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*‘Wonder-birth’*



## Amergin

I begin at the beginning—‘like an old ballocks, can you imagine that?’—with the first poems by the first poet of Ireland. According to *Lebor Gabála Éirenn*, the twelfth-century ‘Book of Invasions’, the name of this poet is Amergin. The very first poem attributed to him is composed even as he leaps off a ship, one of the fleet carrying the last great wave of pseudo-historical invaders of Ireland known as the Milesians. I imagine what this boat must look like to the locals, the shadowy Tuatha Dé Danann, particularly now that Amergin wastes no time in letting them know who’s in command. For in this first poem Amergin twice uses the term ‘I speak for Erin’ as he chants of ‘Springs of men assembling, | Assembling men at Tara, | Tara, hill of tribes, | Tribes of the son of Mil.’<sup>1</sup> (In this translation, John Montague has very skilfully captured in English the complex link-rhyming of the original.) The term ‘Milesians’ derives from the name of their leader, the *Mil Espáin*, or ‘Spanish Soldier’. His wife, Scota, is an Egyptian pharaoh’s daughter, whose name will come to mean ‘Irishwoman’. She is the mother of Amergin. This second poem ascribed to him is known as ‘The Alphabet Calendar of Amergin’:

I am a stag: *of seven tines*  
I am a flood: *across a plain*  
I am a wind: *on a deep lake*  
I am a tear: *the Sun lets fall*  
I am a hawk: *above the cliff*  
I am a thorn: *beneath the nail*  
I am a wonder: *among flowers*  
I am a wizard: *who but I*  
*Sets the cool aflame with smoke?*  
  
I am a spear: *that rears for blood*  
I am a salmon: *in a pool*  
I am a lure: *from Paradise*  
I am a hill: *where poets walk*  
I am a boar: *ruthless and red*

I am a breaker: *threatening doom*  
 I am a tide: *that drags to death*  
 I am an infant: *who but I*  
*Peeps from the unhewn dolmen arch?*  
 I am the womb: *of every holt*  
 I am the blaze: *on every hill*  
 I am the queen: *of every hive*  
 I am the shield: *for every head*  
 I am the grave: *of every hope*

The 'grave' in the last line of that translation gives a clue to its provenance. This version of the poem is offered by Robert Graves, who intercuts elements of the poem as it appears in *Lebor Gabála* with a similar poem attributed to the Welsh bard Gwion, better known as Taliesen. In chapter 12 of *The White Goddess*,<sup>2</sup> Graves gives an extraordinary analysis of the significance of this alphabet calendar, connecting initial letters of names of the months and the trees associated with those months, so that the 'stag of seven tines', for example, corresponds to the letter B, the month of *Beith*, or the birch, which runs from late December to mid-January. The 'hawk' is related to the letter S, the month of April/May, its tree being the *saille*, or 'willow' of the *salley* gardens in Yeats's poem. The letter associated with the month of June/July and the 'head aflame with smoke' is D, as in *Duir*, the oak tree. 'It is most unlikely,' Graves writes, 'that this poem was allowed to reveal its esoteric meaning to all and sundry; it would have been "pied", as Gwion "pied" his poems, for reasons of security.'<sup>3</sup>

I'd like to suggest that the figure of Amergin is crucial to any understanding of the role of the Irish writer as it has evolved over the centuries. In the first place, he or she seems to have a quite disproportionate sense of his or her own importance, a notion to which I'm doubtless offering no contradictory evidence. The bard Amergin has a mandate, it seems, from the *Mil Espáin* to speak on national issues, to 'speak for Erin'. The tone of the alphabet calendar of Amergin is extraordinarily forthright, in your face. There's no shying away from the large rhetorical gesture, the great public poem. This is, after all, an expeditionary force in whose company he travels, a force that will

shortly defeat those previous overlords of Ireland, the Tuatha Dé Danann, at the battles of Tailtiu and Druim Ligen. I'll be focusing on this aspect of the 'public' writer in my second chapter, 'Such a Local Row'. Another aspect of Amergin's poem is, of course, a seemingly contradictory one. It has to do with an urge, equally strong as the public urge, towards what Graves called the 'esoteric' or 'pied'. I assume he's using the word 'pied' in the sense given by the *OED* of a 'mass of type mingled indiscriminately or in confusion, such as results from the breaking down of a forme of type'. That's to say, the urge towards the cryptic, the encoded, the runic, the virtually unintelligible. This will be the subject of my third chapter, 'Alone Tra La', and I'll be relating that cryptic urge to the idea of Amergin's promiscuous provenance and his tireless reinvention of himself as stag or flood or wind or tear or hawk. I should say, of course, that I'm likely to be a little promiscuous myself, referring, when appropriate, to matters other than the one supposedly in hand, though with a tendency to keep coming back to James Joyce's 'The Dead'. And this will be as true of this first chapter as the last, 'Contagious to the Nile', which will be devoted to the subject of veerings from, over, and back along a line, the notions of di-, trans-, and regression. These four chapters of *To Ireland*, I were delivered, almost exactly as they stand, if in somewhat curtailed forms, over an eight-day period in October and November 1998.

I take my title, 'Wonder-birth', from what is supposedly a direct translation of Amergin's name (the 'gin' is cognate with *genus*), and I take as my theme not only Amergin's magical powers of transformation but his essential liminality, as he stands with an army poised on the threshold of victory. Indeed, he quite forthrightly associates himself with the threshold of an 'unhewn dolmen arch', on which the letters of his alphabet calendar are incised in ogham script. I'd like to focus here on a range of strategies devised by a range of Irish writers for dealing with the ideas of liminality and narthecality that are central, I think, to the Irish experience. As it happens, these writers seem to be lining up just beyond the door, making a kind of alphabet calendar of their own, with all the rigorous randomness, all the random rigour, attending such a plan.

## AE

The first through that oaken *Duir* is someone who would certainly have recognized the root of the word. The great George Russell (1867–1935), otherwise known as AE, writes in his poem 'Exiles':

The gods have taken alien shapes upon them,  
 Wild peasants driving swine  
 In a strange country. Through the swarthy faces  
 The starry faces shine.  
 Under grey tattered skies they strain and reel there:  
 Yet cannot disguise  
 The majesty of fallen gods, the beauty,  
 The fire beneath their eyes.  
 They huddle at night within low clay-built cabins;  
 And, to themselves unknown,  
 They carry with them diadem and sceptre  
 And move from throne to throne.<sup>4</sup>

This seems to me to embody a central tenet of the Irish imagination, that what you see is *never* what you get. Heaven and earth are separated by a cloth, albeit a 'tattered' one. There's discrepancy between outward appearance and inward reality. It's what I'm tempted to call 'Eriny'. This notion is nowhere more clearly set down than in AE's 1896 letter to W. B. Yeats:

I am not going to bother you about any derved thing this time but simply to tell you some things about the Ireland behind the veil . . . The gods have returned to Erin and have centred themselves in the sacred mountains and blow the fires through the country. They have been seen by several in vision, they will awaken the magical instinct everywhere, and the universal heart of the people will turn to the old druidic beliefs. I note through the country the increased faith in faery things. The bells are heard from mounds and sounding in the hollows of the mountains.<sup>5</sup>

## *Allingham*

Let me flesh out this idea of a discrepancy between appearance and reality with a stanza or two from the best-known poem by William Allingham (1824–89):

Up the airy mountain,  
 Down the rushy glen,  
 We daren't go a-hunting,  
 For fear of little men;  
 Wee folk, good folk,  
 Trooping all together;  
 Green jacket, red cap,  
 And white owl's feather.  
  
 They stole little Bridget  
 For seven years long;  
 When she came back again  
 Her friends were all gone.  
 They took her lightly back,  
 Between the night and morrow;  
 They thought that she was fast asleep,  
 But she was dead with sorrow.  
 They have kept her ever since  
 Deep within the lakes,  
 On a bed of flag-leaves,  
 Watching till she wakes.

This idea of there being a contiguous world, a world coterminous with our own, into and out of which some may move, as in Allingham's 'The Fairies', might be traced back to the overthrow of the Tuatha Dé Danann by the Milesians, for after the battles of Tailtiu and Druim Ligen, the Tuatha Dé Danann are literally driven underground. They become the *áes sídhe*, the 'fairy' or 'gentle' folk. They are made invisible by virtue of the *féth fiáda* or *ceo sídhe*, the magic mist or veil, a kind of world-scrim, that hangs about them, often allowing them to appear as animals, particularly deer. In the Fenian cycle of tales, the confrontation with, and crossing over into, a fairy realm often takes place during a hunt with hounds, sometimes to the ringing of bells, as mentioned by AE, or the strains of an unearthly music, or *ceol sídhe*, and it usually involves some kind of time warp. This idea of a parallel universe, a grounded groundlessness, also offers an escape clause, a kind of psychological trapdoor, to a people from under whose feet the rug is constantly being pulled, often quite literally so. Here's Allingham in a more evidently grimmer mode,

with a scene of an eviction from his quite brilliant docudrama 'Laurence Bloomfield in Ireland, A Modern Poem':

In early morning twilight, raw and chill,  
 Damp vapours brooding on the barren hill,  
 Through miles of mire in steady grave array  
 Threescore well-arm'd police pursue their way;  
 Each tall and bearded man a rifle swings,  
 And under each greatcoat a bayonet clings;  
 The Sheriff on his sturdy cob astride  
 Talks with the chief, who marches by their side,  
 And, creeping on behind them, Paudeen Dhu  
 Pretends his needful duty much to rue.  
 Six big-boned labourers, clad in common frieze,  
 Walk in the midst, the Sherrif's staunch allies;  
 Six crowbar men, from distant county brought—  
 Orange, and glorying in their work, 'tis thought,  
 But wrongly,—churls of Catholics are they,  
 And merely hired at half-a-crown a day.

The economy and exactitude of this writing is spectacular. Again, there's a telling image of the 'Six big-boned labourers, clad in common frieze' who embody the idea of the discrepancy between outward and inward. A few lines, later, Allingham moves from the wide-shot to a big close-up:

One old man, tears upon his wrinkled cheek,  
 Stands trembling on a threshold, tries to speak,  
 But, in defect of any word for this,  
 Mutely upon the doorpost prints a kiss,  
 Then passes out for ever.

This image of a critically positioned figure, a figure who is neither here nor there, at some notional interface, may be traced back beyond the immediate context of early to mid-nineteenth-century Ireland ('Laurence Bloomfield in Ireland' was published in 1864) to some deep-seated sense of liminality that was, and is, central to the Irish psyche. The overthrow of the historical counterparts of the pseudo-historical Tuatha Dé Danann by the historical counterparts of the pseudo-historical Milesians, who moved into the country around 500 BC, has

been repeated by successive invasions of the country, leaving a sense for many so-called native Irish people of their own invisibility.

## *Anonymous*

I look to four invisible poets, all of them writing in Irish, on whom I will not linger long just now, though I will return to them anon. The first is the author of *Pairlement Chloinne Tomáis* (The Parliament of Clan Thomas), written sometime in the seventeenth century.<sup>6</sup> This is a political satire, written partly in verse, partly in prose, and presents the genealogy of the loathsome Clan Thomas from their ill-starred origins in hell to ill-starred Munster, where they now hold sway after the demise of what we might call the 'genuine gentry' after the Battle of Kinsale. This anonymous author is familiar with *Lebor Gabála*, so familiar indeed, that he or she includes a parody of its genealogical gyrations. It also parodies the widespread interest in *dinnsheanchas*, or 'the lore of places'. I quote briefly from a translation by Nicholas Williams of a section in which 'droop-eared Murcha O Multuaisgirt', a slovenly scion of the Clan Thomas, prepares to move up in the world by marrying above his station:

'My beloved kinsmen', he said, 'and you intelligent, meticulous and prosperous progeny of Tomas Mor, son of Liobar Lobhtha, son of Lobus Lagrach, son of Dracapeist, son of Beelzebub, I have sent for you for this reason: so that you can advise me what worthy woman I should take to wife; for it is high time that I marry a woman after and since the death of my wife, the love of my heart, namely: Brighid Ni Magarlain, daughter of Mathghamhain Breallach O Magarlain and tawny-legged Raghnuít Ni Mheigiollain from Ballydehob.' [Generation and regeneration is much in the air here, since the word *magairle* means 'scrotum' or 'testicles'.] And when he had spoken these words, a mucous stream of tears fell from him and a seizure and sorrow of heart took hold of him, so that he could not speak for a while. 'Now I hear,' said Murcha, 'that there is a prosperous chieftain in fair and lovely Connaught, namely: Maghnus O Madagain . . . and this same Maghnus has a beautiful virgin daughter, and I have decided with your approval to send messengers to ask her father for her hand.'

The name of the 'beautiful virgin daughter' turns out to be Meadhbh, a direct reference to the queen of Connaught who, with her husband,

*Aillil*, is a key figure in the great Irish epic *Táin Bó Cuailgne*. Despite advice to the contrary from his druids (the priests of the *Duir*), Maghnus O Madagain allows his daughter to marry 'droop-eared Murcha O Multuaisgirt':

and the girl was joined to him in marriage, namely, Meadhbh, daughter of Maghnus by name; and he took her off with him to his own house and many children were engendered by them that night.

I'll leave the highly 'Erinized' end of this episode from *Pairlement Chloinne Tomáis* for the moment, and turn to my second anonymous poet, a woman, almost certainly the wife of the king mentioned in the poem. This king is Áed Mac Ainmirech, a historical figure killed in 598 AD. Tailtiu, scene of that great battle between the Tuatha Dé Danann and the Milesians, would become the site of a royal palace, like the hill of Tara. The translation here is by Thomas Kinsella:

Three rounded flanks I loved  
and never will see again:  
the flank of Tara, the flank of Tailtiu  
and the flank of Áed Mac Ainmirech.<sup>7</sup>

It's as if there's no distinction between public and private, between event large and event small. This, I'm certain, is partly a function of the size of Ireland, a country in which a blaze on the hill of Tara or Tailtiu (modern Teltown), the kind of blaze Amergin might embody, would be visible over great distances. It's on his way to light a fire, metaphorically if not literally, at the great meeting point of Tara, of course, that St Patrick himself avails of the *féth fiada* and turns himself and his acolyte, Benen, into deer so as to escape an ambush.

My third anonymous poet is probably writing in the ninth century:

*Int én bec  
ro léic feit  
do rind guip  
  glanbuid  
fo-cird fáid  
ós Loch Laíg  
lon do chraib  
  charnbuidi*

This translation of 'The Blackbird over Belfast Lough' is by Gerard Murphy: 'The little bird which has whistled from the end of a bright-yellow bill: it utters a note above Belfast Loch—a blackbird from a yellow-heaped branch.'<sup>8</sup>

My fourth anonymous poet is also writing out of the ninth century. These are three verses from his poem in praise of 'May-Day':

*Cerbaid sam  
súail sruth,  
saigid graig  
    lúath linn;  
lethaid folt  
fota fraích,  
for-beir canach  
    fann finn.*

*Beraít beich  
(becc a nert)  
bert bond,  
    bochtaí bláith;  
beirid buar  
slaibre sliab,  
feraid seng  
    saidbir sáith.*

*Greit mer fort  
imrimm ech  
imma-sernar  
    sreth slúag;  
ro-saerad crann  
gel is-tír,  
co ní dí ór  
    eilestair úad.*

As is evident from the translation, again by Gerard Murphy, this anonymous poet has a terrific trust in the things of this world. He's content to focus on what's immediately to hand, rather than strive for something beyond:

Summer cuts the stream small; swift horses seek water; tall heather spreads; delicate fair foliage flourishes . . . Bees of small strength carry bundles of

culled blossom on their feet; the mountain, supplying rich sufficiency, carries off the cattle . . . Woodland music plays; melody provides perfect peace; dust is blown from dwelling-place, and haze from lake full of water . . . Fierce ardour and riding of horses; the serried host is ranged around; the pond is noble in bounty and turns the iris to gold.<sup>9</sup>

## *Beckett*

I want to cross-fade from that image of the 'iris', or 'flag', to another flaggy shore:

We drifted in among the flags and stuck. The way they went down, sighing, before the stem! (*Pause.*) I lay down across her with my face in her breasts and my hand on her. We lay there without moving. But under us all moved, and moved us, gently, up and down, and from side to side.<sup>10</sup>

The man 'trembling on the threshold' here is of course Krapp, the creation of the Lord of Liminality himself. Samuel Beckett (1906–89) was so much taken by resonances of his own name that he would surely have delighted in that phrase in the anonymous ninth-century poem, written in the language of which Molloy speaks, 'tears and laughter, they are so much Gaelic to me':<sup>11</sup>

*Berait beich*  
(*becc a nert*)

While the word *beich* means 'bees' in this context, it is cognate with a number of sharp-ended or pointed things, including *boc*, a 'he-goat' and *bac*, a word Dinneen in his great dictionary, published in 1927, gives as meaning, in Modern Irish, 'a quirk; an angular space, hollow or object; a river turn; a crozier, a mattock, a billhook, a prop, a pin, a crook, a peg, a thole-pin; a joint, a hook; a shackle, a hindrance, a stop; a fire-hop, a fire-prop, corner of hob; act of supporting, holding back, hindering'.<sup>12</sup> The word *becc* means 'little, small, tiny or few'. In other words, *Beich becc* is a version of the 'diminutive beaked thing' of Beckett's own name. I'd like to suggest that Beckett was familiar not only with this poem but with that other ninth-century poem about 'The Blackbird Over Belfast Lough', both of which appear, with their

original texts, in Gerard Murphy's *Early Irish Lyrics* (1956). The first line of 'The Blackbird', if you recall, reads '*Int en bec*'. Here *bec* refers quite specifically to the 'beak' or 'bill' of the blackbird. I'm reminded, though, of that passage in *Malone Dies* in which Mr and Mrs Saposcat ponder the presentation of a pen to their schoolboy son, Sapo:

One day Mr Saposcat sold himself a fountain-pen, at a discount. A Bird. I shall give it to him on the morning of the examination, he said. He took off the long cardboard lid and showed the pen to his wife. Leave it in its box! he cried, as she made to take it in her hand. It lay almost hidden in the scrolled leaflet containing the instructions for use. Mr Saposcat parted the edges of the paper and held up the box for his wife to look inside. But she, instead of looking at the pen, looked at him. He named the price. Might it not be better, she said, to let him have it the day before, to give him time to get used to the nib? You are right, he said, I had not thought of that. Or even two days before, she said, to give him time to change the nib if it does not suit him.

I'll not linger over the sexual under- or overtones in this passage, spoken by a character who has just written of his pencil: 'I must have had it about me when I was brought here. It has five faces. It is very short. It is pointed at both ends. A Venus. I hope it will see me out.'<sup>13</sup> But there is certainly an absolute identification between the pen, a word cognate with the word *binn*, a 'peak' (the name of St Patrick's acolyte, Benen, probably allows for his transfiguration into a 'peaked' deer) and *le bec*, the nib with which Beckett himself wrote in French, and the character of Saposcat. That 'Ill-starred punster',<sup>14</sup> as Joyce calls 'Sam' in *Finnegans Wake*, now focuses on the pen and its *bec* with extraordinary attention:

A bird, its yellow beak agape to show it was singing, adorned the lid, which Mr Saposcat now put on again. He wrapped with expert hands the box in tissue paper and slipped over it a narrow rubber band. He was not pleased. It is a medium nib, he said, and it will certainly suit him.<sup>15</sup>

This 'bird, its yellow beak agape to show it was singing' is surely that same bird that perched on the mountainside over Belfast Lough, the mountain with which Beckett would have been all-too-familiar from his sojourn as a teacher at Campbell College. (It sounds as if young Sapo might be one of those Campbell College schoolboys Beckett

described as '*la crème de la crème* . . . rich and thick'.) The essence of Sapo's gift-to-be, should he successfully undergo his rite of passage and pass his exam, is obscured by a series of barriers or scrims. The first of these is the 'lid' of the box, of course. Then there's the 'tissue paper', followed by the prophylactic 'rubber band'. This wrapping and unwrapping of a 'box', in conjunction with the word 'band', connects the scene in *Malone Dies* with the scene in *La Dernière Bande*, the French title of *Krapp's Last Tape* that may famously be rendered in English not only as 'The Last Tape' but 'The Last Erection'. As Krapp reflects on his own reflections (the brilliant theatrical device of the tape recorder leaves him at one remove from the details of his past life, yet absolutely engaged with them) he thinks of the prowess of another 'beak'. This is the 'stem' of Krapp's punt, yet another version of a *beak* as defined by the *OED* as 'the pointed and ornamental projection at the prow of ancient vessels':

We drifted in among the flags and stuck. The way they went down, sighing, before the stem!

I'm tempted to suggest that, at this Proustian moment (*la proue, la prouesse*), with its embodiment of moving and not moving, being and not being, Beckett is hearking back to Allingham's image-field in 'The Fairies', with his description of little Bridget:

They took her lightly back,  
     Between the night and morrow;  
 They thought that she was fast asleep,  
     But she was dead with sorrow.  
 They have kept her ever since  
     Deep within the lakes,  
 On a bed of flag-leaves,  
     Watching till she wakes.

This last image of the watcher is echoed by Krapp:

I said again I thought it was hopeless and no good going on, and she agreed, without opening her eyes. (*Pause.*) I asked her to look at me and after a few moments—(*pause*)—after a few moments she did, but the eyes just slits, because of the glare. I bent over her to get them in the shadow and they opened. (*Pause. Low.*) Let me in. We drifted in among the flags and stuck. The way they went down, sighing, before the stem! (*Pause.*) I lay down across her

with my face in her breasts and my hand on her. We lay there without moving. But under us all moved, and moved us, gently, up and down, and from side to side.<sup>16</sup>

I'm struck, as I revisit that passage, by the positioning of the word 'gently'. It seems to me to be the key to the ghostly presence of Allingham's *gentle* folk and the chilling vigil they keep for little Bridget. The 'flags' are significant in several further senses. The word 'flag' is commonly used of rushes, so connecting it to rush crosses of the cult of St Brigid, the 'rushy glen' of the first stanza of Allingham's poem, and the rushes in Job 8: 7-11:

Question the meditation that has passed,  
 meditate on the experience of its ancestors—  
 for we children of yesterday, we know nothing,  
 our life on earth passes like a shadow—  
 but they will teach you, they will tell you,  
 and their thought is expressed in these sayings,  
 'Can papyrus flourish except in marshes?  
 Without water can the rushes grow?'

I set 'our life on earth passes like a shadow' side by side with's Krapp's 'I bent over to get them in the shadow'. As we know, Beckett is here alluding to the device of the *gnomon* used by Joyce in the stories of *Dubliners*, so that the figure of Krapp becomes a sundial stick casting a shadow. 'Bethicket him for a stump of a beech', the master had written of Beckett in *Finnegans Wake*,<sup>17</sup> picking up on an irreverent line of Swift on Wood, but pointing to another aspect of Beckett's name, its own essential 'woodiness'. For the *bec* may be construed as a version of the Old English *boc*, a 'beech', a word that lies behind 'book'. Beckett is thereby both pen and paper. Krapp identifies himself with the 'stem' of the punt, and 'stem' and 'stump' are etymologically linked. Moreover, the Beckett who strove so vehemently to have his birthdate coincide with a Good Friday must have experienced a certain frisson when he read in 'The Fairies':

By the craggy hill-side,  
 Through the mosses bare,  
 They have planted thorn-trees  
 For pleasure here and there.

If any man so daring  
 As dig one up in spite,  
 He shall find their sharpest thorns  
 In his bed at night.

We might remember Pozzo's sense of a 'wonder-birth', his assertion in *Waiting for Godot* that "They give birth astride a grave, the light gleams an instant, then it's night once more", an idea picked up by Vladimir, 'Astride of a grave and a difficult birth. Down in the hole, lingeringly, the grave digger puts on the forceps'.<sup>18</sup> We might linger ourselves a moment over those 'forceps', since they correspond to yet another *OED* definition of *beak*, 'a pair of pincers, a forceps', before moving on to consider the 'gleam' of the flag-iris, a flower known in Modern Irish as *feileastram* or, more tellingly, *soileastar*, with its connotations of *solas*, 'light' or 'a window', its faint echo of *clap-sholas*, or twilight, the medium of the clapped-out Krapp. The Irish word *crap* itself is used exclusively in compounds and means 'shrivelled, crippled, gathered up', a sense that would correspond with Beckett's striking stage-direction description of Krapp as 'wearish'. The strongest contender for the provenance of the name, however, might be a usage in the 'May-Day' poem:

*Gairid cui  
 chrúaidh den;  
 is fo-chen  
 sam sáir:  
 suidid sine  
 serb  
 i mbi cerb  
 caill chraib.*

The hardy vigorous cuckoo calls. Welcome to noble summer: it abates the bitterness of storm during which branchy wood is lacerated.<sup>19</sup>

I want to suggest that both *cerb* and *chraib* are both near versions of 'Krapp' and that Beckett is not only conscious of the meaning of *cerb* as 'lacerated' but has read Murphy's gloss on the word, with its suggestion that the word is cognate with the 'Scottish gallic noun *cearb*, "rag, tatter . . . imperfect or ragged piece of dress . . . defect"'. He's conscious, too, of *chraib*, 'a branch', so that Krapp, like his creator,

becomes the 'stem' of the punt. If Beckett was indeed familiar with Murphy's *Early Irish Lyrics*, using them as an image store for some idyllic world, he must also have delighted here in a stanza in which his own name, *sam*, appears as 'summer'. But I digress. The final sense of the flag or iris, with which this passage is 'pied', is runic in a way Amergin would have recognized. I should mention, by the way, that there are two Amergins or Amairgins in Irish literature. We've already met the son of Mil. The second Amairgin is also a poet, the son of Conall Carnach and the brother-in-law of Connor MacNessa, the Ulster king who supposedly died on Good Friday. Among Amairgin's exploits are the killing of a monster at Cruachan, the hill palace of Medhbh and Ailill, the aforementioned queen and king of Connaught. I'm pretty sure that Beckett is thinking of this Cruachan when he has Krapp ponder how he might 'be again on Croghan on a Sunday morning, in the haze, with the bitch, stop and listen to the bells'. This is the conventional prelude to an occasion of *féth fiada*. There's the 'haze' or *ceo sídhe*, the 'bells' or *ceol sídhe*, and the 'bitch', the hunting dog which raises and tracks the phantom deer, as the memory of the girl on the punt is about to be raised and tracked. That 'haze' also goes back to the 'haze from lake full of water' in the Murphy translation of 'May-Day', the title of which would already have a cryptic significance for Beckett since the name of his mother was, of course, May. We know that there's a strong connection between the historical events surrounding May Beckett's death and the image in *Krapp's Last Tape* of 'the blind went down, one of those dirty brown roller affairs'.<sup>20</sup> This 'blind' is itself a version of the world-scrim. But I digress again. I was thinking of the word 'iris', how it's a near version of 'Irish'. And I'm suggesting that this is the encrypted word that allows a reader to open the portal on this passage in Beckett, particularly with its Gaelic underpinning. While 'tears and laughter' may be 'so much Gaelic' to Molloy, they are meat and drink to his creator. 'But here I am back at my old aporetics',<sup>21</sup> as Malone writes of himself, 'Is that the word? I don't know.' Krapp combines Lucky's 'divine aphasia',<sup>22</sup> the condition of being 'unable to speak' with what one might term Malone's 'divine aporia', the condition of being 'full of doubts'. The speaker of *The Unnamable*, meanwhile,

wonders 'Are there other places set aside for us and this one where I am, with Malone, merely their narthex?'<sup>23</sup> A 'narthex', I remind myself, is 'properly the name of a tall, umbiliferous plant with a hollow stalk'—a 'stem', you might say—'also, a small case or casket for unguents'. The primary definition, though, is 'a vestibule or portico stretching across the western end of some early Christian churches and basilicas, divided from the nave by a wall, screen or railing, and set apart for the use of women, catechumens, penitents and other persons; an ante-nave'. It is in this space that Malone and Krapp would recognize a fellow feeling for Allingham's 'old man, tears upon his wrinkled cheek' who 'stands trembling on a threshold', who 'tries to speak, | But, in defect of any word for this, | Mutely upon the door-post prints a kiss, | Then passes out for ever.'

## *Bowen*

Beckett's magisterial final addendum in 'Addenda (1)'—there is no (2)—to his "Big House" novel, *Watt*, reads 'no symbols where none intended'.<sup>24</sup> The same holds true of the work of Elizabeth Bowen (1899–1973). I'll concentrate on two short stories, 'The Tommy Crans' and 'The Demon Lover',<sup>25</sup> that give new twists and twitches to the idea of the veiled and the unveiled. 'The Demon Lover' is the story of a certain Mrs Drover, who returns to her shut-up house in wartime London (her family has been packed off to the country):

In her once familiar street, as in any unused channel, an unfamiliar queerness had silted up; a cat wove itself in and out of railings, but no human eye watched Mrs Drover's return. Shifting some parcels under her arm, she slowly forced round her latchkey in an unwilling lock, then gave the door, which had warped, a push with her knee. Dead air came out to meet her as she went in.

The combination of the words 'familiar' and 'cat' summon up a witch's 'familiar', the other-worldly atmosphere compounded by the detail that 'no human eye watched Mrs Drover's return'. The comparison of the cat that 'wove itself in and out of railings' to a shuttle in a loom brings with it not only the idea of immanence from Job 7: 6

('My days are swifter than a weaver's shuttle, and are spent without hope') but once again sets up the idea of a scrim between one world and another. The 'railings' delineate a narthex, though the door opens less into a nave than a crypt, pointing to further encryption. The ominous nature of things extends even to a version of *nomen est omen* implicit in Mrs Drover's name. The 'D' of 'Demon' and the 'over' of 'Lover' are built into 'Drover'. It is fated that Mrs Drover meet her demon lover at the hair-raising end of the story. Mrs Drover passes through a number of world-scrims, rooms in which 'though not much dust had seeped in, each object wore a film of another kind', pondering all the while if the caretaker has returned to leave the letter on the hall table, thinking back to the evening of her soldier fiancé's leave-taking for the Great War, until she flees the house and boards the only taxi in the taxi rank:

This evening, only one taxi—but this, although it presented its black rump, appeared already to be alertly waiting for her. Indeed, without looking round the driver started his engine as she panted up from behind and put her hand on the door. As she did so, the clock struck seven.

It's remarkable that this moment again corresponds so neatly to the convention of the *féth fiada*. The taxi with its 'black rump' is the equivalent of a deer. Mrs Drover 'panted up from behind' like a hound giving chase. There is a sound effect of the clock, the *ceol sídhe*, delineating the moment.

The driver braked to what was almost a stop, turned round and slid the glass panel back: the jolt of this flung Mrs Drover forward till her face was almost into the glass. Through the aperture driver and passenger, not six inches between them, remained for an eternity eye to eye. Mrs Drover's mouth remained open for some time before she could issue her first scream. After that she continued to scream freely and to beat with her gloved hands on the glass all around as the taxi, accelerating without mercy, made off with her into the hinterland of deserted streets.

The taxi here corresponds to the encapsulating *ceo sídhe*, or other-worldly mist, in which Mrs Drover is spirited away by her 'driver'. The combination of 'Drover' (a word that is used specifically of driving cattle, and is therefore a gloss on the *bo* element in Bowen's name) and

the 'driver' with its connotations of what is 'driven'—rain or snow—brings me back to a key sentence, the last, if you recall, in the first paragraph of 'The Demon Lover':

Dead air came out to meet her as she went in.

The positioning of the word 'dead' here points in the direction of what can only be the ghost text of this story, James Joyce's 'The Dead'.<sup>26</sup> The 'snow' that is general over Ireland in Joyce is replaced here by 'rain'. The focus on the 'caretaker' throughout the Bowen reminds us of the central role of 'Lily, the caretaker's daughter' in Joyce. The letter on the hall table is a version of the 'heliotrope envelope' Gabriel Conroy remembers from his 'secret life' with Gretta. The positioning of Mrs Drover with her lover 'in the garden . . . under a tree . . . looking in through the window at her mother and sister' precisely replicates Gretta's memory of that last night she saw Michael Furey, the night 'the window was so wet I couldn't see so I ran downstairs as I was and slipped out the back into the garden and there was the poor fellow at the end of the garden, shivering . . . He was standing at the end of the wall where there was a tree.' The 'driver' in Bowen is prefigured in 'the cabman' in Joyce, who drives Gabriel and Gretta to the Gresham hotel, the neutral ground in which Gabriel realizes that 'one by one they were all becoming shades'.

The second Bowen story, 'The Tommy Crans', begins with the following sentence:

Herbert's feet, from dangling so long in the tram, had died of cold in his boots; he stamped the couple of coffins on blue-and-buff mosaic.

Yet again, this is a remake of the first sentence of 'The Dead':

Lily, the caretaker's daughter, was literally run off her feet.

The point of view of both Lily and Herbert are presented by their colloquialisms—'literally run off her feet' and the 'couple of coffins'. Those 'couple of coffins' allude also to how Gabriel 'stretched himself cautiously along under the sheets and lay down beside his wife' in a way reminiscent of the monks at Mount Mellary who 'slept in their coffins', while the phrase 'died of cold' describes exactly what happened to Michael Furey, as would befit yet another character for

whom *nomen est omen*. The name Furey echoes the Irish words *fuar*, meaning 'cold' and *faobhar*, an 'edge', while the term *faobhar an dho-rais* means quite specifically a 'threshold', the threshold upon which the Lass of Aughrim sings. 'The Lass of Aughrim' is also known as 'The Lass of Loch Royal' or, given the slippage between 'l' and 'n', 'The Lass of Loch Royan':

The rain falls on my yellow locks  
And the dew it wets my skin;  
My babe lies cold in my arms;  
Lord Gregory let me in.

This 'let me in' is, I suggest, the 'let me in' of the punting Krapp. While the clues are all there in that compacted first sentence about 'Herbert's feet', the second, third, and fourth sentences will confirm the Joycean connection, most immediately in the setting:

In the Tommy Crans' cloak-room the pegs were too high—uncle Archer cocked H.M.S. *Terrible* for him over a checked ulster. Tommy Cran—aslant, meanwhile, in the doorway, was an enormous presence. 'Come on, now, come!' he exclaimed, and roared with impatience. You would have said he was also arriving at the Tommy Crans' Christmas party, of which one could not bear to miss a moment.

Scarcely is the story under way than we sense that if 'In the Tommy Crans' cloak-room the pegs were too high' then it's more likely than not that the Tommy Crans will be brought down a peg or two—might I say, a *bec* or two?—which is precisely how the story evolves. My mention of the peg/*bec* syndrome leads me to ponder the very name of 'the Tommy Crans': Bowen again loads the name 'Cran' with an extraordinary freight, again using a version of *nomen est omen*. Dinneen gives five main areas of definition of the Irish word *crann*: 1. a tree. (You might remember this meaning from the anonymous seventh-century poem we read earlier—*ro-saered crann | gel is-tir*, 'the white tree has been ennobled in the land'.) 2. a bole, mast, shaft; a bolt, a bar, a beam; a stave, a timber. 3. a wooden vessel, frame, device, etc. 4. a lot, a piece of stick used in casting lots. 5. a tune, a melody, a step in dancing; cf. *Eng.* bar, stave. That first sentence describing Tommy Cran is worth another look, I think, particularly when its

rather awkward syntax so draws attention to itself, mimetic as it is of Tommy's skewdness:

Tommy Cran—aslant, meanwhile, in the doorway, was an enormous presence.

Again, it's as if Tommy Cran is fated to become the bole, bolt, bar, or barrier on his own threshold, so that we're not sure if he's welcoming us or warding us off, just as it's not clear if he's coming or going. The 'cloak' in the narthecal 'cloak-room' opens into a magical place:

The room where they all sat seemed to be made of glass, it collected the whole daylight; the candles were still waiting. Over the garden, day still hung like a pink flag; over the trees like frozen feathers, the enchanted icy lake, the lawn. The table was in the window. As Herbert was brought in the clock struck four.

I want to suggest that, yet again, Bowen presents us with a *féth fiada*, again signalled by a clock striking, in which concepts of 'here' and 'there' are problematized—"The table was in the window". There is a persistent, consistent, hunt imagery running through the piece, signalled by a world-scrim falling:

So the coloured candles were lit, the garden went dark with loneliness and was immediately curtained out. Two of the uncles put rugs on and bounded about the room like bears and lions.

After tea, when Herbert and Nancy go and stand by the lake, glimpsing in the distance the 'uncles *chasing* the laughing aunts', Nancy says, "I never believed in fairies—did you either?" and, shortly afterwards, gives him a present of 'something really her own, a pink glass greyhound', the archetypal hunting dog. The lake has already been identified with 'two swans', birds emblematic of an other-worldly interface, as in the metamorphosis of the children of Lir, upon whom a spell is cast so that they disappear for three hundred years and return to Ireland as decrepit old people, a lake on which, in a prefiguring of the decrepit Krapp's punt-vision, Herbert thinks of Nancy:

how, in summer, her boat would go pushing among the lily-leaves. She showed him their boat-house, rusty-red from a lamp inside, solid. 'We had a lamp put there for the poor cold swans.' (And the swans were asleep beside it.)

I can't prove it, of course, but I'd be willing to bet that Beckett is conscious of this passage in Bowen, particularly when the sequence of Krapp's taped reverie about Croghan (from *cruach*, a crook or rick, Croghan is a near homonym for *crann*), the haze, the bitch, the bells, the drifting in among the flags, is immediately preceded by 'Be again in the dingle on a Christmas Eve, gathering holly, the *red*-berried.'<sup>27</sup> That reference to the swans is followed immediately by a series of questions about time, mortality, and generation:

'How old are you, Herbert?'

'Eight.'

'Oh, I'm nine. Do you play brigands?'

'I could,' said Herbert.

'Oh, I don't; I'd hate to.'

The combination of 'brigands' (cognate with the *Brigantiae* and their bear-deity,<sup>28</sup> the rush-crossed little St *Brigid*) and the 'rusty-red' in the boathouse conjures up an association with the hunting, shooting, fishing Red Branch Knights, 'Red Branch' here referring to the hall, the *Craobh Rua*, often identified as Creeveroe in County Armagh, in which the knights rested up with their leader, the aforementioned Connor Mac Nessa, where they were no doubt entertained by the aforementioned second Amairgin. I'll come back to the Red Branch Knights when I look at Joyce's 'The Dead' in more detail. For the moment, let me suggest that the focus on time passing, if not indeed the concept of a time warp associated with the *féth fiada*, is consistent with Bowen's interest in, and deft handling of, time in this six-page story, so densely packed that, by the time one reaches the end, one has the sense of having read sixty, perhaps even six hundred, pages:

As they turned back to face the window, her smile and voice were tender, but not for him. In the brightly lit stripped room the Tommy Crans walked about together, like lovers in their freedom from one another. They talked of the fortune to be made, the child to be born. Tommy flung his chest out and moved his arms freely in air he did not possess; here and there, pink leaflets fluttered into the dark. The Tommy Crans would go on for ever and be continued; their seed would never fail.

This revisiting of the end of 'The Dead', with the similar blocking of the scene between Gabriel and Gretta and the substitution of 'pink

leaflets' from some get-rich-quick scheme for the snow, 'flakes, silver and dark, falling obliquely against the lamplight' is no less sustained, of course, than the 'Eriny', or discrepancy between appearance and reality. For we know that the 'seed' of the 'Tommy Crans' will *most certainly* fail. The 'Eriny' is every bit as heavy as the description of the wedding night, with its wondrous multiple engenderings, in *Pairlement Chloinne Tomáis*, a text to which, I suggest, Bowen quite blatantly alludes in substituting 'The Tommy Crans' for 'Clan Thomas', a function of that common slippage between 'r' and 'l'. This further 'Erinizes' the fate of 'The Tommy Crans', the dispossessed Anglo-Irish 'gentry' who are turning, again because of that slippage between 'r' and 'l', into possessing 'gentles', ghosts of themselves who are implicated in, but cut off from, their own lives.

I've dwelt at length here on Bowen's revisiting the anonymous author of *Pairlement Chloinne Tomáis* and her slanted acknowledgement of Joyce as a figure who, like 'Tommy Cran—aslant, meanwhile, in the doorway—was an enormous presence'. I've dwelt on the recurring image of that liminal place. I've dwelt on the recurring image of the narthex, what one might call the terminal narthecality not only of so many of Beckett's characters but so many characters in Irish literature. I've dwelt on Beckett's revisiting Bowen and Allingham. I've dwelt on the idea of the recurring image of a *féth fiada*, the barrier between being and not-being, between this world and some other, wondrous realm, often manifesting itself as a mist, of course, but just as often taking the form of a woven fabric, a 'textile'. I've dwelt on the complexity, sometimes the complicatedness, of so many of these 'texts' and their 'subtexts'. Now I'd like to suggest that the extraordinary appetite and aptitude for 'intertextuality' among these writers goes beyond a mere interest in the allusive, or the parodic, but is symptomatic of several deep-seated senses. The first is of concomitancy. There's a sense of two discrete coexistent realms. Two texts. Concomitant with that, though, is the fact there's no distinction between one world and the next. Or one text and the next. If there's a fine line between the notions of 'allusiveness' and 'elusiveness', it's so fine it's constantly breaking down. Concomitant with that is a touching disregard for the figure of the author. Joyce belongs in Bowen,

Bowen, Allingham, and those anonymous ninth-century Irish poets in Beckett. All, indeed, are anonymous. Their very disregard for their 'selves' allows them to mutate and transmogrify themselves, to position themselves, with Amergin, at some notional cutting edge.

## *Carleton*

I'll look briefly at three or four writers who are, to a greater or lesser extent, part of an avant-garde, a term with militaristic connotations recognizable to Amergin but otherwise now all but forgotten. These writers are shock-troopers of sorts, however unlikely that may seem as a description of William Carleton (1794–1857). Shock-trooper or, more accurately, double agent, a mover behind enemy lines, a man with a foot in both camps, Carleton represents an extraordinary straddling of the two main religio-political traditions in Ireland. Born and brought up as an Irish-speaking Roman Catholic in County Tyrone, a member of the secret society of the Ribbonmen, Carleton would convert—should I say 'defect'?—to Protestantism shortly after his move to Dublin in the 1820s. By the time he'd published his first story, 'The Lough Dearg Pilgrim', in 1828, Carleton's new-found anti-Catholic sentiment was firmly in place:

There is no specimen of Irish superstition equal to that which is to be seen at St. Patrick's Purgatory, in Lough Dearg. A devout Romanist who has not made a pilgrimage to this place can scarcely urge a bold claim to the character of piety . . . It is melancholy to perceive the fatal success to which the Church of Rome has attained, in making void the atonement of Christ by her traditions; and how every part of her complicated, but perfect, system, even to the minutest points, seizes upon some corresponding weakness of the human heart, thereby to bind it to her agreeable and strong delusions.<sup>29</sup>

Carleton contains a powerful combination of intimacy with, and enmity towards, his subject matter that would not be seen again until Joyce, where it's the one stunningly simple quality that makes 'The Dead' so stunningly complex. We know that Joyce was interested in revisiting Carleton from his letter to Stanislaus Joyce of 6 November 1906:

I have written to A[unt] J[osephine] asking her . . . to try to lay hands on any old editions of Kickham, Griffin, *Carleton*, H. J. Smyth &c, Banim and to send me a Xmas present made up of tram-tickets, advts, handbills, posters, papers, programmes &c. I would like to have a map of Dublin on my wall. I suppose I am becoming a maniac. I am writing her today to know how you spell Miss McCleod's (?) Reel.<sup>30</sup>

As Richard Ellmann points out in his note, the detail of Miss McCleod's Reel, 'probably intended for "The Dead", was not used'.<sup>31</sup> Though Ellman doesn't say why, I would suggest that it's because Joyce doesn't want his reader to summon up the McCleod of the moment—that's to say the recently deceased 'Fiona Macleod', the pseudonym and alter ego of William Sharp (1855–1905), champion of the 'new paganism', with its insistence that 'a new epoch is about to be inaugurated' now that 'the religion of our forefathers' has waned. It simply isn't 'a gentle way of putting it',<sup>32</sup> as Joyce describes his method in the following sentence, citing the example of how 'I have also added in the story *The Clay* the name of Maria's laundry, the *Dublin by Lamplight Laundry*.' A few paragraphs later, we hear a familiar Carletonian note being struck, including his unconscious repetition of the word 'peasantry' from Carleton's *Traits and Stories of the Irish Peasantry*:

The Irish proletariat has yet to be created. A feudal peasantry exists, scraping the soil but this would with a national revival or with a definite preponderance of England surely disappear. I quite agree with you that Griffith is afraid of the priests—and he has every reason to be so. But, possibly, they are also a little afraid of him too. After all, he is holding out some secular liberty to the people and the Church doesn't approve of that. I quite see, of course, that the church is still, as it was in the time of Adrian IV, the enemy of Ireland: but, I think, her time is almost up.<sup>33</sup>

I suspect that, had Aunt Josephine met Joyce's request, the story she's most likely to have sent him is 'The Midnight Mass', in which Owen Reillaghan labours through a snowstorm in search of the supposed murderer of his brother, Mike:

At first he struggled heroically with the storm; but when utter darkness threw its impervious *shades* over the desolation around him, and the *fury* of the elements grew so tremendous, all the strong propensities to life became

roused . . . These struggles, however, as well as those of the body, became gradually weaker as the storm tossed him about, and with the *chill* of his breath *withered* him into total helplessness . . . The tumult of the tempest, the whirling of the snow-clouds, and the *thick snow, now falling* and again tossed upwards by sudden gusts to the clouds, deprived him of all power of reflection . . . The driving sleet and hard granular snow now ceased to fall; but were succeeded by large feathery flakes, that *descended* slowly upon the still air.<sup>34</sup>

I suggest that this particular storm is at least as strong a contender for the provenance of the snow-scene at the end of 'The Dead' as the much-vaunted opening of Bret Harte's *Gabriel Conroy*, though the latter's obviously the provenance of Gabriel's name. My reason for this has to do with several aspects of the Carleton. The first is the combination of the shared vocabulary, italicized above. Then there's the intellectual and emotional crisis in the protagonist of which the storm is the outward manifestation. Thirdly, there's the iconography of 'the Mass performed under the open sky' on Christmas Eve, which is picked up by Joyce on the Feast of the Epiphany, in the 'crooked crosses', the 'spears' and the 'thorns' at the midnight culmination of his story. I'm fairly sure, too, that Joyce was familiar with 'The Midnight Mass' because of the key moment in the plot-line, in which it transpires that Mike shares some of the same qualities as the great Tim Finnegan, so that 'a deep groan was heard, and the apparently dead man opened his eyes, and feebly exclaimed—"a dhrink! A dhrink!"'.<sup>35</sup>

## Coffey

Those same qualities for radical self-renewal found in Mike Reillaghan and his creator are also to be found in Brian Coffey (1905-95), a poet intent on walking the fine, liminal-narthechal line between continuity and discontinuity, location and dislocation. Like many mould-breakers, Coffey is thought of, if he's thought of at all, as a 'difficult' poet. As his editor, J. C. C. Mays, points out in his introduction to Coffey's *Poems and Versions 1929-1990*:

If Coffey's poems get difficult, it is because his stance is difficult to maintain—difficult for him and his readers—but it is difficult because there are no props,

not because there are props which require further props of explanation . . . It should therefore come as no surprise that Coffey's writing provokes resistance, even resentment. It will puzzle or cause affront to anyone who thinks poetry exists on the side, as an adjunct or comfortable adornment.<sup>36</sup>

## *Devlin*

The same might be said of Denis Devlin (1908–59), with whom Coffey shared his first book of poems, entitled *Poems*, self-published by the pair of them in 1930. Like many mould-breakers, Devlin is thought of, if he's thought of at all, as a 'difficult' poet. As his editor, J. C. C. Mays, points out in his introduction to the *Collected Poems of Denis Devlin*:

When the method is not understood it looks like the product of disabling detachment, snobbery. Devlin's way of handling ordinary syntactic transitions might appear to be the product of impatience, but the estimate equally would be wrong. Sense is elided, meaning is syncopeated, because it has to be.<sup>37</sup>

While Coffey and Devlin were described by Beckett in his 1934 *Bookman* review as 'without question the most interesting of the youngest generation of Irish poets', it's difficult not to see them as sticks which Beckett might use to beat the 'leading twilighters',<sup>38</sup> particularly Yeats, who dwell in the *clap-sholas*, while giving themselves over to the influences of 'the *surrealistes* and Mr Eliot, perhaps also those of Mr Pound'. Beckett might well have mentioned the name of Mr Joyce, to whom Devlin alludes in his best-known poem, 'Lough Derg':

Against the craftsmen's primary-coloured skies  
Whose gold was *Gabriel* on the patient roofs,  
The parabled windows taught *the dead* to rise.<sup>39</sup>

I suspect that Beckett himself is thinking of 'Lough Derg' in some of the details of *Krapp's Last Tape*, particularly the punt scene on the lake, a site which, like Lough Derg, allows for the possibility of spiritual recovery. St Patrick is already a ghost in the scene, through the place name 'Croghan', which brings to mind the other great Irish pilgrimage

to *Croagh* Patrick, while the play is written specifically with *Patrick* Magee's voice in mind. That Lough Derg, 'the red lake', might be in Beckett's mind, at least subliminally, is suggested by 'holly, the red-berried'.<sup>40</sup> Several word choices of Beckett also found in 'Lough Derg' include the 'berries' and, just a few lines before, 'Behind the eyes the winged ascension flags'.<sup>41</sup> This line includes two central ideas in *Krapp's Last Tape*. The first is the idea we've already considered of 'flags' in the sense of *irises* and 'the *flagging* pursuit of happiness'<sup>42</sup> of which those same flowers might have been emblematic. The second is the insistence on what lies behind 'the eyes just slits',<sup>43</sup> with its specific echo of the scene between Gretta and *Gabriel* (his name finding a near version in 'Krapp' itself) in which 'she looked away from him along the shaft of light towards the window in silence'.<sup>44</sup> For Krapp is the Gabriel who would 'fade and wither dismally with age',<sup>45</sup> still insisting on 'the fire in me now'<sup>46</sup> even as, in Joyce's phrase, 'his soul had approached that region where dwell the vast hosts of the dead'.<sup>47</sup> This 'region', located somewhere in the west of Ireland, is surely where, as Devlin has it:

Water withers from the oars. The pilgrims blacken  
 Out of the boats to masticate their sin  
 Where Dante smelled among the stones and bracken  
 The door to Hell.<sup>48</sup>

The connection between St Patrick's Purgatory and Dante, who reputedly made a pilgrimage to this isolated lake in County Donegal, would have had a particular appeal to Beckett, crouching like Belacqua at his feet, while Devlin's phrase 'to masticate their sin' surely plays on the mastication/masturbation nexus in a way that Beckett picks up on in the banana/erection of *la banane* and *La Dernière Bande*.

## *Edgeworth*

That's *La Dernière Bande*, 'spelt as pronounced', as Arthur advises Mr Graves (surely some relation to Alfred Perceval and his son Robert) of the spelling of the aphrodisiac 'Bando' (surely some relation) in *Watt*,

Beckett's spoof of the 'Big House' novel. The genre can be traced back to one book, *Castle Rackrent* by Maria Edgeworth (1768–1849), published anonymously in 1800, the pivotal year in Irish history to which Edgeworth alludes in her introduction:

When Ireland loses her identity by an union with Great Britain, she will look back, with a smile of good-natured complacency, on the Sir Kits and Sir Condys of her former existence.<sup>49</sup>

The avant-garde aspect of *Castle Rackrent*, now scarcely noticeable, is twofold. The image of territorial expansion, indeed, is used by Walter Allen, in *The English Novel*, to describe the book's first claim to fame:

Miss Edgeworth occupied new territory for the novel. Before her, except when London was the scene, the locale of our fiction had been generalized, conventionalized . . . Miss Edgeworth gave fiction a local habitation and a name. And she did more than this: she perceived the relation between the local habitation and the people who dwell in it. She invented, in other words, the regional novel<sup>50</sup>

The second, revolutionary aspect of the book is set down with all his customary succinctness by my old professor, John Cronin, in his study of *The Anglo-Irish Novel*:

In making [Thady Quirk] the narrator and controller of the novel's point of view, she established a new technique of fiction and presented commentators with a cat's-cradle of speculation about her central figure and the relationship between him and his material.<sup>51</sup>

It is this relationship between the protagonist and his or her material, including the ordering of that material, which Beckett, who had already touched on the subject in *Molloy*—'I began at the beginning—like an old ballocks—can you imagine that?'<sup>52</sup>—would take to its logical conclusion in *Watt*:

As Watt told the beginning of his story, not first, but second, so not fourth, but third, now he told its end. Two, one, four, three, that was the order in which Watt told his story.<sup>53</sup>

By the end, if such there be, of the novel, Mr Knott's big house has been transmogrified into a station waiting-room, the nave into the narthex, in which the signalman, Mr Case, is 'reading a book: "*Songs*

*by the Way*" by George Russell (A.E.). Mr Case had a very superior taste in books, for a signal-man.'<sup>54</sup> In my next chapter, I'll be focusing on how a range of writers, from Ferguson through Hewitt to Joyce and Kavanagh (all of them afforded, to a greater or lesser extent, an 'edge' by Maria Edgeworth), have responded to what I've termed elsewhere the 'eternal interim' of Ireland.