own purported literary idolising with a sardonic recontextualising of what it might mean to admire an artistic legacy. Beckett appears amid a starry catalogue of Paris-based literary greats, the poem panegyrising 'Proust and Baudelaire // and Beckett and Stein, Joyce and Apollinaire'.[52] The perfunctory feeling of this checklist of icons is intensified by recurrent ellipses and dashes scattered across the short poem, and by the dispassionate briskness with which the poem's speaker determines to move on from the Parisian cemeteries and join the 'great big queue' outside the Louvre that closes the final stanza.[53] Thus, although 'Paris' ostensibly glorifies Beckett among a conglomerate collection of canonical twentieth-century writers, its situating him in Paris rather than Ireland – let alone Northern Ireland – locates Flynn as a tourist, rather than a direct inheritor, of his work. The relationship between Beckett and Flynn's poetic persona is here one of literary sightseeing, rather than any essentialised national kinship.

A few pages later, in the sonnet 'Marcel Proust', Flynn invokes Beckett's name again with similarly mischievous archness. At the end of an octet recounting the many ways in which her life does not measure up to that of the celebrated Proustian genius, she admits, 'I was not stricken by Samuel Beckett's cigar...'[54] Immediately following this apparent hierarchising of Beckett's literary celebrity, however, Flynn opens the ensuing sestet with an assertion of her own contemporary (and indeed distinctly feminine) Proustian *mémoire involontaire*: 'But one whiff of kiwi-fruit lip-balm from Anita Roddick's Body Shop / and wham! I'm back' in decade-old memories.[55] Flynn reshapes an established modernist framework to suit her own independent poetic identity. Even the shift in the wildly differing tenors of the vocabulary between the octet and sestet – from 'was not stricken' to 'wham!', 'melancholic asthma' to 'kiwi-fruit lip-balm', vitiated languor to reinvigorated vitality – emphasises new poetic life, freed of a constraining inheritance. Like Muldoon in 'The Prince of the Quotidian', Flynn asserts an informed understanding of canonical literary culture, but promptly removes herself from any too-close affinity with that practice, in a simultaneously self-deprecating and triumphantly resistant gesture. Erin C. Mitchell has suggested that Flynn's poetry betrays an acute concern that literary influence 'be paid forward with appropriate anxiety and gratitude'[56] but, in this poem, Beckett and his associated literary forebears function as a productive site of resistance rather than a source of restrictive angst.

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[51] Leontia Flynn, *Drives* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2008), 20.
[52] Flynn, *Drives*, 20.
[53] Flynn, *Drives*, 20.
[54] Flynn, *Drives*, 26.
[55] Flynn, *Drives*, 26.

Finally, Flynn's sonnet 'Samuel Beckett', as the lengthiest and most direct invocation of Beckett's iconographic persona in *Drives*, performs the most decisive of all of Flynn's Beckett-oriented exorcisms. 'Samuel Beckett' relocates the reader from France to London, recounting a fantasised appointment between not-yet-successful Beckett and his psychoanalyst Wilfred Bion. Bion's imagined notes on the young Beckett's sorry condition open the poem on a teasingly irreverent note that Beckett suffers from a list of humiliating symptoms including 'boils, odd facial rashes [. . .] nightsweats, insomnia, dreams of suffocation / palpitations, panic attacks, diarrhoea'.[57] In sharp contrast to Fiacc's starstruck mythologising of Beckett, Flynn here reduces the literary icon down to an intimately vulnerable human form. The issue of inescapable inheritance is revised from the literary to the specifically familial, as both Bion and Beckett point an accusing finger at the latter's mother as the source of his ills. Flynn's poem traces a necessary separation that enables literary creation, the separation of Beckett from his mother and the Cartesian separation of body and mind – 'two *utterly* separate kingdoms' – that enables him to give a 'quick shrug at the thought of his last anal cyst' and return to writing the Cartesian-inflected *Murphy*.[58] Where Flynn cites the division of body and mind that allows Beckett to write *Murphy* in the midst of his physical suffering, we can trace a parallel with Flynn's own assertion of literary independence: a separation that allows her to establish herself as a freely functioning poet in her own right. Borrowing Muldoon's own neologism, 'the ungetroundable', to denote the apparently inescapable influence of Beckett on subsequent Irish and Northern Irish writing,[59] Stephen Watt has traced how 'for both Muldoon and Mahon' – and, we might add, for Fiacc – 'Beckett has proved an irresistible "ungetroundable" figure' whose oppressive weight of influence reaches 'at times pathological dimensions'.[60] By contrast, Flynn manages to 'get round' Beckett in a manner that Muldoon, Mahon and Fiacc either could not or would not do, invoking an affectionately sketched yet attenuated Beckett who can be safely incorporated into – and then discarded from – her own poetic practice.

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[56] Erin C. Mitchell, 'Leontia Flynn's Poetic Museums: Losing, Saving, and Giving Away Belfast's Trash', *New Hibernia Review* 18, no. 2 (2014): 117.

[57] Flynn, *Drives*, 11.

[58] Flynn, *Drives*, 11, original emphasis.

Of course, this is a self-consciously staged repudiation on Flynn's part. A poem entitled 'Samuel Beckett' that borrows liberally from the details of Beckett's biography and bibliography, published in a volume that recurrently invokes Beckett's name, does not 'reject' Beckett or escape his influence in any straightforward sense. Much as the psychosomatic nature of Beckett's physical suffering undermines the idea of any actual separation of mind and body – highlighted here by the over-emphatic italicising in 'two *utterly* separate kingdoms' – so too Flynn's performative erasure of Beckett throughout *Drives* renders him a strikingly vital presence within the volume. Nevertheless, although he is positioned as pre-eminent among the multitude of other iconic literary forebears invoked throughout *Drives*, Beckett's afterlife is here a more muted, workable inheritance, rather than a hauntingly oppressive one. Flynn's irreverent tone, and her invocation of a younger, more vulnerable and less overbearingly successful Beckett, frames his legacy as a generative rather than paralysing force.

Conclusion: Beckett in Northern Ireland

In 'Beckett in Belfast' (2010), Northern Irish poet Howard Wright reimagines Beckett's declared distaste for the Campbell College students he taught during his brief and unhappy period living in Northern Ireland's capital city Belfast:

> Fuck off you snot-thick
> northern sons, so politically flawed, so genetically deficient.
> I'll kick the wee pricks in their *ars poetica* and never look back.[61]

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[59] Paul Muldoon, 'Getting Round: Notes towards an *Ars Poetica*', *Essays in Criticism* 48, no. 2 (1998): 108.

[60] Watt, *Contemporary Irish Writing*, 131, 135.

[61] Howard Wright, *King of Country* (Belfast: Blackstaff Press, 2010), 35.

Wright draws on Beckett's recorded dislike of Campbell College students and of Belfast itself, but rescripts it in an imagined monologue that, although framed as Beckett's own voice, is unmistakably verbalised by Wright rather than by Beckett; the invective in the poem's first line 'stuff your cricket and oral French' seems carefully calculated to run counter to Beckett's well-known passion for both cricket and the French language, for example.[62] Thus an odd tension is established in 'Beckett in Belfast': on one hand, an invoked 'Beckett' or 'Beckett's voice' has ostensibly taken over the entire poem but, on the other hand, this is an obviously fantasised version of Beckett scripted by Wright. Although Wright bases his poem on Beckett's acknowledged dislike of Campbell College and his time in Belfast, this antipathy is moreover at times very much also Wright's own, a targeted aversion reiterated throughout his poems in *King of Country*. Beckett's distaste for Northern Ireland might seem an unlikely source of inspiration for a Northern Irish poet, but Wright borrows Beckett's sentiment to express what is apparently his own shared sensibility – and in doing so he recasts Beckett's persona almost beyond recognition in order to suit his own poetic practice.

If Wright's poem draws on Beckett's disparagement of a Belfast school, the 'Belfast School' of poets have also turned, affectionately yet exactingly, on Beckett's own legacy. Beckett's 'northern sons' (and daughters) have given him a new afterlife in the continued invocation in their poetry, but their complexly multitoned invocations have also reworked that legacy to scrutinise and at times to assert their own position in a contemporary poetic canon. Speaking more broadly about contemporary Northern Irish poetry, Naomi Marklew has noted that the work of the younger 'peace poets' – that is, those who, like Flynn and Wright, established their careers following the Troubles ceasefire – typically retains the 'sense of inheritance' which Marklew cites as one of the 'strengths' of Northern Irish literature, but often also acts as a source 'of resistance and of hope for the future'.[63] Northern Irish poetry rescripts Beckett to its own ends.

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[62] Wright, *King of Country*, 35.

[63] Naomi Marklew, 'The Future of Northern Irish Poetry: Fragility, Contingency, Value, and Beauty', *English Academy Reviews* 31, no. 2 (2014): 77.