

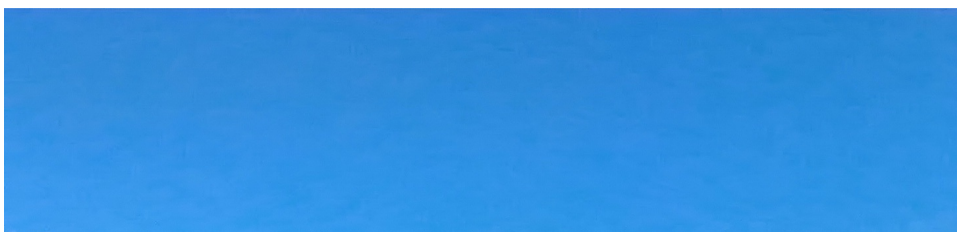


## Nothing to be done

Beckettian bewilderment at the Irish border in the throes of Brexit. A review of the hilltop reading of *Waiting for Godot* by Irish artist and writer, Meadhbh McNutt.

5:30am: I was driving to the Irish border with my mother – our bizarre family celebration of choice following my return from London. “Are we in the North now?”, I asked. She wasn’t sure. Rippling Union Jack’s and the sight of an Orange Lodge would soon answer our question. We arrived in Enniskillen despite several wrong turns, where a bus delivered us to an obscure location.

What’s in it for me? A fair question repeatedly posed to artists. Some artworks incite this question more than others. Samuel Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot*, premiered at Théâtre de Babylone in 1953, is one such work. Beckett’s ability to prod a nerve allowed the drama to stand the test of time. On the final Happy Days International Beckett Festival before Brexit, Curators Seán Doran & Liam Browne, and Director Annie Ryan prodded further – necessitating a morning trek up a muddy hill as part of the Purgatorio: Walking for *Waiting for Godot* performance. Roaming past curious sheep and fertile farmland, we took our seats around Antony Gormley’s austere, metallic Godot tree. Any awkward silence amongst us was undercut by a whistling gale. Shivering actors appeared along the wild hillside, their long coats snapping in the wind. Personal costume details muted the modern classic’s stuffy theatre-bro edge; Estragon’s troublesome boots were a pair of old Timberlands. Pozzo sported a black pair of Nike Air Max with his aristocratic, silk dressing gown, while Vikings star Tadhg Murphy’s bleached blonde hair made a refreshing substitute for Lucky’s usual dusty wig. “Nothing to be done,” Dublin actor Andrew Bennet began. Beyond him, a frontier of pine trees and barbed wire separated Fermanagh moorland from the hills of Cavan.







Waiting for Godot follows homeless companions Vladimir and Estragon as they circle their only point of reference – a solitary tree. Our secular pilgrimage was fitting given the underlying theme of salvation that haunts the play. The tiresome two bide time in wait of an unseen Godot who embodies an aura of resolution. The world that Vladimir and Estragon inhabit is insular and almost entirely stripped of context. In our blindness, we are propelled to reinterpret the story anew with each recital. There is a sense in which Beckett's characters are tasked with their creator's dirty work i.e. to find a reason for their being there. We never know whether they succeed and in our wondering state, we seem to take their place. The hype surrounding Godot pointed to a problem shared amongst all modernist giants: when referential material is subtracted from the picture, we feel as though there is nothing at stake. Who are you Mr. Beckett to place us in purgatory? What is of value in this impasse? For the market, the fact that speculation breeds profit was perhaps enough of an answer. For the rest of us, Godot is yet to arrive.



## *Perhaps the only conclusion to be derived from Waiting for Godot is that conclusions are often transient and illusory at best.*

Beckett may well return our question: "Who am I to craft an individual Godot for each of you?" should the messy work of signification not be shared amongst writer and producer, performers and participants? Perhaps the only conclusion to be derived from *Waiting for Godot* is that conclusions are often transient and illusory at best – a familiar paradox to those residing in the border counties. With the border as backdrop, the circular and irresolute dialogue that cemented Beckett's reputation as an absurdist icon stirs memories of waiting at checkpoints and roadblocks, of endless peace talks and fluid national boundaries. Beckett confined the play to a hiatus of sorts. Perhaps this is why the timing feels pertinent. With cross-border relations thrown into uncertainty and a suspended Assembly stalling Northern Irish politics, Vladimir and Estragon's display of bewilderment becomes less surreal and more relatable.

Each of the two acts concludes with the appearance of a messenger boy (we later discover they are brothers) who informs the pair of Godot's decision to postpone his visit a day further. Beckett tempts us with allusions to Christ here. Didi and Gogo (Vladimir and Estragon) dream of Godot's loft, where the boys allegedly sleep amongst the hay. One sibling minds the goats while the other acts as shepherd; the shepherd is beaten while the goatherd escapes punishment. Theological allusions, however present, are never certain. Beckett himself rejected the simple identification of Godot as God. He was more concerned with the consolatory snares of everyday language. If the play is unintelligible, it is not down to the accessibility of the language. On the contrary; Beckett employs the limits of expression – the loaded semantics of habitual phrases, the comfort of the familiar – as a deluded mode of expression that undermines itself. He is attentive of this tendency towards integration in language, wherein we curb matters beyond our control by putting them into words.

The play ends with the following scene:

**VLADIMIR:** Well? Shall we go?

**ESTRAGON:** Yes, let's go.

They do not move.

Though uttered by two tramps in purgatory, the sentiment could just as well have come from the mouths of a married couple, or political comrades – anyone stifled by time and duty. We see this kind of reluctant attachment in the relationship between Pozzo and Lucky, a lord and servant duo whose toxic interactions offer distraction to Didi and Gogo. Some have interpreted Pozzo and Lucky as a tragicomic caricature of German Idealist Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel's master-slave dialectic. Others see the pair as an embodiment of Britain's tense colonial relationship with Ireland (the name Lucky here taking on a tongue-in-cheek tone). Pozzo's desire to know and control his subject creates a circle of contradiction where one wish eclipses the other. This is why Lucky is at once an enigma and a brute to Pozzo. Despite repeatedly whipping Lucky and cursing him – "PIG!" – Pozzo relies on his servant for emotional guidance: "Guess who taught me all these beautiful things... My Lucky! Beauty, grace, truth, of the first water, I knew they were all beyond me." [1] However unequal the relationship, the roles of master and slave reinforce and sustain one another. Didi and Gogo's ongoing discussions similarly reinforce the invisible parameters that they build for themselves – a fiction made real through practice. Both relationships revolve around an abstraction. These parameters may lack the enforced, physical presence of the Irish border, itself a



physical manifestation of the wider power struggle. Yet both predicaments suggest a deep psychological entrenchment that imposes its form on the social realm. Beyond the contested national border, invisible boundaries persist all over Northern Ireland. These unspoken constrictions could seem frivolous or incredibly serious depending on the situation: serious because they are embodied by people, frivolous because their authority is fluid.



In June of 2016, Britain voted to leave the European Union despite a majority in Scotland and Northern Ireland preferring to remain. The result left many Northern Irish voters feeling politically disillusioned. Beyond the obvious impracticalities of a restored border, few of us could understand why Northern Ireland should have to rebuild old fences given the time and courage it took to break them down in the first place. The situation is made stranger still with DUP MPs wielding power in Westminster while the Northern Irish Assembly lies dormant. Millennials like myself had watched the border fade away to little more than a change in phone signal over the years. My mother carried me back and forth in her womb at the tail end of the Troubles in the early 90s, while studying Irish Politics and History at the University of Ulster in Derry. She encountered acts of kindness from border guards in those days; one offered her some tangerines as a Valentine's Day gift. The same man was murdered hours later in an explosion planted by paramilitaries. She had also found herself a target of violence. A soldier raised his gun to her when she asked him for directions at a roadblock – my siblings watched from the car. I planned to document these stories from friends and family but something always held me back, beyond the fear of resurrecting old sectarian tensions. The idea of turning a trauma into an anecdote made my skin crawl. Perhaps this aversion developed from reading countless media reports that, in an either sensationalizing or emotionally distant tone, felt far removed from the real agony and confusion that lingers after such events. The matter-of-factness of news journalism, however important, feigns certainty in an entirely disorientating situation.

Contemporary artists like Willie Doherty, Paul Seawright and Ursula Burke have favoured a progress shaped by healing rather than rapid advancement in the aftermath of the Troubles. Their enquiries have laid much of the groundwork for an ambitious cultural foray such as *Walking for Waiting for Godot*. All of this important work takes place within the context of the peace process, supported by networks of cross-border solidarity and the intervention of the European Union (an essential supranational component now in jeopardy). Willie Doherty's artistic practice is built around the act of returning to familiar landscapes again and again. His photographs search for traces of the unresolved and overlooked, of "something that evades language." [2] Like Didi and Gogo, he revisits weary paths in search of a resolution that never arrives. Though the paths remain the same, perceptions change as details are either forgotten or mutated by suspect memories.



## As reflection increases in scope and power, content itself becomes ever more opaque.

The second act of *Waiting for Godot* sees characters forget their bearings. Slowly, they piece together the events of Act I, along with the purpose of their journey. A blinded Pozzo reemerges in distress, with no recollection of Didi and Gogo. In the midst of the chaos and gloom, a few hopeful leaves have sprouted on the tree. The amnesiac finale is an exercise in the plasticity of memory, reminding us that our perception of the past pivots on our intentions in the present. Referring to Beckett's refusal to interpret his own works, German Critical Theorist Theodor Adorno once wrote in a text dedicated to Beckett, "As reflection increases in scope and power, content itself becomes ever more opaque." [3] There is a need for creativity in thinking about the future of cross-border relationships. An opaque narrative like *Waiting for Godot* permits those in the border counties to ruminate over shared histories beyond traditional formats of remembrance and political debate. Consciousness is given free reign where it was previously blinkered by sentimentality and righteousness. Under Beckett's spell, we forget in order to remember. And in our blindness, we learn to see again.

[1] The quote continues, "So I took a knook." Translator Robert Cohen pointed out the word's appearance as a name for small forest elves with long white hair in L. Frank Baum's 1902 short story, *The Life and Adventures of Santa Claus*. The knooks reluctantly help Claus harness the reindeer despite their contention that beasts should neither be whipped nor harnessed. Claus thanks the knooks "for their knowledge of man's needs as well for their labors on my behalf." Pozzo echoes Claus in his lament to Lucky, and again in cracking his whip and calling Lucky to action with the demand, "On!". See: Robert Cohen, 'Pozzo's Knook, Beckett's Boys, and Santa Claus' (*Modern Drama*, 2011).

[2] Willie Doherty, 'Some Notes on Problems and Possibilities', in Fiona Bradley (ed.) *Willie Doherty: Buried* (Edinburgh: Fruitmarket Gallery, 2009), p.155

[3] Theodor Adorno. *Aesthetic Theory* (Continuum, 2000). p. 34

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[Previous](#)

**August**

[Next](#)

**September**



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