

Irreducible Ireland

Moore, Wilde, Yeats,
Joyce, Beckett

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CHISOKUDŌ

Contents

Foreword by Richard Kearney *ix*

Preface *xv*

Abbreviations *xix*

1. George Moore: The Quest for Sexual Recognition *1*
2. Comic Entrances, Tragic Exits: Wilde and Socrates *52*
3. The Priest: From George Moore to Mary Lavin *76*
4. The Grief of Impermanence: Yeats's "Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen" (1921) *110*
5. The Troubled Heart: "Meditations in Time of Civil War" (1923) *131*
6. The Triumph of Imperfection: "Among School Children" (1926) *147*
7. An Inward Turn: "A Dialogue of Self and Soul" (1927) *166*
8. Nietzsche and Shelley in "Blood and the Moon" (1927) *203*
9. "A Chemistry of Stars": Joyce's Newman *215*
10. Samuel Beckett's Radio Mystery: *All That Fall* *232*
11. Intertextual Power in *The Lost Ones* *267*
12. *Company*: The Self in Throes *308*

Epilogue *361*

Index of Proper Names *364*

Foreword

Richard Kearney

The roots of this book go back to those amazingly seminal days that Joseph O’Leary and I spent in Paris in 1977–1979. O’Leary was ensconced in the historic Irish College, reading the Fathers in light of Heidegger, prompted by the sagacious Fr Liam Swords to study Jansenism and the Irish in the seventeenth century, and joining me in forays around the philosophically stimulating Paris of that time. Mark Patrick Hederman and I involved him in *The Crane Bag* journal for which he wrote his first essay on Joyce (having previously been more enchanted by Marcel Proust and Henry James). Somewhat later Robert Welch got him to write on George Moore. On learning of O’Leary’s turn to Moore, my mother-in-law, Kathleen Bernard, a devoted Joycean in her own right, exclaimed: “Are you going to stick with that old bore?” But Joseph found Moore to be a gift that kept on giving, and a sharp interpreter of his native Ireland.

Kathleen Bernard recommended O’Leary to her friend Masaki Kondo, whom he met in his first week in Japan in 1983, and who has constantly urged him ever since to write on Beckett. She herself had once warmly thanked Beckett for *Oh les beaux jours*, one of his many parables of heroic persistence in hellish situations. At that time Deirdre Bair’s ground-breaking biography of Beckett (1978) made a splash in Paris and was the target of much churlish gossip. Beckett produced an inspired response in *Compagnie (Company)*. *Imagination Dead Imagine* (1965) was an allied text, which inspired the dialectic of my

own *The Wake of Imagination* (1982), while his “I can’t go on, I’ll go on” fed into my thoughts on *Anatheism: Returning to God After God* (2011). I was greatly inspired by O’Leary’s pioneering work on Beckett, including his original reading of the structure of *Company* as a parody of Proust with its three “*voix narratives*”; he revisits and deepens this analysis in the present volume, sensing a potentially religious dimension, God in the dark.

In keeping with the critical insights of O’Leary’s former writings on literature and culture, we find more evidence in this volume of his unerring attention to theological and musicological nuance. This dual attentiveness is particularly manifest in his chapters on Samuel Beckett, where close readings of the novels and plays are marvels of hermeneutic sensitivity. O’Leary can sound quasi-mystical intonations in Beckett’s ostensible atheism, without the slightest hint of apologetics. He deftly addresses, following Angela Moorjani, the profound influence on Beckett of Schopenhauer’s take on Buddhism, and particularly its themes of emptiness and samsara. Beckett’s apophatic, not to say anatheist, mysticism can be summed up in his lapidary phrase—“nothing is more real than nothing” (*Malone Dies*). And if O’Leary were not so demure and discreet regarding his own Christian theology, he might have made more of the deep ambivalence of Beckett on questions of faith, something I myself have analyzed elsewhere.¹ It is already on display in Didi’s theological musing at the start of *Waiting for Godot*: “One of the thieves was saved.... It’s a reasonable percentage.” It caught the world’s ear in the play’s title: the mischievously allusive name may refer to Godot the clown (as in Pierrot), to a famous French cyclist whom spectators waited for hours to greet, to the Gaelic term *go deo* meaning “forever,” in addition to the ultimate object of waiting postulated by everyman’s metaphysical gropings, the

1. “Demythologizing Intellect,” in R. Kearney, ed., *The Irish Mind* (Dublin: Wolfhound, 1984); and the three essays on Beckett, “The End of the Story,” “Writing Under Erasure,” and “Derrida and Beckett,” in *Navigations: Collected Irish Essays 1976–2006* (Dublin: Lilliput Press and Syracuse University Press, 2006), 150–76.

“God who may be.” Such playfulness—or in a Roland Barthes phrase, “profound ridiculousness”—when it comes to questions of theology is quintessentially Beckettian.

But if O’Leary is alert to tacit soundings of the sacred he is equally attuned to sounds of the profane—especially in Beckett’s play between the ordinary voice and silence. In his three chapters on Beckett, he celebrates the genius of the acoustic imagination. In perspicacious close readings of his compatriot’s versatile oeuvre, O’Leary highlights the colloquial power of the human voice to carry a profound charge of experience and emotion, and of philosophical questioning: “A voice comes to one in the dark. Imagine.” And I particularly admire his appreciation of the resonant Irishisms of Beckett’s tramps, clowns, and wanderers, subtly informed by his upbringing in Dublin and Wicklow (where he walked the hills with his garrulous father for hours as a child). So often commentators of Beckett, Joyce, and Wilde concentrate on the meaning of the writings at the expense of the voice which embodies and amplifies them. O’Leary demonstrates how Beckett is a maestro of the ear as well as the eye; and he reminds the reader that for all the metaphysical messages to be found in these Irish authors, the most important feature of their work is comedy. Beckett, like Joyce and Wilde before him, is steeped in what Vivian Mercier calls “the Irish comic tradition.” However dark or despairing the vision, hilarity always has the last word.

Japan turned out to be a hotbed of Irish studies, and its branch of IASAIL (International Association for the Study of Anglo-Irish Literature), later IASIL (International Association for the Study of Irish Literatures), was launched with the dynamic presence of the poet Brendan Kennelly in 1984. Twenty-five contributions to its *Journal of Irish Studies* form the basis on which this book by Joseph O’Leary and its companion *Joyasis Crisis* (2021) have been established. Meanwhile Joseph’s hobby became his job, as he was hired to profess literature at Sophia University, Tokyo, from 1988 to 2015. His remarkable Lady Donnellan lectures on “The Soul of Irish Modernism: Joyce, Beckett,

Yeats” at Trinity College in 1991, hosted by Seán Freyne, demonstrated his developing resolve to give a theological interpretation of Irish literature.

Another theologian friend, James Mackey, asked him to contribute to *An Introduction to Celtic Christianity* (Edinburgh, 1989), where he sketched his first thoughts on “the spiritual upshot of *Ulysses*.” Unlike the great literary theologians he admires—Romano Guardini, Hans Urs von Balthasar, and Rowan Williams—O’Leary has gravitated less towards religious writers like Dante, Hopkins, Dostoevsky, Claudel, than to authors who either never talk about God (Proust and James) or who seem to mock and reject religion (Moore, Joyce, Beckett). Perhaps it is Yeats who gives him most trouble. In the present work he focuses on what is perhaps the greatest phase in Yeats’s career, the verse of the 1920s centered on the magnificent image of the Tower. Cleaving to the eternal human themes and holding at bay the phantasmagoria of *A Vision*, he embraces a senatorial Yeats who combines a moving heart-story with a wise vision of Ireland at a time when the country was closing in on itself. In wrestling with those challenging poems, let’s not forget the earlier Yeats with his more spontaneous and quite inexhaustible inspiration from Irish mythology. Poems such as the “Song of Wandering Aengus” voice a deep Celtic connection with nature that is revealed in for its own sake:

Though I am old with wandering
Through hollow lands and hilly lands,
I will find out where she has gone,
And kiss her lips and take her hands;
And walk among long dappled grass,
And pluck till time and times are done
The silver apples of the moon,
The golden apples of the sun.

Here the Yeatsian “persona” at the center of O’Leary’s study is much less obtrusive and instead we tune in to what I would call a panentheistic awareness, a sense of Nature that is crucial for the spir-

itual health of Irish people and all people in our fragile world today. O’Leary’s recent reflections on the ecological spirituality of Hölderlin and Rilke veer in this direction and he might find a precious ally for them in their Irish counterpart.²

Joseph O’Leary stresses the emancipatory aspect of all the Irish writers he discusses, and it is perhaps here that their religious dimension most appears. “The Spirit blows where it wills”, and one of O’Leary’s paradoxical skills is to find the Spirit in action even in the most bitterly anticlerical or atheistic utterances of his authors. All of them would be dismissed by many as enemies of the Church, who could not be taken seriously as representatives of a spiritual or religious vision. Without the local parochial blinkers, Europeans were able to understand the human and spiritual depth of their writing, and as Paris was the city that kindled the talents of Moore, Joyce, and Beckett it was also the place where they were most generously recognized. It was there that the Wilde tragedy ended, to name a writer not much celebrated in Ireland until Micheál Mac Liammóir brought him back to life with *The Importance of Being Oscar* in 1960. The beauty and power of Yeats’s poetic voice won acclaim from the start; some poems found their way into Japanese in the 1890s; and some of his lines sang in the minds of Irish schoolchildren long before they heard of Joyce or Beckett, if they ever did. But as a religious thinker Yeats was often dismissed as a muddlehead, and Catholic clergy would express astonishment that the Church of Ireland buried him as a bona fide Christian in the family graveyard in Co Sligo. Indeed, what a strange crew they are, these Irish writers—prompting some to ask, are they Irish at all? Or is their very oddity what makes them so irreducibly Irish?

Three of them wanted to learn Irish, but with no success. Joyce had his Stephen Dedalus famously admit that his “soul fretted in the

2. See J. S. O’Leary. “Faithful to the Earth: Hölderlin, Nietzsche, Rilke, and Heidegger,” in *Hosting the Earth*, ed. Richard Kearney, Peter Klapes, Urwa Hameed (London: Routledge, 2024).

shadow” of the English language, holding “its words at bay.” Stephen confesses in *A Portrait* that the spirit of his ancestral Gaelic tongue ghosts the vocabulary of his English Dean of Studies. Joyce’s own ghost tells Seamus Heaney in *Station Island* to avoid the “cod’s game” of Irish nationalism, but the sense of working between two linguistic traditions still persists in contemporary Irish writing. “Two buckets are easier carried than one,” says Heaney, “I grew up in between.” The language question has received a new boost from recent writers like Manchán Magan, who claims that a psychological blockage prevents Irish people from learning their language, because of transgenerational memories of the Famine and other traumas associated with it. Perhaps that trauma lies behind the sense of alienation which all the writers discussed in this book attest. All of them seem to suffer from a deep emotional lack, an obscure and inscrutable discontent. Joseph O’Leary’s patient auscultation might be seen as helping them toward healing, and by the same token contributing to the healing of the Irish soul.

This remarkable book by Joseph O’Leary offers hope for a new spiritual Irish culture where false oppositions will have been overcome and we can draw creatively on all the riches of our pluralist heritage without prejudice or fear.

Preface

I am honored to dedicate this book to a brave and generous Corkwoman, Angela Welch, née O’Riordan, and to the memory of Robert (Bob) Welch, one of the most intensely missed presences in the world of Irish literary studies. In his astonishing book, *Kicking the Black Mamba*,¹ a heart-broken elegy for his beautiful son Egan, which gave no indication that he himself was to leave us so soon afterwards, Robert reaches far back to our first meeting, on the top deck of “this bus, the number 3 that goes out to Ballyphehane.” That must have been in 1965, but one can always peer deeper into the well of the past (Robert, like Beckett, had phenomenal recall of his earliest infancy). I first met him in fact at a school essay competition event in 1964—our elders had made us waste our time composing a piece on the dull subject of Road Safety—and years before, in 1957–1961, I may have delivered the *Cork Evening Echo* from my father’s shop at the top of Tory Top Road (formerly Lane) to his parents’ house in Slieve Mish Park at its bottom.

I did not realize then how fortunate I was to be friends with Bob, who became an elder brother, far ahead of me in literary culture and human wisdom (my father judged him a good judge of character). He studied English Literature with Seán Lucy (1931–2001) and Old and Middle English with Riobáird P. Breathnach (1930–1984)—coinci-

1. Robert Anthony Welch, *Kicking the Black Mamba: Life, Alcohol and Death* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 2012); see J. S. O’Leary, “Robert Welch’s Farewell,” *Journal of Irish Studies* 28 (2013): 7–16.

dentially the Gaelic version of his own name—at University College, Cork. Until checking just now, I had had the impression that it was also from Breathnach that he acquired his mastery of Gaelic literature, which so well equipped him to be an encyclopedist of Ireland’s literatures (*The Oxford Companion to Irish Literature*, 1996). His great strength as a literary scholar is that, poet, novelist, and dramatist himself, he loved the texts and took the secondary literature lightly. In his houses in Cork, in Wakefield (when doing his doctorate under A. Norman Jeffares at Leeds University and later as a colleague of a poet he greatly admired, Geoffrey Hill), and in Coleraine, the walls of the sitting room were lined with books, warmly glowing literary classics, with no clutter of lit crit.

His relationship to literature was passionate, questing, visceral. I bumped into him at the end of Connolly Road probably in the summer of 1966 and begged him to explain the impenetrable lines:

April is the cruellest month, breeding
Lilacs out of the dead land, mixing
Memory and desire, stirring
Dull roots with spring rain.

He took the book and read the lines sonorously. His comment: “Isn’t that just great poetry!” somehow seemed more appropriate than any *explication de texte*. We regularly strolled along the disused railway track discussing such topics as whether Keats was decadent when he peppered his throat to enhance the tang of claret. Bob’s enthusiasms were tremendous, but I did not always take them up. Jazz, which he loved, I could not stand. I had him listen to Berg’s *Lulu* with its sensual saxophones; now it strikes me that the LPs must have been lent by Bernard Curtis (1907–1995), first Director of the Cork School of Music, a kind and good man, who proved his valor as an educator by leaving such precious items in such unreliable hands. Robert’s advocacy of the poet David Jones did not bear fruit. I merited the reproach that René Char gave to some literati: “You are in poetry only up to your ankles!”

Bob's spiritual sensitivity opened him to preternatural realms, an asset for a student of Irish literature, as indeed was his Catholic piety.

In February 1966 Frank O'Connor (like Bob a Cork-born master of Irish literature in both languages) was surprised to be invited to speak in Maynooth College, where he received a standing ovation; he died in March. Entering the College in September I missed that event, but in the same Callan Hall soon heard Seamus Heaney launch *Death of a Naturalist*, and then welcomed Bob with four Cork poets in tow. Thus one epoch, its arrival marked by the passing of Yeats and Joyce and the launching of *The Bell* in 1940, came to an end, and another began, which in turn could be seen as ending when Bob "rose and twitched his mantle blue." Literature was a live issue among the seminarians, with great benefit to the Irish Church. Hugh O'Donnell and others staged *Waiting for Godot* with praise from the author himself. They pooh-poohed my mention of Tennyson and Browning (who in fact never appeared on the syllabus) and invited me to a dramatic recitation of Sylvia Plath, which left me with the notion for many years that her dad was a German and indeed a Nazi! I advertised my first ever lecture, on Yeats, which drew a sizable lunchtime audience, but had to be abandoned when after delivering one line I discovered that I had nothing further to say!

Later I shared a room on Long Corridor with another man of many human and literary facets, Donncha Crowley, whose mother had been a friend of mine. Intense and intelligent, he was steeped in Greek, in Celtic Studies, and in *Ulysses*, then of no interest to me, a devotee of French and *Four Quartets*, Donncha came to Tokyo a few years ago to act Didi in *Waiting for Godot*, and returned to Ireland with a young bride on his arm.

Picking among times and places, I recall a great evening in a cottage in Ballingearry in September 1987 with Bob, Prof. Lucy, and John Montague. I could only listen with awe to these poet-professors who knew Ireland inside out (whereas what the present book contains is only a set of broken shards). The exhilarating conversation turned on Seán

Ó Riada, (1931–1971) and how he did not want to die with his work unfinished, and positively haunted Lucy and Montague after his death. The following Sunday John Montague read his 1974 poem “Ó Riada’s Farewell” at a National Concert Hall commemoration of the composer (in the intermission he greeted me with a grand kiss on my cheek):

I am in great danger, you whisper,
as much to the failing fire
as to your friend & listener;
though, *you have great luck...*

Mahler’s horn wakening the autumn forest,
the harsh blood pulse of Stravinsky,
the hammer of Boulez
which you will never lift.
Never to be named with your peers,
I am in great danger, he said;
firecastles of flame,
a name extinguished.

Seamus Heaney enters this little story again in my last anecdote. At the 1990 international conference of IASAIL in Kyoto I found him and his wife Marie alongside Robert and Angela in a circle of mostly American scholars singing the most horrible Irish music, such as “I’ve been a wild rover for many a year” and I asked Bob: “What are you doing singing Irish ballads in the middle of the Gion Festival. Come with me to a Japanese tavern.” I asked Seamus Heaney as well and he replied, “Oh no, I must go to another of these singsongs upstairs.” Well, we had a pleasant evening, though in Robert’s retelling some non-existent “hookers” pop up.

In sum, wherever Bob Welch appeared, one could expect a banquet of original thought, fine speech, hilarious comedy, and above all deep, reflective humanity, which soared beyond routine academic concerns. Angela keeps that flame burning, and I believe its gentle warmth extends over what has been a remarkably intense period in Irish literary life.