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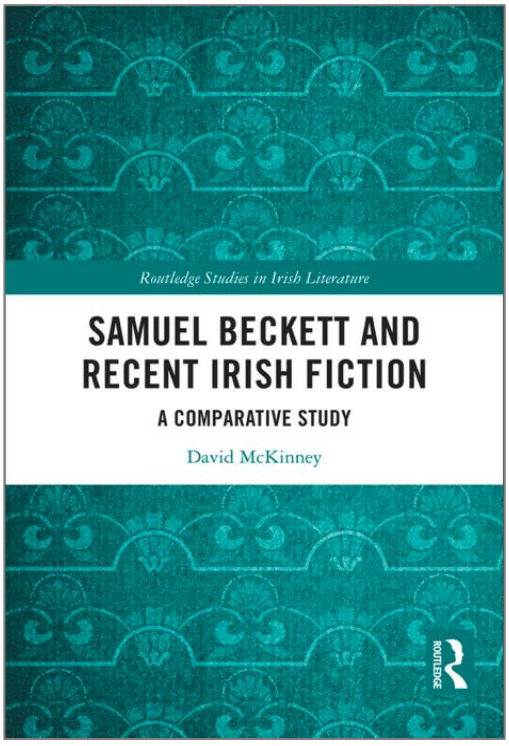
(RECOMMENDED CITATION)

BOOKS

David McKinney, *Samuel Beckett and Recent Irish Fiction: A Comparative Study*, New York: Routledge, 2025, 201 p.



David McKinney's study of contemporary Irish fiction represents a timely contribution to two topical and interconnected strands of scholarship: the growing body of research concerned with the aftermath of Ireland's post-2008 financial collapse and the broader critical debates surrounding the global crises ascribed to late capitalism. More precisely, McKinney examines the post-crash turn towards literary experimentation, arguing that Irish writers "consciously or unconsciously" draw on Beckettian tropes to tackle the unspeakable in their works, as well as to register and convey the emotional depths of structural disempowerment (1). In developing his claim, he builds on Mary M. McGlynn's argument that recent Irish fiction exhibits traits of "irrealism," a term borrowed from the Warwick Research Collective to describe the formal strategies of the semi-periphery within the world-literary system (2-3). Yet, McKinney extends McGlynn's argument by tracing the roots of this aesthetic tendency among Irish writers back to the conceptual, non-representational techniques of Samuel Beckett.

His claim is premised on the assertion that the two historical events – the post-war and post-Celtic Tiger periods – have had analogous traumatic consequences due to the breakdown of trust in official establishments (5). However, besides context, there is a distinction between Beckett and the selected contemporary writers that McKinney

neither acknowledges nor explores. Specifically, while Beckett's art was marked by the oppressive historical circumstances he inhabited, with a few exceptions[1], he persistently refrained from explicit messages or ideological commitments in his works. In contrast, the female writers McKinney chose assume a political agenda[2], both in the articulation of their artistic vision and in their reworking of Beckettian tropes. Even apart from questions of gender, if any contemporary text adopts Beckettian elements to portray difficult experiences with the aim of actively addressing social issues, the aesthetic acquires a political dimension that may alter its meaning. Nonetheless, this aspect remains untouched. Another potential limitation is that, while McKinney differentiates Samuel Beckett's approach from that of James Joyce, he does not clarify what distinguishes Beckett from other Irish and non-Irish European modernist writers who grappled with questions of truth, meaning, and knowledge (i.e., Joseph Conrad, Flann O'Brien, Ford Madox Ford). This insight could have strengthened or refined McKinney's central argument about the present-day resurgence of Beckett's aesthetic and the singularity of its impact.

The first chapter reads Emma Donoghue's *Room* (2010) alongside Samuel Beckett's *Molloy* (1951). It brings to the fore the novels' depiction of unequal power dynamics as intrinsic to conditions of confinement, scarcity, and alienation, effectively showcasing how Donoghue's deployment of the Beckettian disoriented "childlike gaze" (180) can evoke the exposure and helplessness induced by financial crises. As such, employing a psychoanalytic theory of child development, McKinney interprets Jack and Molloy's engagement with the outside world as predefined by a search for the "confining comfort" of the prenatal state (28). For instance, their attachments to material objects (e.g., Molloy's sucking stones and Jack's decaying tooth) serve as substitutes that mediate this separation (45). In this sense, their struggles are not merely matters of self-preservation but self-formation. Since mother-child dyads are constituted through their co-emergence, this intersubjectivity confers a continuity that stabilises the selves as much as it restricts them. When this relation is suspended, uncertainty follows; yet it is precisely through "the resolution of [this] tension" – the integration or rejection of this absence – that the characters can achieve growth (59-60).

Identity likewise takes centre stage in the second chapter. Continuing with Beckett's trilogy, it compares *Malone Dies* (1951) with Kevin Barry's 2015 novel *Beatlebone*. The chapter mobilizes Derrida's concept of trace, propounding that both texts confront the impossibility of recuperating and aggregating a stable self through artistic creation (61). The wanderings of Malone and John thus unfold as inward journeys, charting their "deferred" attempts at "self-realization" (61), whether as accomplished artists and/or unified subjects. From this perspective, McKinney suggests that the Beckettian indeterminacy underpinning the narrative of Barry's novel reflects the climate of austerity that permeated Irish society after the economic collapse, when long-term,

[1] Written in 1982 for an event organized by A.I.D.A. (Association Internationale de Défense des Artistes), *Catastrophe* was dedicated to the Czech playwright Vaclav Havel, who was at the time imprisoned for his political beliefs.

[2] See Emma Donoghue's 2014 and Eimear McBride's 2021 interviews in the Guardian, in which they openly discuss how their political beliefs inform their work.

future-oriented commitments, such as home ownership or even higher education, seemed increasingly unreachable (75).

The third chapter juxtaposes Keith Ridgway's *Hawthorn and Child* (2012) with an earlier novel from Beckett, *Mercier and Camier* (1946), highlighting the latter's fundamental interest in Arnold Geulincx's post-Cartesian philosophy. Once again, both narratives reveal the elusive quality of truth, as their characters are unable to reconcile "their minds with their bodies," resulting in an immobilizing disconnection that renders action futile and meaningless (103). This "Geulingian" epistemological instability is conveyed via the "restless fragmentation" of narrative, encompassing erratic shifts of perspective and ambivalent narrators, disruptive elements that undermine conventional plot designs sustaining the teleological illusion of progress (103). Thus, both Beckett and Ridgway's subversion of the detective form relies on a language that is at once alienating and alienated, a technique that estranges readers from the characters, "characters from their narrators, characters from their bodies, and authors from their characters" (138). As McKinney ultimately points out, if Ridgway creates out of an "exhausted" form (136), he does not merely inherit Beckett's legacy but engages with the current disillusionment regarding neoliberalism and global capitalism through his aesthetic of indeterminacy.

Probably among the study's most original insights, the last chapter turns to Beckett's late-middle drama, placing Eimear McBride's 2013 novel *A Girl is a Half-Formed Thing* in dialogue with *Happy Days* (1961) and *Not I* (1971). McKinney is particularly interested in expounding a "feminized Beckettian aesthetic," embodied in the writer's female characters, whose condition of "stasis and entrapment" exceeds that of their male counterparts by virtue of their "partial disembodiment" (148). Importantly, as Beckett's characters become progressively more helpless, their worlds correspondingly recede into abstraction: discourse disintegrates and setting disappears. Therefore, McKinney notes that McBride harnesses this distinctly Beckettian paralyzed language and reversed Christian imagination to depict a tormented consciousness fractured by the suppressed trauma of sexual abuse. In doing so, she manages to "recover" the voices otherwise silenced or devoured by Ireland's "patriarchal discourse" (177-178).

Samuel Beckett's receipt of the Nobel Prize in 1969 was met with resistance from the author himself and later with disagreement from many of his critics, who regarded the Swedish Academy's decision as a misguided reading fraught with parochial idealism. The honor arguably imposed, and even celebrated, clarity in a body of work operating on ambiguity. At the same time, David McKinney's proposed "Beckettian model of influence" (179) may invite a reconsideration of this judgement, one that entertains the possibility that the award may not have recognized mastery in Beckett's oeuvre but rather his methodical obliqueness. Overall, the book succeeds in demonstrating the enduring influence and heightened relevance of the Beckettian aesthetic during turbulent times – such as the ones contemporary (Irish) writers have to work with and within.

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