

## The apparitions

*Kevin Barry*

It was October when the apparition of Samuel Beckett appeared on a gable wall in Ringsend. The spectral visitation was twelve feet tall and not quite inanimate – if you stared long enough, a strange flicker enlivened its hawklike eyes. The apparition was faint in daylight but more obvious at night – come dusk, his form would somehow illuminate. The gable was of an old tenement that housed a twenty-four-hour tanning salon and an infamous chipper. Soon it was noted that at a certain melancholy hour, Beckett turned by the merest fraction to look toward the Liffey's storied waters. By coincidence, the new Samuel Beckett Bridge had lately been slung across the river just west of Ringsend to link the Grand Canal Dock Redevelopment Scheme with the Irish Financial Services Centre, but let it be said that no apparent distaste clouded the falconlike gaze of the stout-hearted old Resistance fighter.

The apparition caused immediate difficulties for the Dublin intelligentsia. This was no Blessed Virgin taking form upon a tree stump in front of syphillitic peasants out in the hungry districts of west Limerick. This was a secular apparition, and it was incontestable – Beckett was absolutely *there* on the Ringsend gable. The intelligentsia found they had nothing smart to say about the matter, and an amount of hand-wringing and beard-stroking went on in the thoughtfully renovated terrace houses of Portobello.

As for the particulars of the apparition, this incarnation was of Beckett perhaps in his late fifties. He wore a trademark black roll-neck sweater and a pair of thick-stemmed miserabilist corduroys. Gaunt as ever, he had that poised gentleness about him, too, a certain reserve – he was still every inch the ascetic Foxrockian.

In the early days, a steady stream of pilgrims flowed down Pearse Street. These were unhealthily thin young men who had lingered too long for their complexions' good in the reading rooms of Trinity College and the National Library. In an expectant hush, they gathered around the apparition, and little moans of ecstasy escaped their throats at every shimmer of the profoundly depressed dramatist's ospreylike glance. Perhaps his sharp gaze was seeking on the southern horizon the great peak of Djouce in the Wicklow mountains, where he had trailed as a boy after the bootsteps of his cheerful father? So the young men mused as they rolled cigarettes from their tobacco pouches and drifted into an almost post-coital fugue state.

Slowly, though, as the weeks of early winter passed, we grew accustomed to the apparition. Certainly, if you were on the No 2 bus heading home to Sandymount, you'd turn your head to have a quick look, as young women came and went from the tanning salon, tangerine-faced in their Ugg boots, and as the occasional brawl erupted outside the chipper, and you were reassured that no matter how grim you were feeling yourself, Beckett felt worse. But the gathering of pale young devotees with each passing day diminished, and the apparition became just another of those oddities of Dublin life that its people find are as well left unremarked.

Then Beckett spoke.

It occurred at precisely five o'clock on Tuesday evening in the last week of November. He said:

“Oh I have an itchy, *itchy* anus.”

Things became awkward. As anyone who has read his *Selected Letters* will attest, the fact that Beckett suffered the not-inconsiderable trial of an itchy anus is hardly news, but to have him state the fact in plain hearing of the citizenry was unfortunate, and frankly a little uncouth. Especially as it became the apparition's custom to repeat those words, like an irate mantra, every hour and on the hour.

It was at this point the city authorities put a call through to my PR consultancy.

Rikki, they said, we need your help.

The Beckett apparition had of course attracted an amount of in-

ternational media coverage. Ireland is always favoured as a source for skewy colour pieces, and throughout the early weeks, global news crews were frequently on the scene in Ringsend. The apparition was a boost to our tourist numbers, certainly, though of course a smallish one – a ghostly visitation from an avant-garde dramatist will realistically only do so much for bed-night figures. Still, it was coverage, and the authorities were now concerned that having Beckett whinging about his arsehole on an hourly basis wasn't an ideal projection of the city's image.

We thrashed the matter out during an emergency late-night session at a discreet hotel on the quays. I tried to keep things calm. I suggested a number of reasonably innovative PR solutions, but just then a messenger lad came from across town, panting, and he brought fresh news:

James Joyce was after putting in an appearance on Clanbrassil Street.

We pelted through the rainy nighttime streets in our macs and galoshes, and it was breathlessly remarked that Mr Joyce had notable connections with his point of apparition. His character, Leopold Bloom, in the novel, *Ulysses*, lived at 52 Clanbrassil Street. This direct link to the work suggested at once a more promising heritage opportunity. It was thoughtful of Mr Joyce, we remarked, to allow such a connect.

Then we saw him. He was above on the gable end of a poledancing

and private-room emporium called Fun-time Kitty O'Reilly's All-Nite Slaghouse. In the window of which a flashing neon sign promised:

"Fresh Ukrainian Snatch Daily."

Now Beckett was one thing. He has a certain snob value, but Joyce, to this day, is box office, and we knew his apparition would attract massive attention. And this is where he chose to appear?

Plus, he was shitfaced.

He swayed dangerously, and the eyes behind the wire-rimmed spectacles were watery and roving. And, unlike Beckett, who in due fairness had maintained a dignified silence for a few weeks anyway – at least until his piles started to play up – Joyce was mouthing out of him from the get-go. He was tappin' passers-by for change in a slurred and unpleasantly melodious tone. And he was sizing up everything in a skirt. Ankles to nape, they took the rake of his beady little masturbator's eyes. Anything aged sixteen to sixty-four. Lascivious, unkempt, drunk – this was our Joyce apparition.

"Ah, don't, please!" we beseeched the passers-by as they reached politely for change. "He'll only drink it!"

We were only beginning to come to terms with the Joyce disaster when word filtered down from the northside reaches of the city: William Butler Yeats had arrived. His apparition was on the gable end of a methodone clinic on Talbot Street. He couldn't have picked a section of the city with more fucking skangers per square fucking foot. He was speaking, yes, but in a well-mannered whisper.

"Nodge?" he wafted. "Would you have a nodge spare for me at all?"

We retreated to our discreet hotel on the quays.

So what's a "nodge" exactly? a representative of the city authorities asked.

From what I gather, I said, it means a small chipping of hashish or cannabis resin – perhaps just enough to make a single cannabis "cigarette."

From our subsequent enquiries, it turned out, sadly, that WBY had form in this regard – he used to buy "tincture of cannabis" from a chemist shop in Sligo.

At least he's not on the smack, an authorities man remarked.

Not yet, another sighed. But the hash is a gateway drug ... The cunt will be robbin' people on the Luas by Christmas.

Rikki, they all pleaded, it's time for action!

And it was later – much later – whilst abed, in a flop of night-sweat, that the solution came to me:

Screens!

I remembered the fabric screens they used on the gable ends of pubs for big sporting occasions. A gauzy screen that pulls down and hides an entire gable for you. No bother.

I put the notion to the members and they barked like seals.

Quickly, we had the screens made up, and an explanation was offered to the city in a special broadcast that went out simultaneously

on all channels.

It had been established, we said, by scientific evidence that the apparitions were starting to fade into the brickwork. This was not yet visible to the naked human eye but our surveyors were in no doubt. The fading was due to the workings of the pale Dublin sunlight. If the matter were to go unchecked, we would lose the apparitions entirely within a year or two. So the apparitions had to be protected by special screens, and the words spoken – such a gift from the otherworld – must be protected also. By being drowned out.

The Beckett screen was a rendition of the playwright gazing into a Parisian morn, outside a café, while a tape played loudly on an endless loop a rendition of “I can’t go on ... I’ll go on ... I can’t go on ... I’ll go on ...” as performed by a rotating cast of stars of Irish television and radio, including the man who does the Brennan’s Bread ad.

The Joyce screen was a vision of the novelist in blazer and strawboater, while a tape played (eternally) the closing paragraph from “The Dead” as recited by An Especially Soulful Actor of the Dublin Stage.

The Yeats screen was an image from his dope-free early twenties, on the beach in Sligo, as a musical adaptation of “Inishfree” was sung by Westlife.

We announced that the actual apparitions, and their voices, might yet be allowed to appear for special occasions.

But no particular dates were set.

*Kevin Barry’s most recent book is City of Bohane*