



## **'It is suicide to be abroad. But what it is to be at home ...': Beckett as national performance**

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## Beckett and National Performance/Beckett as National Performance

In 2015, an Irish naval vessel was sent to the Mediterranean, acting as part of a European Union mission to respond to the refugee crisis that had developed in that region. In the course of a three-month tour, the ship's crew rescued over 1,000 people, bringing them safely to Italy and Malta. They returned to Ireland in December of that year, receiving what multiple Irish media outlets described as a 'hero's welcome' (see UTV, 2015; Newstalk, 2015).

Does it matter that the name of that Irish ship was 'the LÉ Samuel Beckett'?<sup>1</sup> Beckett's plays and novels often feature characters who are marginalised and dispossessed, and he himself often expressed compassion for people who had been displaced by war – an expression of empathy that may have been influenced by his experience of fleeing Paris in 1941. And, later in his life, he was involved in efforts to support his friend Jérôme Lindon's attempts to expose the use of torture by the French army in Algeria, risking expulsion from France for doing so (see Knowlson, 1995: 492-5) – so it seems reasonable to assume that Beckett would have supported the objectives of the Irish navy's mission. Yet, as outlined by scholars such as Emilie Morin (2009: 1-21) and in collections such as Sean Kennedy's *Beckett and Ireland* (2010), Beckett's attitude towards the Irish state was at best ambivalent - and indeed was often straightforwardly negative. For that reason, it is difficult to imagine how he might have responded to his name being given to a military vessel, even if the ship was being used on a humanitarian mission by an Ireland very different from the one that he spent his youth in.

This paper begins with the observation that nations such as Ireland interact with each other – and seek to understand themselves – by appropriating theatre-makers and other artists, using them to perform versions of their nation to the outside world, as the Irish state did by naming a ship after Beckett. What is being communicated when we learn that a vessel named after a playwright has rescued refugees? What happens when that ship takes part in trade or diplomatic missions, or is visited by tourists while in dock in Ireland? If Beckett acts as a kind of intercultural shorthand between nations, what images of Ireland – and of the writer himself – are communicated? And how do such appropriations change the

performance and understanding of Beckett's works, both within and beyond Ireland? My aim in asking such questions is not to answer them directly but instead to consider the circumstances that provoke them – and, by doing so, to offer a perspective on the creation of Beckett as a national icon in Ireland, a process that I will chart from shortly after his death in 1989 to the LÉ Samuel Beckett's first mission. I want also to place the treatment of Beckett in a broader discussion of nation-branding in Ireland, offering an outline history of the Irish state's performance of itself through its artists, which I discuss in relation to the appearance of Irish writers on banknotes during the twentieth century. My aim in exploring these brief case studies is to suggest a model for how we might consider in more depth the relationship between the Irish state and Irish artists as examples of national performances.

### **1. Historical contexts – Money as Irish Performance**

A mutually-imitative relationship between the state and its artworks was evident immediately upon the achievement of independence in 1922. For example, one of the Irish government's first decisions was to make the Abbey Theatre the first state-subsidised national theatre in the Anglophone world. That decision was grounded in pragmatism, in a desire by the state to use the Abbey Theatre's international reputation and its nationalist credentials in order to bolster its own legitimacy (see Lonergan, 2009: 58).

The use of art to underwrite the legitimacy of the new state was also evident in the state's design of its national currency. Its paper money did not feature an image of a monarch, a head of state, or a common national symbol. Instead they presented a character from a play – Kathleen Ni Houlihan, a personification of Ireland as imagined by Yeats and Lady Gregory in the 1902 drama of the same name, and as re-imagined by the artist John Lavery in a later portrait.



**Image: First Series Irish bank note, with Kathleen Ni Houlihan, adapted from a painting by John Lavery, appearing in the left side.**

Bank notes are not just decorative; they are, to borrow a phrase from the title of a book by Philip Coggan, 'paper promises' (2012). They do not have value in themselves – a £10 note is not literally worth £10, but is instead a metaphor for real wealth, which is usually held in a bank or reserve. But if a country becomes bankrupt or suffers from runaway inflation, that banknote no longer has value; it reverts to the status of paper. The decision by the bearer of a banknote to treat paper as if it has material worth thus requires a suspension of disbelief such as theatre audiences apply. That explains why so many countries place images of monarchs or presidents on their money: a national currency is a performance not just of a nation's sense of culture or beauty – but also of its credibility or, more specifically, its credit. If a state lacks credibility, the value of its note will fall. If a currency lacks credibility, a state may fall. So a national currency exists in a mimetic relationship with the state: belief in one bolsters belief in the other.

In the two later series of Irish banknotes, the currency would be redesigned to feature other literary and theatrical figures: Jonathan Swift, W.B. Yeats, and James Joyce among them – but the portrait of Kathleen Ni Houlihan remained as the notes' watermark until the Irish punt was discontinued with the adoption of euro

banknotes in 2002. In the second banknote series, the €20 note features a portrait of Yeats, and in the background one can also see the logo of the Abbey Theatre.



Image: B Series Irish banknotes, featuring W.B. Yeats.



Image: Abbey Theatre logo

Hence, the Abbey was in a probably unique situation internationally whereby its patrons would have paid for tickets using banknotes that featured the theatre's own logo.

This is not the only example of the Irish state making use of an iconic brand for its currency. Its original coins (designed by a committee chaired by Yeats) featured an image of a fourteenth-century Irish harp, an image recognized internationally as an iconic representation of Ireland. However, international awareness of that image had been fostered by its use as a brand-mark by Guinness: that company had trademarked the image in 1876 – even though the harp from which the image was taken was (and still is) regarded as an important element of Irish national heritage. As a result of the image being owned by Guinness, the Irish state had to turn the harp the other way around when using it for their coins (as they would also reverse the Abbey’s logo on the banknote with Yeats on it). We will return to the harp as an icon briefly below, but for now might observe that Irish pub patrons would have paid for pints of Guinness using coins that featured an inverted version of that beverage’s own brand – that too was a situation that was almost certainly unique to Ireland.



**Image: the original Guinness harp trademark**





**Image: the harp on Irish coins – euro series. The harp has appeared on all Irish coins since 1922**

The relationship between metaphor and economics (as broadly conceived and including the use of money) has been a subject of academic scholarship since (at least) the 1970s, but has recently been reinvigorated. A key example is Richard Brock's *The Romantic Economist* (2009). 'Economic theories and models are never a direct encapsulation of some unbiased and unmediated vision and analysis,' writes Brock; 'rather... they behave like giant metaphors, actively structuring our vision and analysis' (5) For Brock, economic metaphors should be seen as functioning similarly to metaphors in romantic poetry: they may either be illustrative (revealing what something is) or constitutive (transforming a thing into something else). As Brock himself points out, economic terminology is full of such metaphors (a major example of this for him is the phrase 'Washington Consensus', but in Ireland the phrase 'Celtic Tiger' is another useful example). We might thus understand why the Irish state would appropriate a figure such as Yeats for its bank-notes: as an icon for the Irish nation, his presence is illustrative (in that it expresses Ireland's sense of its cultural heritage) but also constitutive (in that it *determines* the extent to which nations trust Ireland's financial stability based on its cultural heritage).

## **2. Nation-Branding and the Irish Artist: An Outline**

It is generally acknowledged that figures such as Beckett, James Joyce and W.B. Yeats have often been deployed in state-sponsored performances of the Irish nation. For example, Elizabeth Butler Cullingford distinguishes between modernist and postmodern aesthetics in the appropriation of Yeats by mass culture, an analysis that can be applied to the appropriation of Yeats by Irish state agencies. She writes first about modernism:

In the modernist aesthetic, subscribed to by Yeats himself, meaning may be elusive and difficult but close attention will usually uncover it. In the unified modernist work... the text signifies all over: every detail is important, and

therefore some knowledge of the original is indispensable to the interpretation of literary allusion. (2001: 194)

For Cullingford, modernism requires the reader to trace origins; it also requires a sense of the authority of the original writer. As she writes, 'to a modernist writer or reader, it matters that we recognise Yeats as the source and authorial guarantor of phrases such as 'Things Fall Apart'' (194). In contrast:

Contemporary postmodernist culture... has supposedly abolished the 'depth' model of literary and cultural enquiry... Yeats's phrases float free of their origin in his poem... Without having to read him, American consumers understand that the postmodernist 'Yeats' signifies cultural capital. (194)

She shows how Yeats and his poetry are decontextualized, and then used in popular film and advertising to evoke images of authenticity and sensitivity that neither require nor encourage knowledge of the poems themselves. Cullingford thus differentiates between two versions of Yeats: the modernist whose poems require careful reading, and a postmodern icon or 'commodity fetish' who signifies a particular set of values, usually related to romance, tradition, poetic sensitivity, and so on. While her discussion relates to the use of Yeats in advertising, her references to his cultural capital are directly relevant to his appropriation by Irish stage agencies, including his appearance on banknotes.

Spurgeon Thompson makes a similar argument, but about Joyce. Exploring the repackaging of Joyce's life and works for tourists' consumption, Thompson distinguishes between the literary canon and what he terms an 'imitation canon'. The latter is an example of what he considers faulty mimesis:

It is a rip-off, or cheap knock-off of the traditional literary canon. This attempt to approximate the canon for a mass audience displays profoundly more conservative and co-optative tendencies than does the traditional canon. The traditional literary canon preserves its core texts from political intrusion and scrutiny, of course, yet it also acknowledges that literary



discourses are complex, thus leaving some room for various forms of resistance and subversion. The 'imitation canon,' on the other hand, is so totalizing as to leave virtually no space at all for subversion or complication. It dominates by a sort of rude fiat (1997: 136)

Cullingford's book was published in 2001, and Thompson's essay in 1997. Both therefore pre-date the intensification of the Ireland's appropriation of its writers for the promotion of state-sponsored activities. This includes examples such as the Industrial Development Agency's 2005 'Irish Mind' campaign in publications such as *The Economist* – a series of full-page ads to encourage Foreign Direct Investment that displayed portraits by Louis Le Brocquy of Irish artists including Beckett, Bono and others (see Lonergan, 2009: 60). Similarly, in 2010 the state agency Culture Ireland established a venture called 'Imagine Ireland', a year-long series of readings, performances, and conferences in the USA, the aim of which was to use Irish art to promote the Irish state – or, perhaps more correctly – to limit the damage to its reputation in the wake of the 2008 banking crash and the collapse of the Celtic Tiger economy.

The emergence of such projects illustrates the impact of nation-branding on Irish cultural life, so that it now becomes possible to see Ireland's Beckett as operating in a 'performance space' that includes Norway's Ibsen or England's Shakespeare, among others – and which also includes such acts as the Russian sponsorship of a 2016 performance of Bach, Prokofiev, and Shchedrin in Palmyra after their army had driven ISIS from that city (Kramer and Higgins, 2016: A4), an association of national cultures with militarism that contrasts with the Irish navy's use of the Beckett name.

The practice of nation-branding has gained momentum since the late 1990s, and culture has played a key role in its acceleration. Theatre scholars have explored many of its manifestations: Tony Blair's promotion of the 'Cool Britannia' idea (see Harvie, 2005: 16-40; Hewison, 2011: 31-62); the competition in newly independent eastern European countries to host the Eurovision Song Contest (see Fricker and Gluhovic, 2013); the links between new national theatres and growing regional autonomy in Scotland and Catalonia (see Reid, 2014; Delgado, 2003, Wilmer, 2008);

and so on. Melissa Aronczyk defines nation-branding as an action that is ‘the result of the interpenetration of commercial and public sector interests among domestic and international populations’, suggesting that its objective is ‘to help the nation-state successfully compete for international capital in such areas as tourism, foreign direct investment, import-export trade, higher education, and skilled labor’ (2013: 16). She adds that the performance of positive versions of the nation may be used to enhance ‘pride and patriotism within a nation’ too (16). Such acts of nation-branding can be described as performances: as staged events that aim to convey a set of meanings to an audience.

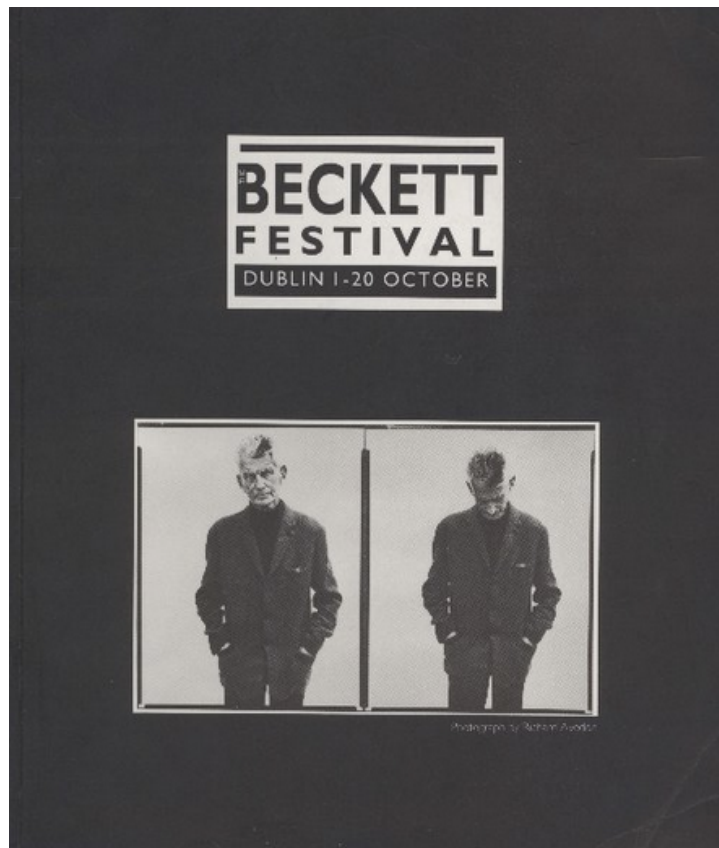
In Irish contexts, the study of nation-branding has been carried out mainly in the fields of tourism studies and social science. Combining both approaches is Michael Clancy’s *Brand New Ireland* (2009), which argues that nation-branding is a form of storytelling. ‘States utilize branding for an external audience of diplomats, investors, international bankers and the global public at large,’ writes Clancy, ‘but another important audience is their own citizens. Branding is simply another means through which the state narrates the nation’ (2009: 27). To brand something is to create a set of associations between the nation and a group of abstract characteristics, which, in the Irish case, might include proximity to nature, creativity, the imagination, authenticity, and so on. By making those characteristics seem desirable, one attracts people to the brand – and thus to the product that the brand seeks to represent or symbolise.

Drawing on Clancy and Aronczyk, it is possible to identify three relevant characteristics of nation-branding. The first is that it is one of many competing narratives about the nation: it must compete against national stereotypes, for instance (such as the cliché of the Irish as drunken or belligerent), but it can also be seen as an example of Thompson’s ‘imitation canon’, and also relates to Cullingford’s distinction between an expertise-led interpretation of artists and a postmodern interpretation of them as commodity fetish. Second, nation-branding attempts to create positive associations that need not correspond to reality: the decision to name a naval vessel after Beckett can be made without any reference to Beckett’s actual feelings about militarism and/or the Irish state itself. Finally, the audience for nation-branding can be found not just in the outside world but within the nation

itself: when the LE Samuel Beckett received a 'hero's welcome', what was being performed were a set of values that were intended to be 'consumed' both within and beyond Ireland, and which therefore entail the construction of Irish identity. A question to be considered in the remainder of this paper, then, is how and why Beckett attained this status?

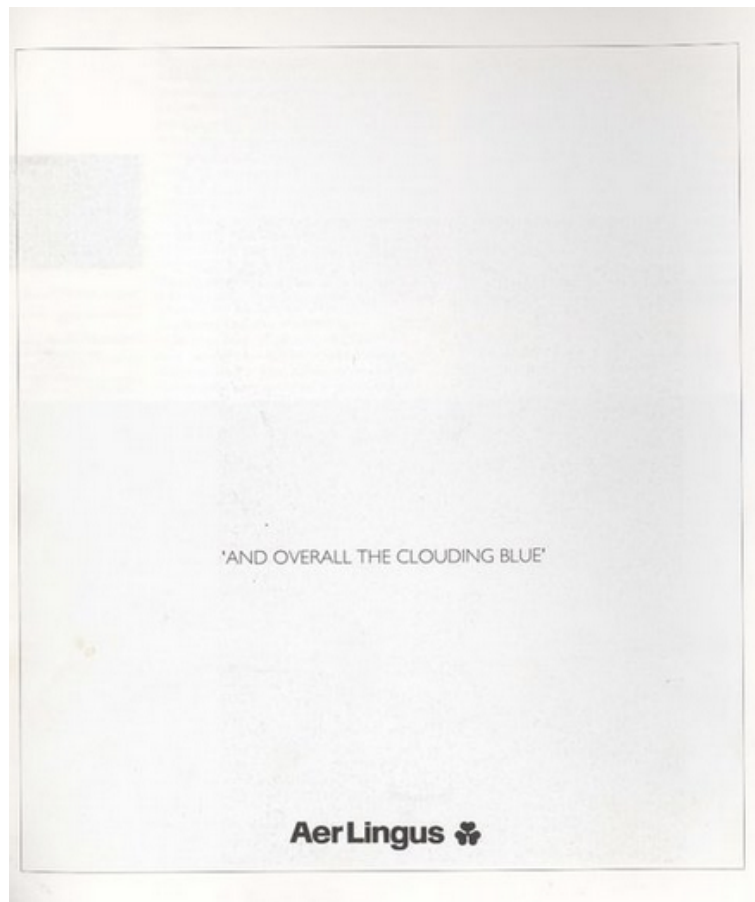
### **3. Why Beckett?**

The first significant step in transforming Beckett into an icon for Ireland was the staging of a Beckett Festival by Dublin's Gate Theatre in 1991. That event involved the performance of Beckett's stage plays, the broadcasting by the national TV station of several films and documentaries, and a symposium at Beckett's alma mater Trinity College (see Clare, 2016: 39-50). Something of Beckett's status within Ireland at that time can be discerned from the festival programme, a beautifully designed document of almost 80 pages. The inclusion of a chronology of Beckett's life, together with short biographical essays suggests that, although Irish audiences knew who he was, Beckett was still somewhat unfamiliar. Similarly, the inclusion of an essay on the 'Irish Beckett' implies that it was thought necessary to make the case that Beckett and Ireland could be seen as having something to say to and about each other.



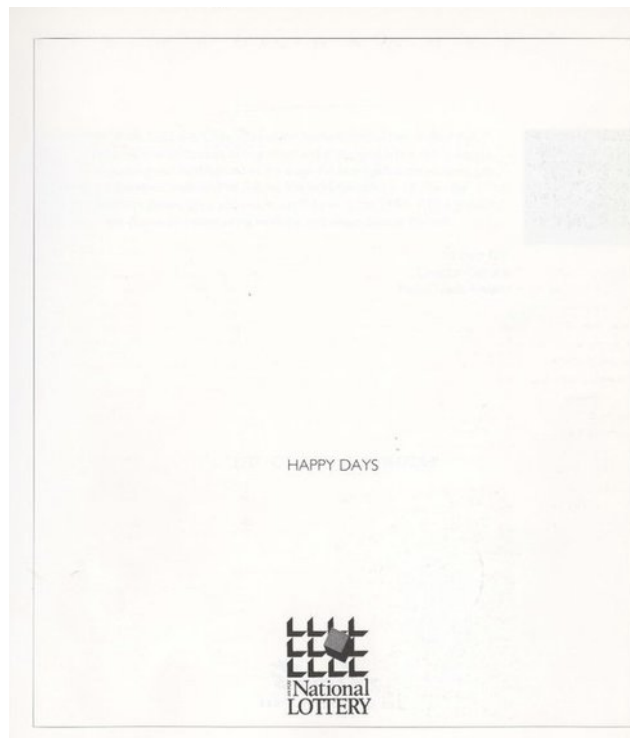
**Image: Gate Theatre's *Beckett Festival Show Programme* (1991)**

What is most revealing, however, is the design of advertisements in the publication, which tell us much about the assumed audience for the Festival: what they would have bought, their preferred brands of alcohol or tobacco, and so on. The practice in Ireland in the early 1990s was for advertisements in show programmes generally to be uncustomised: they appeared exactly as they would have been published in newspapers or magazines for general readers. For the Beckett Festival, however, all of the ads were specially prepared – and, without exception, conformed to the design of the brochure, rather than using their own brand guidelines. Each ad appeared on an almost blank page, with a quotation from Beckett in the middle, and the company's logo appearing at the bottom of the page – always without contact details or other corporate markings. Hence, the ad for the Irish state airline Aer Lingus was presented as follows:



**Image: Gate Theatre's *Beckett Festival Show Programme* (7)**

That quotation is from *All that Fall*, Beckett's 1956 radio play. An advertisement for life insurance was presented with amusingly Beckettian morbidity, quoting the line 'I shall soon be quiet dead at last in spite of all' (from the novel *Malone Dies*). And, lest we become too despondent, here is the advertisement for the National Lottery:



**Image: Gate Theatre's *Beckett Festival Show Programme* (19)**

Seventeen of these ads feature in the programme, all of them including either a quotation from Beckett or the title of one of his plays or novels. They capture the playful quality of Beckett's work, but most interesting here is a performance of the relationship between Beckett and the commodity or brand. Yes, advertising will be sold in support of the production of Beckett's plays, but it must conform to a Beckettian aesthetic. There is a sense, in other words, that to link Beckett too explicitly with commercialised images would be to detract or distract from his work.

The impulse to view Beckett and the Beckettian as transcending the commoditised would soon decline, however. In 2003, the Irish state engaged in a trade mission to China, hoping to attract foreign direct investment, to recruit Chinese students to Irish universities, and to generate tourism. The government brought two major Irish stage productions with them. One was *Riverdance*. The other was the Gate Theatre's production of *Godot*.

The link between Beckett and multinational agencies was enhanced in 2013 when a new bridge was opened bearing his name. It was located in Dublin's docklands, close to the city's International Financial Services Centre where several Irish and European banks are headquartered:

Dublin City Council commissioned Valencian architect Santiago Calatrava - the world's leading bridge designer - to create the Samuel Beckett Bridge which connects the north and south sides of the River Liffey [...] The brief called for a landmark structure of unmistakable modernity and with a unique character....(Dublin Docklands, 2011)

The bridge thus performs a set of values. Because it is constructed by the 'world's leading bridge designer', the aim is to suggest that Ireland is a place in which the world's leading people do things. Also interesting is the phrase 'unmistakeable modernity' – as if betraying a fear that the bridge might instead represent an ambiguous modernity or that, worse still, Ireland may be perceived as not modern at all. And then there is the bridge's shape: a harp. So the brief fuses Beckett and the harp with Calatrava, giving us a structure that is modern and 'world class' while also distinctively Irish.

The naming of the naval vessel after Beckett came after a period when Beckett moved from being a revered but somewhat unfamiliar literary figure to a situation in which he was giving his name to multiple state initiatives – a period of twenty-five years in which the avant-garde gradually became kitsch, one might argue. What, then, can we learn from the performance of Ireland that is carried out by this ship?

The LÉ Samuel Beckett launched in 2012, and was the first of a series of three naval vessels named after Irish writers (the second being the James Joyce, launched in 2013, and the third the W.B. Yeats, launched in 2016). One of its first missions was to patrol the waters around Skellig Michael, the island home of a medieval Irish monastery and a UNESCO world heritage site, when that location was used to film scenes for the *Star Wars* film *The Force Awakens* (2014). The decision to grant Disney/Lucasfilm access to this site was condemned in Ireland: there was a fear that the island's heritage could be damaged and that the protected wildlife could be harmed. The Irish state proved indifferent to those complaints. As Fintan O'Toole wryly observed, there was something deeply ironic about sending a ship named after



‘one of the greatest enemies corporate culture has ever had’ to protect the interests of Disney (2015).

How then do we respond to the presence of the *LÉ Beckett* in the Mediterranean? As Aronczyk points out, one purpose of nation-branding exercises is to change attitudes within nations themselves. This is not necessarily negative: a 2017 survey by the International Rescue Council found that the citizens of Ireland had the most sympathetic attitude towards Syrian refugees in all of the European countries surveyed. It seems reasonable to infer that media reports about the *LÉ Beckett* played some role in building sympathies towards refugees more generally (2017).

But negative consequences may also arise. A naval vessel is an extension of the state; a person who steps onto the *LÉ Beckett* is, in a manner of speaking, standing on Irish territory. This use of a boat to convey national legitimacy contrasts with the status of the vessels that many refugees and migrants have used to cross the Mediterranean – most of which were destroyed when intercepted by the Irish navy during its successive missions there. Does the identification of one vessel with a particular state reinforce the stateless and thus ‘illegitimate’ status of the other vessels? By marking the vessel as distinctively Irish, the *Beckett* name is performing values – of belonging, modernity, the state, European identity, civilisation, and so on. And those values in turn may define through a process of contrast the vessels that the *LÉ Beckett* intercepts – and, by extension, the people in them (for a detailed discussion of the status of boats as a metaphor for European identities, see Zaroulia, 2015: 193-210). Placing *Beckett* in any kind of political context will inevitably give rise to such questions and concerns.

#### **4. Beckett as National Performance**

One way of thinking about this form of nation-branding is to see the Irish state’s appropriation of *Beckett* as an example of ‘national performance’, as defined by Erin Hurley (2010). She focuses on a range of performances that represent and mediate Quebec, not just internationally but within that province/nation’s borders too. Such performances include theatrical performance (such as the works of Michel Tremblay) but also include state-sponsored examples of nation-branding such as

Expo '67, as well as the work of Celine Dion. Culture is particularly important for Quebec, writes Hurley, because, 'Like other nations without a state, Quebec relies on cultural production to vouch for its national status' (2010: 8).

Hurley presents three ways of thinking about national performances. The first is *simulation*, which we might define as the presentation of a symbol as 'real' even if the object that it stands in for no longer exists. For instance, we can think of simulation in terms of Thompson's description of the James Joyce tower in Dublin, which is seen as 'real' because its interior represents accurately the layout of the room described in the first chapter of *Ulysses* – a room, that is, that never existed anywhere other than in James Joyce's imagination until it was recreated for tourist consumption (1997: 144)

The second is *metonymy*, which includes the transformation of one part of an object or system into a symbol for the object or system in its entirety. As Hurley writes, 'A performance's nation-ness would be measured... by a standard of 'likeness' or resemblance to social reality. Theatre and nation stand in iconic mimetic relationship...' (2010: 23). The key phrase is 'iconic mimetic relationship': national performances perform the nation but they can also perform the author, and the performance of one draws attention to the other.

The last is *affection*, a term used by Hurley to refer to the representation of nation through strong emotional connections that are often 'substantially non-referential' (29). These three keywords allow for an understanding of how national performances need not relate to the actual nation. For instance, we can think of simulation in an Irish context in terms of how certain plays will be seen as most 'Irish' when they represent aspects of the national culture that no longer exist (such as the peasant culture of the west of Ireland). National theatre is itself a kind of metonymy. And affect relates to identity formation through nation-branding, which, aims to evoke feelings rather than thought.

Using Hurley's three-part model in the context of the earlier discussion of nation-branding, it is possible to view the Irish presentation of Beckett as operating within a chain of national performances. Some important points about this 'chain' can be made. The first is that these metaphorical performances of nation are usually mutually reinforcing: a successful Irish play can create the impression of a functional

Irish economy and *vice versa*. The second is that national performance is not just used for the purposes of branding; it also creates a sense of Irishness within Ireland itself. And finally, belief (or feeling) rather than knowledge (or facts) is essential to the success of a national performance: it does not matter *whether* a performance is based on the truth (the question of Beckett's opinion of Ireland, for example); what matters is that the performance itself is accepted as authentic. We might thus conclude that a nation with credibility is one in which the chain of metaphors are mutually sustaining, and are believed.

### Conclusions

To return to the question at the beginning of this paper: does this matter? 'Beckett' the national icon has evolved over twenty-five years, becoming increasingly distant from Beckett's own life and work in the process. The Beckettian icon is used to communicate ideas that are simplistic, and which tell us little that is true, authentic or useful about Ireland, but which are nevertheless recognised as 'Irish'. To understand the 'real' Beckett or to appreciate his works will not help us to understand the Irish workforce, or the engineering of a bridge, or the status of people who choose to flee to Europe. The reverse is also true: an ad in *The Economist*, a bridge, and a naval vessel all give us version of Beckett that do nothing to deepen our appreciation of the person himself or his work – but they flatter the viewer by assuming knowledge of a major (but difficult) writer. The artist thus acts as a synecdoche for authenticity, giving the state the kind of credibility that it might not otherwise achieve.

So when nations talk to each other by using our artists, what are they saying? What does it mean to pay for something with a bank note that features Jane Austen, to walk down a street named after Lorca, or to fly on a jet named after Stanislavski? The exploration of the above case study suggests that, far from improving our understanding of each other, these images instead impede and inhibit the development of cross-cultural knowledge. We need, therefore, to understand that when states appear to pay tribute to artists by using their names, they are engaged in an unequal transaction: one that risks denigrating the artist – and one that stands

in contrast with nations' deteriorating willingness to fund artists who are actually making work today.

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<sup>1</sup> 'LÉ' stands for 'Long Éireannach' – literally, an Irish ship, and is the Irish navy's equivalent of HMS or USS.