Ideas Floating on Their Causes: Purgatory, Endgame and the Irish Dissentient Tradition

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Journal or publication title: SHIRON

Volume: 41

Page range: 87-103

Year: 2003-07-01

URL: http://hdl.handle.net/10097/57592

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| 論文名 | イデアフローティング・イオン・ THEIR CAUSES: PURGATORY, ENDGAME AND THE IRISH DISSERTER TRADITION |
| 開始年月日 | 2003-07-01 |
| 備考 |  |

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Ideas Floating on Their Causes:  
**Purgatory, Endgame and**  
the Irish Dissentient Tradition

Miki Iwata

The dramatic works of W. B. Yeats have exerted a strong influence on the Irish stage. The foundation of the Abbey Theatre was an epoch-making event and it is not too much to say that Yeats was an initiator of modern Irish theatre as its founder and co-director. Yet he is generally taken to be one of the greatest poets of twentieth-century Ireland, and consequently most critics have regarded his drama as a sideline. When they pay it attention, their remarks are mostly directed to Yeats’s dance plays in their relation to Japanese Noh theatre. The problem of this sort of analysis is that his drama is regarded as a handmaiden to, or — at best — an instance of his poetic art. As early as the late 1950s, Frank Kermode interpreted “Among School Children” with an appropriate reference to Yeats’s discovering the Noh plays (49-91). Critical assessments of Yeats’s dramatic works in themselves have as a result suffered relative neglect.

**Purgatory** (1939), the last of his dramatic works to be performed before his death, is counted as one of these dance plays, and ranked with *At the Hawk’s Well* (1917) and *The Dreaming of the Bones* (1919)—on the basis of stories similar to a major theme in Noh which focuses on travellers’ encounters with the supernatural, often with shadows of the dead. However, almost twenty years separate the period when he engaged in writing dance plays and *Purgatory*. After the publication of *Four Plays for Dancers* in 1921, Yeats’s theatrical activities came to a halt. *The Cat and the Moon*, which appeared in *The Criterion* in July 1924, is the only new play published in the 1920s, and it was actually written shortly before his marriage in 1917. Thus, he produced virtually no new plays during the 1920s. It appears
he may have reached an impasse with the dance plays, and, therefore, that to consider Purgatory on the same basis as the other dance plays is straining the point.

What illustrates the change in Yeats’s taste most eloquently is his enhanced interest in philosophical texts during this period, especially those of George Berkeley, whom he initially criticized in a controversy with Edward Dowden about Irish literature (Uncollected Prose 351-52). In fact, a close reading of Purgatory reveals a pessimistic version of subjective idealism in the work, an outlook which cannot be seen in the earlier dance plays. Furthermore, observed from the Berkeleian point of view, Purgatory will reveal a hidden affinity with Samuel Beckett’s Endgame with all its characteristics of the post-modern world where man, deprived of any communication or religion, is at a loss in a huge void of uncertainties.

Yeats introduced a new current in Irish theatre and a study of modern Irish drama cannot hold good without due consideration for his contribution to it. To put it more concretely, while his works exemplify an attempt to establish an Irish drama unique to his own people (and his dramatic materials were therefore often chosen from the Irish myths), they also afford ample scope for interpretation as harbingers of absurdist plays written by Beckett in the mid-twentieth century. Berkeley’s dissentient theory of ideas and their causes forms one key link between the two Irish dramatists. The artistic adaptation of subjective idealism paves a way for an approach to the absurdist’s world. Thus, by reconfiguring his dramatic achievement in this fashion, a clearer picture of Yeats the writer will emerge.5

I

Yeats’s middle-aged cultivation of the mind bore fruit first in prose and poems, a little ahead of his plays. In publishing the final version of A Vision in 1937, he added to the opening section of the introduction comments on Lady Gregory’s credit for his educational development. She told him that he had become “a much better educated man . . . and much more powerful in argument.” Thus the poet proudly “put The Tower and The Winding Stair into evidence to show that my poetry has gained in self-possession and power” (8). In subsequent sections, he explains that this change has its inception in the esoteric communications with unknown spirits via his wife’s automatic writing, though whether such supernatural communication was a sham or
not is a question beyond the scope of the present discussion. What is more important here is that he regards his self-education in this period as a creative force which will help his art gain “in self-possession and power.” A Vision offers the figure of a poet who “seeks in book and manuscript/ What he shall never find” in a lone tower (59). This is a caricature of the Yeats who refashioned himself in Thoor Ballylee, “[beginning] with Berkeley” (19). Looking at the tower from the ground, the hermit-like Michael Robartes and his friend Aherne carry on a dialogue about the truth the poet has not yet found. Lines from Robartes’s song, “All thought becomes an image and the soul/ Becomes a body,” is antagonistic to the Cartesian dualism by which mind and matter are two distinct entities (61). Robartes’s argument rather shows a slight affinity with Spinozan monism in that these lines make equivalences between soul and body and, consequently, negate the body’s substance. The juxtaposition of the body with thought, image and soul reminds a reader of the monist idea that nothing finite has any substance except the infinite, which illustrates Yeats’s inclination towards a pantheistic idealism inherited from Spinoza and Hegel. Indeed, in the introduction which he wrote for Bishop Berkeley, his Life, Writings and Philosophy, published in 1931 by J. M. Hone and M. M. Rossi, Yeats expects that the writings of Spinoza and Hegel will be counted as “the greatest of all works of intellect” in several generations, and demonstrates his dislike for the “mechanical philosophy” of Isaac Newton and John Locke (Essays 396-411). But it is Berkeley who most radically dissented from the physicists’ scientific worldview when it was in the first flush of a triumphant vogue.

A major motive of Berkeley’s works is to refute Locke's doctrine by which consciousness is merely one of the properties of matter, and therefore dependent on the maintenance of physical conditions. His theory regards the whole universe as, in a sense, a huge machine. For Berkeley, however, such a notion of the universe would ruin morality and, to confute this scientism, he took surprisingly drastic measures, that is, to deny the existence of matter by suggesting that we can never be truly aware of anything but our own ideas. According to him, the objects of human knowledge consist of “either ideas actually imprinted on the sense” or “ideas formed by help of memory and imagination” and thus sensible things have no existence outside the mind (Treatise 103). However, one may oppose, these ideas must have their causes, as we do not invent our own ideas with our will. Berkeley manipulates this probable opposition, turning it to his advantage:
But besides all that endless variety of ideas or objects of knowledge, there is likewise something which knows or perceives them, and exercises divers operations, as willing, imagining, remembering about them. This perceiving, active being is what I call mind, spirit, soul or myself. . . . [T]he existence of an idea consists in being perceived. (Treatise 103)

Since to cause is to act for him, and since nothing is really active but the will of an intelligent being, Locke’s material bodies cannot be the causes of anything. In Three Dialogues between Hylas and Philonous, Philonous, the philosopher’s advocate, broadens the idea. Since sensible things “depend not on my thought, and have an existence distinct from being perceived by me, there must be some other mind wherein they exist.” Therefore, “I . . . immediately and necessarily conclude the being of a God, because all sensible things must be perceived by him” (97). Interestingly, Berkeley sets his own logical consequence prior to belief in God: he appreciates the necessity of the perceiving self of human beings throughout.

The reason why Berkeley’s subjective idealism strongly attracted Yeats largely depends upon its disowning the objective existence of matter and privileging subjective perception so as to restore the power of human subjectivity and therefore, as the poet assumes, “[t]he romantic movement seems related to the idealist philosophy.” However, it is also because Berkeley contributed immensely to establishing an Irish intellectual lineage when the country was yet only on its way to becoming a nation (Essays 404). His brief letter to Hone, presumably dated 20 November 1930, declares his fascination with the philosopher:

You have set Berkeley in his Irish world, and made him amusing, animated and intelligible. He is of the utmost importance to the Ireland that is coming into existence, as I hope to show in my introduction. I want Protestant Ireland to base some vital part of its culture upon Burke, Swift and Berkeley. (Letters 779)

What the passage makes clear at once is that he more or less exclusively admires Berkeley’s achievement in establishing a culture for the nation “coming into existence.” In fact, many of Yeats’s later works offer a Berkleian reliance on human perception based on experience. In “The Tower” (1928), for instance, the poet sings his confidence in his own perception; though, in the first section, he insinuates that he should be Neoplatonic and treat pure ideas, the clause expressing this
idea is subordinate to, and therefore marred by, the main clause: “it seems” (Collected Poems 194). Thus, the poet is expected to reject the Neoplatonic world of ideas, which he fulfills in the third section, declaring that “Death and life were not/ Made lock, stock and barrel/ Out of his bitter soul./ Aye, sun and moon and star, all./ And further add to that/ That, being dead, we rise./ Dream and so create/ Translunar paradise” (198). He here exposes a near-solipsism: when the poet proclaims that man made death and life by his feeling them, it reminds readers of Berkeley’s simple assertion that “The table I write on, I say, exists, that is, I see and feel it” (Treatise 104). The truth of things depends not on theoretical comprehension but on direct human perception of them. Along with the poet in “The Tower,” Yeats himself shares this idea with them. He reveals his determination to repudiate abstract ideas in his diary entry for 19 June 1930:

Those spiritual beings seem always as if they would turn me from every abstraction. I must not talk to myself about ‘the truth’ not call myself ‘teacher’ nor another ‘pupil’—these things are abstract—but see myself set in a drama where I struggle to exalt and overcome concrete realities perceived not with mind only but as with the roots of my hair. (Explorations 301-02)

It is interesting that he compares himself to a person “in a drama,” for the figure of the poet struggling to face realities as an actor plays his part in a drama overlaps considerably with the persons in his own last plays. The spirit of Jonathan Swift, for example, in The Words upon the Window-Pane (1934) acts out again and again in his agony “some kind of horrible play,” until he wholly understands the consequences of what he had done before his death (Collected Plays 603). Yeats likewise presses himself to attain knowledge of real life not only with his metaphysical intellect but with his bodily existence, even to the “roots of [his] hair.”

However, the more Yeats aged, the more he was haunted by the difficulty of living experientially. In “The Circus Animals’ Desertion,” one of his last poems, the poet compares himself to the manager of a circus and his literary themes to the circus animals. As the title word “desertion” shows, the retrospect of his own works is apparently pessimistic. The poet loudly deplores his having permitted himself the indulgence of seemingly self-complete images “in pure mind,” and evokes their underlying origins (347). By the importunate enumeration of the banal sundries that are all “old” or “broken,” he emphasizes the commonness from which his poetic themes derived. The centre of
his regret does not lie in that they had such commonness but in the fact that the poet himself overlooked the process of perceiving these objects. His ideas have, as it were, left behind their causes—the genuinely active part of the mind. The isolation of ideas from things by way of oblique perception seems the impasse to which Yeats came in his last years. That such an interpretation is by no means outlandish can be gathered from the fact that Yeats in this period still demonstrates a detestation for scientism. Yeats begins “Private Thoughts,” an essay in On the Boiler, published in the same year as “The Circus Animals’ Desertion,” with the following proclamatory sentence: “I am philosophical, not scientific, which means that observed facts do not mean much until I can make them part of my experience” (Explorations 429). Consequently, in his probing for a human perception, he has to face the same problem of wrongly perceiving again and again. Growing ever older, he seems obsessed by the idea:

I have a one-act play in my head, a scene of tragic intensity. . . . I am so afraid of that dream. My recent work has greater strangeness and I think greater intensity than anything I have done. I never remember the dream so deep. (Letters 907)

This is a letter written only a year before his death. The one-act play that he mentions in the letter is Purgatory. His great fear of the play shows that he was terribly anxious about how human beings should surmount the danger of falling into passionless abstraction. He was distressed by the idea that one might not overcome this erring recurrence to the end just like the Old Man in Purgatory, even immediately before his own death. Indeed, the figures of afflicted spirits who endlessly repeat their trespasses form a motif that Yeats himself repeatedly used in plays such as The Dreaming of the Bones (1919) and Purgatory.

II

In every respect, Purgatory is the most intensely minimized of his one-act plays. With a mere 223 lines and only two characters, the father and son, the play unfolds a great family saga of decline and fall. Stage properties are also curtailed to a bare tree whose leaves were once “thick as butter./ Fat, greasy life” (682), but which is now shattered as a thunderbolt rived it. An Old Man tells his bastard son that he is from a grand family which once flourished but now is ruined in just the same way as the tree is. The house’s decline was brought
about by a mismatched marriage between a mean groom and a land-
lady, the Old Man’s own father and mother. Explaining to the indiffer-
ent son that souls in Purgatory must suffer the eternal recurrence of
their sins, he awaits the ghosts of his parents. When the shadows
appear and repeat the sexual intercourse on their bridal night, the Old
Man stabs his son to death using “the same jack-knife” with which he
killed his father so as not to pass the “pollution on” (688). Neverthe-
less, having murdered the Boy and congratulated himself on terminat-
ing the consequences, he hears the hoofbeats of his dead father riding
to his bridal bed and realizes in despair that he cannot relieve his
mother.

The play has occasionally been compared with Samuel Beckett’s
*Waiting for Godot* because of the characteristics they have in common:
a simple stage set with a withered tree, two beggar tramps as protago-
nists, and the circulating structure of the story. Katherine Worth, for
instance, pointed out the similarity of the tree in the two plays and
connected them with Maeterlinck’s “drama of the interior” (258-60).
In recent studies too, the two playwrights are linked via these formal
characteristics. Brenda Maddox’s explanation of *Purgatory*’s set pro-
vides an example: “The setting is a bare stage with a stone and a tree,
and the suggestion of a ruined house—the minimalism learned from
the Japanese that Yeats handed on to Samuel Beckett. (Beckett, then
thirty-two, living in Paris, had not yet begun to write plays.)” (360)
Her argument is of course reliable, though, too much attention to for-
mal similarities may lead critics miss another continuity between Yeats
and Beckett. Eminent scholars including M. L. Rosenthal have appro-
priately pointed out that in *Purgatory* there is Yeats’s eugenic fear of
the degeneration of the Irish race which also appears in such poems as
“Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen,” “The Gyres,” “A Bronze Head,”
and “Under Ben Bulben”—though they do not connect this fear with
Beckett’s curse on procreation. However, applying only these senses
of form and the eugenic idea to *Purgatory* may straiten the meaning of
the work. Elizabeth Butler Cullingford, for instance, finds in the play
Yeats’s lament for Maud Gonne’s “disastrous eugenic choice in mating
with the base blood of John MacBride” (282). It is curiously notewor-
thy that Martin Esslin’s warning against too minute interpretations of
*Endgame* holds good for Cullingford’s reading of Yeats as well. After
introducing an analysis which regards Hamm and Clov as the equiva-
lents of James Joyce and Beckett himself, Esslin immediately rejects
the idea: “Yet on closer reflection this theory surely becomes unten-
able . . . because, far from illuminating the full content of a play like *Endgame*, such an interpretation reduces it to a trivial level” (68). Though he deals with Yeats as a kind of ancient man of letters who could not appreciate Alfred Jarry’s *Ubu roi* (359), what Esslin takes as the characteristics of the theatre of the absurd is true of *Purgatory.*

Thus, I will treat the play from the viewpoint of subjective idealism, a viewpoint which will show, in Esslin’s phrase, the “far more universal nature” of the play (69).

As regards idealist interpretations of the work, as early as the 1960s Thomas R. Whitaker made several important statements involving the Romantic idea of remorse. According to Whitaker, the key to the release from the helplessly repetitive nightmare in the play is in the conscious refusal of “remorse” itself, which the characters fail to realize. In the Shelleyan vision, remorse is a form of self-contempt and therefore destroys the imagination. Casting out remorse itself serves to end the repetitive agony. The Old Man’s murders are based on hatred of his blood and have the same roots as “the remorse of the dead.” Consequently, there’s no escape in *Purgatory*. He carries out this analysis in relation to Yeats’s dance plays:

> The true perspective on the action of Yeats’s other plays of “dreaming back” is not provided by the consciousness of . . . the soldier or Diarmuid and Dervorgilla. As in *Purgatory*, the release is implicit in the consciousness which can accept in contemplation the terrible vision of the play. (272)

Here, he attempts to make a comparison between the treatment of remorse in *The Dreaming of the Bones* and in *Purgatory*. In *The Dreaming of the Bones*, a Young Man who joined the Easter Rising and ran away from Dublin comes across the shadows of the legendary couple Diamuid and Dervorgilla, who first “brought the Norman” into Ireland through their love and consequently led the country towards English possession (442). The shades tell the Young Man that they will be eternally earth-bound unless the living can forgive their sin, but he fails to relieve them as he is also bound by a narrow nationalism that is a mere inversion of the remorse of the couple. Indeed, this play and *Purgatory* have a striking similarity in their plots, but Whitaker overlooks the important difference between the two plays. The remarkable characteristic of *Purgatory* in comparison with other Noh-like plays by Yeats is that the agony of the dead is expressed not by the ghosts themselves but by the living. Diarmuid and Dervorgilla are
performed by actual persons and they call themselves “that most miserable, most accurst pair/ Who sold their country into slavery” (442). They express their remorse for themselves. Similarly, the intense moment of remorse is represented by their dance, which causes the Young Man to become violently disturbed. His interrogative screams (“Why do you dance?/ Why do you gaze, and with so passionate eyes,/ One on the other; and then turn away,/ Covering your eyes, and weave it in a dance?/ Who are you? what are you?”) underline the non-verbal power of the shades (443).

On the contrary, in Purgatory, the ghosts are represented only as silhouettes projected onto a screen. A stage direction (“A window is lit showing a young girl”) is all that the text suggests about the ghost of the Old Man’s mother (685). Being unable to speak or dance, the silhouettes are to do nothing but be there. Consequently, “the remorse of the dead” is spoken out only in the mouth of the living. Therefore, the key to the play is not the ghosts as objects but the Old Man’s perception of them. The dubiousness of the Old Man’s agency is made clear from his very calling to appease the remorse: “Release my mother’s soul from its dream! / Mankind can do no more. Appease / The misery of the living and the remorse of the dead” (689). Indeed, he is incorrect in calling his mother’s repeating of sexual intercourse “the remorse”; it is rather an act of pursued pleasure. His words reveal the danger that he may speak erroneously. The existence of the ghosts depends on the Old Man’s perception of them, and yet it is not entirely reliable. Besides, the Old Man often uses sentences in a subjunctive mood to revise uncertain facts. When he is reproached by the Boy for his keeping the money to himself, for instance, he makes the hastily decisive judgement that “had I given it . . ./ You would have spent it upon drink” (686). Likewise, his subjunctive excuse that “I killed that lad because had he grown up/ He would have struck a woman’s fancy,/ Begot, and passed pollution on” can by no means justify the horrible fact of filicide (688). In short, we can say that the structure of Purgatory is fundamentally monological and highly arbitrary. In terms of subjective idealism, as the perceiving self itself is deformed, the world outside the mind, entirely remote from any foundations, becomes nothing more than a vast uncertainty. Thus, as Worth sees it, “we should receive an oppressive sense of the outer world being invaded and distorted by an inner drama” from Purgatory (183).

This can be gathered also from the fact that the conversation between the Old Man and the Boy is quantitatively quite out of pro-
portion. The Boy speaks a little less than twenty per cent of all the lines: the rest are all the Old Man’s. Moreover, the Boy’s small part does not seem entirely meaningful. The Boy obviously begrudges having this talk with his father and his response to the father consists almost only of jeering at his narration. Thus, their talk does not produce much dialogic meaning:

Boy. I have had enough!
Talk to the jackdaws, if talk you must.

Old Man. Stop! Sit there upon that stone.
That is the house where I was born.

Boy. The big old house that was burnt down?

Old Man. My mother that was your grand-dam owned it,
This scenery and this countryside,
kennel and stable, horse and hound—

What is immediately apparent from this extract is that the Old Man is as indifferent to his son as the son is to his father. When the Boy laughs at him, the Old Man tries to keep him silent. Even when the Boy gives a straight reaction to the father’s story, the Old Man imperviously takes no notice of his confirming question. The Boy is on the stage as if he were only needed, despite his important role in being killed, in order to listen to the Old Man’s self-righteous story. The pattern is similar to that of Beckett’s plays in which silent listeners are the last resort of the speaker suffering from a sense of nothingness, as Willie is for Winnie in Happy Days. The relationship between the Mouth and the Auditor in Not I is a perfect example of this.

The arbitrariness of the Old Man’s speech becomes salient in the poor diction he uses. As regards the style of this verse drama, some critics, including Bloom, have pointed out Yeats’s intentionally awkward and unpleasant verse (427). This reaches its culmination with the play’s catastrophic event. The Old Man stabs his son to death with a repetitive murmur:

That finishes—there—there—there—

[He stabs again and again. The window grows dark.
‘Hush-a-bye baby, thy father’s a knight,
Thy mother’s a lady, lovely and bright.’
No, that is something that I read in a book,
And if I sing it must be to my mother,
And I lack rhyme.]

At the most intense moment of the play’s action, the Old Man’s song goes entirely wrong: though he tries to chant a requiem for his mother,
he confusedly sings a lullaby for children; the song is not an original of his but borrowed; besides, as he himself admits, his lines “lack rhyme” and their rhythm is awkward. The Old Man’s failure to shape his speech reduces the authenticity of his words all the more for the fact that he is almost the only speaker in *Purgatory*, a verse drama. His habit of explaining the connotations of things adds a similar effect to his speech. He attempts forcefully to convince the Boy that the bare tree is a symbol of the fallen family. However, expressed by such officiously interpretative phrases as “Study that house,” “study that tree,” and “that’s symbolical,” the symbolism of the tree is paradoxically weakened and loses its significance. Indeed, having killed his son, the Old Man applies the purgation of the mother’s soul to the tree in the sentence “It stands like a purified soul” (688). Nevertheless, immediately after his self-complete interpretation, he hears his father’s ghost riding on horseback. Consequently, the tree becomes a floating signifier that is isolated from its signified—itself a conspicuous characteristic of post-modern literature. The tree in *Waiting for Godot*, for instance, has a similar role in that its apparently being suggestive of growth between the two acts comes in the end to nothing.

Observations in the last few paragraphs have implied some distinctive features of *Purgatory*: the impossibility of communicative dialogue, the devastating arbitrariness and terribly imperfect mastery of monologue, and a thoroughly pessimistic view of human life. These features are equally Beckettian, and they remind us of his drama in and after *Waiting for Godot*, given the many critical remarks which claim a formal similarity between *Purgatory* and that play. However, in my opinion, *Purgatory* is more highly akin to *Endgame* in that both plays have a fear of the continuity of bad blood, offer arbitrary stories of a protagonist, and inherit a Berkeleyian idea of human perception.

III

In *Endgame* (1958), there is only a bare room with two windows and the world outside seems extinct. The persons in the play are assumed to be the only survivors who live by waiting or not waiting for something. Noteworthily they are closely interdependent so that we hardly sense the multiplicity of human beings but an obsessive and obsessed soul, in spite of there being four people. The names of Clov, Hamm, Nagg, and Nell are all identical to each other in that they all originate in the word “nail” and these names in *Endgame* implicitly
suggest the dense family sequence evident in *Purgatory*, which exposes on the stage a suffocatingly enclosed inner world isolated from anything beyond it.¹²

Hamm’s swearwords to his own father, Nagg, “Accursed progenitor!” and “Accursed fornicator!,” fiercely denies even legitimate lovemaking with a wife (96). His denial is based on the fact that the act sent him forth into this world. The idea is reminiscent of the Old Man’s oedipal cry to the shadow of the mother, “Do not let him touch you! It is not true/ That drunken men cannot beget,/ And if he touch he must beget/ And you must bear his murderer” (686). Both plays epitomize the curse on human life via the curse in a single family’s blood and both families fail to achieve any real communication. Clov hates Hamm and repeatedly expresses his desire to leave him:

CLOV: I’ll leave you.
HAMM: No!
CLOV: What is there to keep me here?
HAMM: The dialogue. [Pause.] I’ve got on with my story.
   [Pause.] I’ve got on with it well. [Pause. Irritably.] Ask me
   where I’ve got to. (120-21)

To keep Clov back, Hamm can give no excuse but that there are two persons needed to make the dialogic form. Even the dialogue does not work well. Hamm’s story proceeds not by the natural development of a conversation but by his own impatient reminder to ask him to tell his story. Hamm and Clov are alienated from each other as are the Old Man and the Boy in *Purgatory*. Moreover, in the same way as the Old Man, Hamm is a poor narrator: though he imagines himself as a storyteller and tries to go on with his story (a sort of his autobiography), it does not work. In such a helpless situation the ideas emerging from the active process of perceiving are inversely connected with a negative sense. Hamm is afraid of the possibility that they might “mean something”:

HAMM: We’re not beginning to . . . to . . . mean something?
CLOV: Mean something! You and I, mean something! [Brief laugh.] Ah that’s a good one!
HAMM: I wonder. [Pause.] Imagine if a rational being came back to earth, wouldn’t he be liable to get ideas into his head if observed us long enough. [Voice of rational being.] Ah, good, now I see what it is, yes, now I understand what they’re at! (108)

Beckett’s idea of perception is undoubtedly based on that of Berkeley
though here the ultimate eye of God is revised into the grotesque eye of “a rational being” from outer space evocative of science fiction. Thus, the Beckettian perception becomes absurd, being released from the panopticon of God. However, what is important is that both Yeats and Beckett owe their ideas to Berkeley, and consequently, they are of the same Irish line. In both, what makes their plays helplessly moving has relation to a digression from the due course of human perception that should give our ideas appropriate causes. We can see the shadow of Berkeley cast across a wide range of Beckett’s work: one of his early novels, *Murphy*, refers to Berkeley; his exchanges on art, “Three Dialogues,” are probably a reflection of Berkeley’s *Three Dialogues between Hylas and Philonous*; furthermore, for the epigraph to his movie, *Film*, Beckett uses Berkeley’s proposition “*Esse est percipi*.” Despite his own excuse for the epigraph, “No truth value attaches to above, regarded as of merely structural and dramatic convenience” (323), Beckett’s interest in Berkeley is in fact not less than that of Yeats. Thus Beckett ingeniously named his little play for television, . . . *but the clouds* . . ., after a phrase from Yeats’s near-solipsist poem, “The Tower,” which I mentioned above, for in the play only the male voice tries to create the pseudo-identity of a woman whose appearance in pictures on television is so uncertainly closed up as to be “reduced as far as possible to eyes and mouth” (417).

Both in *Endgame* and *Purgatory*, the two protagonists alike tell their own stories in the third person. In *Purgatory*, the Old Man narrates various biographies of the dead, though they are at the same time his autobiography. To put it plainly, he tries to revise a story of his own under the guise of one about others only to fail. Such speech as his anticipates the Mouth of *Not I*, which desperately denies the first person in her fragmentary reminiscences: “. . . what? . . . who? . . . no! . . . she! . . . SHE! . . .” (382). Certainly, reminding an audience of the decline of the Irish Ascendancy, *Purgatory* is within an Irish context, but it has much in common with the Beckettian world where any social specifications are stripped away and a vast indeterminacy stretches off.13

Yeats’s dramatic career represents a complex network of involvement with and evolution in the theatre movements of the twentieth century, as well as with his own literary explorations. Thus, when Richard Ellmann discusses the literary background to Beckett’s art, he never fails to mention Yeats’s later drama: “An ardent attender of plays at the Abbey Theatre in Dublin, Beckett admired the late plays
of Yeats. He liked especially the one about Swift in *The Words upon the Window-Pane*, in which the voice of Swift utters the devastating final line, ‘Perish the day on which I was born’’ (112). Ellmann’s evidence that Beckett liked Yeats’s later plays will help endorse their Beckettian interpretation.

T. S. Eliot’s enthusiastic praise for Yeats as a playwright is far from groundless. After commenting on Yeats’s struggle as an Irish poet to master his own poetic language despite so much influence from English and the historical legacy of the English Romantic Movement, Eliot refers to his toil with drama as an entirely different kind of struggle:

> With the verse play, on the other hand, the situation is reversed, because Yeats had nothing, and we have had Yeats. . . . I do not know where our debt to him as a dramatist ends—and in time, it will not end until that drama itself ends. (256-57)

When we examine Yeats’s absurdist aspects, we tend to connect them retrospectively with Beckett’s thanks to the work of his great successor. Nevertheless, as Eliot asserts, “Yeats had nothing,” and we should not ignore the simple fact that Beckett had not begun to write plays when Yeats died in 1939. Justice should be done to Yeats’s achievement as a playwright. Just as Berkeley dissented from Locke’s doctrine when it was in the ascendancy, so Yeats confronted the naturalistic drama of his day with Irish verse drama. When we recall the recently reformulated concept of a minor literature—the literature written by ethnic minorities in major languages—Yeats’s influence upon Beckett may appear greater within this dissentient tradition. Both of them experienced a peculiar problem of bilingualism in Irish writers. For all the enthusiasm of language revival movements such as the Gaelic League founded in 1893, the first language of modern Irish writers has been for the most part English—the enemy’s language, as it were—and they have not often been native to their *native* language. Perhaps, for them, the issue of writing in the ruling language involved just such a separation of ideas and their causes. Though their plays were radical and news, they have common roots in Berkeley’s idealism, and have a share in the Irish dissentient tradition. In this respect, as a playwright who first adopted the Berkeleian viewpoint in his work, a viewpoint later developed by Beckett, Yeats, in a sense, created modern absurdist drama where unhinged ideas will float forever on their tenaciously insistent causes.
Notes

1 Interestingly, however, Yeats never regarded himself as a poet alone. Declaring that “I believe myself to be a dramatist,” he was concerned that his plays be performed on the stage throughout his life (Variorum Plays 417). Moreover, in his Nobel Prize speech at the Royal Academy of Sweden, he infers that “the English committees would never have sent you my name if I had written no plays, no dramatic criticism, if my lyric poetry had not quality of speech practised upon the stage. . .” (Autobiographies 559).

2 Among such critics as Eric Bentley, Sylvia C. Ellis and Nancy Ann Watanabe, Richard Taylor is typical. In his The Drama of W. B. Yeats: Irish Myth and the Japanese No, he concludes that Yeats’s turning-point as a playwright is “the discovery of the Japanese No, which . . . made possible the full expression of his perennial themes. . .” (200).

3 To take a notable example, Peter Ure juxtaposes The Dreaming of the Bones with Purgatory in that “the adherence [to the cyclical system of reincarnation] is fairly close” in them (97).

4 Furthermore, when it comes to staging drama, he also remained silent during the 1920s. Every reliable record shows that it was not until 21 November 1931, that The Cat and the Moon was first performed, despite the fact the poet gives the date as 9 May 1926. The Abbey Theatre had to wait almost exactly six years from the performance of The Player Queen on 9 December 1919 to that of a new play, Sophocles’ King Oedipus——performed on 6 December 1926—not an original work but an adaptation of the Greek tragedy.

5 In the field of modern Irish theatre studies, Katharine Worth’s research has been highly significant in that it first appropriately valued Yeats’s plays and brought “Yeats, Synge and Beckett, Wilde and O’Casey under the same light” (1). Her point is to rearrange a series of Irish playwrights in the dynamics of world theatre from the Symbolist movement to the theatre of the absurd. However, her use of the Belgian playwright, Maeterlinck, as the glue to stick together a range of Irish dramatists sometimes seems far-fetched.

6 Subsequent references to Yeats’s poems are cited to this edition.

7 All further references to Yeats’s dramatic works are to this edition.

8 It is true that Yeats was horrified with the performance of Ubu roi, in which a King “carries for a sceptre a brush of the kind that we use to clean a closet,” and was in a sad mood over the coming of “the Savage God” (Autobiographies 348-49). But this event took place in 1896 and, as Richard Allen Cave correctly points out, Yeats’s later plays such as The Herne’s Egg (1938) are under the influence of Jarry. Terence Brown also espouses Cave, “to whose interpretation I am indebted” (357).

9 “Dreaming back” is in quotation marks because it is a Yeatsian term used in A Vision to explain a soul in the period between birth and death. According to Yeats, the spirit should shift from “Passionate Body” to “Celestial Body,” but “If the Passionate Body does not disappear, the Spirit finds the Celestial Body, only after long and perhaps painful dreams of the past” (223-24). He calls this state “Dreaming Back.”

10 Cave criticizes the fact that recent performances have followed the experimental stage effect without any projection of the shadows—a neglect of “the com-
plexity of Yeats’s theme about perception” (378). It seems that his attack hits the
mark because the direction would lead an audience to so facile an interpretation as
that the ghosts are mere products of the mad old man’s fancy.

11 Harold Bloom also takes notice of the slip in the Old Man’s prayer. However,
his regards the playwright in the same light as the Old Man to such an extent
that he calls Purgatory’s quality “a rhetorical survival, based on our deception,” to
justify his evil act. Consequently, Bloom declares: “perhaps we ought to resent a
work that has so palpable a design upon us” (428-29).

12 Clov, Hamm, Nag, and Nell are derived from the French, Latin, German,
and English respectively. Hamm is also interpreted as a hammer that beats and
oppresses the rest of the three by many critics.

13 The reverse is also true of Beckett. In Not I, for instance, the Mouth twice
refers to “Croker’s Acres”—an existing open field near Beckett’s home in Ireland.
In all the devastating ambiguity of her speech, the definiteness of the proper name
has an overwhelming power.

14 According to Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, Beckett, (an Irishman who
wrote in English and French) is typical of the writers who fall within this category.
The two scholars focus on the political power of minor literature which subverts
major languages from within. Theodor W. Adorno also interprets Beckett politi-
cally. He discusses how Endgame, with its anarchic world, represents a coun-
terblow against modern rationalistic totalitarianism.

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