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# '... parents unknown . . . unheard of . . .': *Not I* and the 'Mother and Baby Homes Report'

This article re-reads Beckett's play *Not I* (1972) in the light of the 'Mother and Baby Homes Report', published in January 2021. Beckett interrogates what James Smith, Clair Wills, and others have referred to as Ireland's 'architecture of containment'. Mouth, 'brought up . . . with the other waifs' in a mother and baby home, absorbed religious notions of sin and punishment. Through a close reading of selected passages, the article considers to what extent *Not I* can be read as a 'survivor's testimony' such as those given to the commission of investigation into mother and baby homes.

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Ireland has changed – and is changing – but this does not undo the damage and trauma that has been inflicted on women.

Sinéad Gleeson, *Constellations* (2019)

## Introduction

The dedication of Claire Keegan's novella *Small Things Like These*, published in October 2021, reads: 'This story is dedicated to the women and children who suffered time in Ireland's mother and baby homes and Magdalene laundries'.<sup>1</sup> The protagonist of Keegan's story is Bill Furlong, an illegitimate child whose mother dies when he is young and who is brought up in a Protestant Big House. An early passage is revealing. In search of his birth certificate at the registry office, 'Unknown was all that was written in the space where his father's name might have been. The clerk's mouth had bent into an ugly smile handing it out to him, over the counter.'<sup>2</sup>

An immediate comparison can be drawn between this modern Irish text and Samuel Beckett's short monologue play *Not I* (1972). Mouth, the play's protagonist, exclaims that her parents were 'unknown . . . unheard of

. . . he having vanished . . . thin air . . . no sooner buttoned up his breeches'.<sup>3</sup> Her mother 'similarly' disappears, sparing the orphaned child the kind of love 'as normally vented on the . . . speechless infant'.<sup>4</sup> Indeed, most women and babies ended up in these institutions because of a lack of familial support, or indeed support from the man responsible for fathering the baby. Having a child out of wedlock would have cast shame on the family, and few women were as fortunate as Mary Boyle in *Juno and the Paycock* (1924) in having a supportive mother proclaiming that the child would have something better than the typical heteronormative nuclear family – 'it'll have two mothers'.<sup>5</sup>

Very little has been written in relation to *Not I* and Ireland's ignominious history of confinement, in particular, of course, female confinement. In one of the very few academic works published on this topic, or more to the point, which even references it, Futoshi Sakauchi notes: 'It is striking to discover the extent to which recent Irish controversies have brought to public attention the events recounted by Mouth: irresponsible sexual

intercourse, unwanted pregnancy, childbirth out of wedlock, adoption and misery in a church-run institution, powerlessness in society, and the lack of mercy.<sup>6</sup> Sakauchi's essay is important for correctly identifying and highlighting these 'Irish' concerns within *Not I*. In many ways, this article seeks to demonstrate that much of the difficulty that critics have when discussing *Not I* comes from their failure to situate it within an Irish cultural context. With the intent of expanding outwards from Sakauchi's central idea, 'Not I in an Irish Context', this article will consider the extent to which we might read Mouth's account as a fictional 'survivor's testimony' from the perspective of a woman raised in such a religious institution in Ireland. Since the publication of the 'Mother and Baby Homes Report' in January 2021, this idea of 'testimony' has been in the forefront of the collective Irish consciousness. I am not suggesting, of course, that we can confound Mouth's account with the testimonies given to the commission. These were formal accounts given to a committee by real-life survivors of these homes. Beckett's text is a fiction, an account of what he claims (see below) to have 'heard' in Ireland.

My argument is rooted in the idea that Mouth's testimony is a testimony from the twentieth century, an earlier era when no official body was ready or willing to listen to the cries of a 'deviant' woman such as Mouth. Instead, they demand that she speak, trying to force words from her mouth, with little empathy or compassion: 'that time in court . . . what had she to say for herself . . . guilty or not guilty . . . stand up woman . . . speak up woman . . . stood there staring into space . . . mouth half open as usual . . . waiting to be led away . . .'<sup>7</sup> She is treated as 'aberrant' and 'deemed deserving of scorn and punishment'<sup>8</sup> by a judge who addresses her as 'woman', with an aggressive line of questioning. Indeed, the simplistic binary nature of the Irish political outlook at the time regarding such 'illegitimate' women is summed up by the question, 'guilty or not guilty'? Having been ignored by the legislative and governmental bodies in Ireland for seventy years – 'good God!<sup>9</sup> – she is forced to testify to herself

and to the outside world as she wanders in a field, speaking into the ground, her 'face in the grass'.<sup>10</sup>

Another challenge that *Not I* presents with regard to this notion of 'testimony' is, of course, the play's formal resistance to straightforward interpretation in performance. Indeed, the words spoken by Mouth can be very difficult to catch or make sense of, due to the playwright's expectation of a rapid delivery. But Beckett's theatre is nothing if not challenging, and even first-time spectators of the play will pick up on the clear Irish textual referents if their ear and attention are carefully attuned. Indeed, despite the formal and performative challenges that the text presents, upon close scrutiny there are many textual-level signifiers in *Not I* that clearly point to an institutionalized childhood in Ireland 'with the other waifs', the other illegitimate and orphaned children.<sup>11</sup>

The play, as Beckett very famously stated, is designed to 'work on the nerves of the audience, not its intellect',<sup>12</sup> and it is not speculative to suggest that Mouth's ferocious monologue is a prolonged cry for help from a woman recounting her life in an institution, or possibly a series of institutions. She is being punished in this way exactly for the reasons of being an illegitimate child, for not being able to express herself as a 'normal', mentally well person and because she was a woman in a Church/State-ruled country. Critics have claimed, quite obtusely, that Mouth is in court because she's 'unseen' by society, mere 'dark matter', 'without a voice in the police order of her community, as when she is put on trial'.<sup>13</sup> Such a description is inaccurate. The issue is not that she is *unseen*; it is precisely the opposite, that she is seen and found deviant from societal norms because of her behaviour in court and in public.

It is clear that Beckett had encountered and 'heard' these 'crones' during his time in Ireland:

I knew that woman in Ireland . . . I knew who she was – not 'she' specifically, one single woman, but there were so many of those old crones, stumbling down the lanes, in the ditches, behind the hedges. Ireland is full of them. And I heard 'her' saying what I wrote in *Not I*. I actually heard it.<sup>14</sup>

Despite his unfortunate use of the pejorative noun 'crone', Beckett appears to have been marked by the vision of these traumatized women, whose 'stumbling' and mumbling were clearly the result of psychological trauma caused by institutional abuse within his native country. Perhaps he used the word 'crone' to deflect attention from his real feelings of compassion for female victims of confinement in Ireland. This empathy, as demonstrated throughout this article, is more than evident upon close scrutiny of the play-script in conjunction with an analysis of the history of confinement in twentieth-century Ireland.

### **'Architectures of Confinement' and the Commission of Investigation into Mother and Baby Homes**

Critics have, historically, steered away from focusing on the play's distinct cultural and historical markers, preferring to zone in on the challenging formal aspects of the play and the ways in which Beckett's philosophical and psychoanalytical thinking informs its structure and composition. Although there are obvious merits to such an approach, such analyses can be frustrating considering the historical referents that are wilfully ignored. It is fortunate that the tide is changing with the political shift that has taken place in recent years, as well as the emphasis on manuscript genetics which often yields fascinating results when the analysis is undertaken from a lucid critical perspective. The original English version of the play is very much set in a twentieth-century Ireland that Beckett was familiar with. When the text was performed by Billie Whitelaw, an English actor with a Received Pronunciation (RP) accent, she was instructed to pronounce the word 'baby' as 'babby'; how it would be pronounced, in other words, by many Irish women, especially those belonging to a poorer demographic. Whitelaw's appeal for the role of Mouth is clear: her perfect diction allows her to perform a clear and rapid delivery of the play's text, yet Beckett insisted on her emphasizing this important word 'baby' as an Irish woman would. In addition, the

play's topographical marker ('Crocker's Acres')<sup>15</sup> decisively sets *Not I* directly within an Irish context.

Having located *Not I* (at least Beckett's English version of the text) in Ireland, we must consider the foundation of the Irish Free State, particularly between the years 1922 and 1937 when the key legislation towards creating an Irish 'national identity' was being drawn up.<sup>16</sup> James M. Smith has done a remarkable job of chronicling Ireland's 'Containment Culture' through his analyses of the Carrigan Report (1931) and the Criminal Law Amendment Act (1935), noting, importantly, at the beginning of his essay that the 'historically powerful Catholic Church and the fledgling Irish Free State cooperated increasingly throughout the 1920s as the self-appointed guardians of the nation's moral climate',<sup>17</sup> establishing what Smith calls 'Ireland's national imaginary'.<sup>18</sup> This is an imaginary that seems to have haunted Beckett's imagination late into his life, particularly with regard to the treatment of Irish women.

Una Crowley and Rob Kitchin note that from the establishment of the Cosgrave government in 1922, the Church and State joined forces 'to produce "a mutually reinforcing political and episcopal vision" underpinned by a commitment to Catholic moral values . . . despite the 1922 Constitution defining the state as officially secular'.<sup>19</sup> These two bodies, the Irish Free State and the Church, proceeded to foster 'an official state attitude toward "sexual immorality"',<sup>20</sup> leading to the establishment of 'Ireland's architecture of containment',<sup>21</sup> not simply through the institutions utilized (mother and baby homes, Magdalene laundries/asylums, Industrial and Reformatory Schools), but also through the 'legislation that inscribed these issues and the numerous official and public discourses that resisted admitting to the existence and function of their affiliated institutions'.<sup>22</sup>

As an Irish Anglican Protestant, Beckett would have been acutely aware how closely interwoven the affairs of the Catholic Church and Irish Free State were, how closely an Irish national identity was linked

to a Catholic identity, and how the legislative measures had been implemented in order to keep separate 'deviant' or 'problem elements' of the population: 'Nationalist and religious leaders could for the first time shape the moral landscape in their own vision through their new abilities to formulate, control, and deliver legal reform and welfare, health, and education.'<sup>23</sup> These close links between an Irish national identity and Catholicism were clearly a factor that precipitated Beckett's movement abroad in the years before the Second World War. Crowley and Kitchin make the important observation that the 'disciplinary regime that was constructed was highly gendered, focusing almost exclusively on the regulation and self-regulation of women':<sup>24</sup>

By constructing any form of sexuality outside that of marriage as a moral problem and an issue of social responsibility, it legitimated what was essentially a police action – the spatial confinement of the 'deviant'. Confinement in these circumstances was not seen to infringe on the women's rights as citizens and as such was viewed as a legitimate form of government.<sup>25</sup>

Thus, from the historical perspective of Ireland's 'Containment Culture', the tragedy of Mouth's situation as an abandoned 'waif' is very apparent.

Much is different in twenty-first-century Ireland. A series of well-documented scandals involving the Catholic Church and revealed abuse have rocked the Irish nation since the 1990s, made more horrific by the Church's tendency to cover up the atrocities perpetuated by its clergy. One of the most recent of these scandals relates to the mother and baby homes in Ireland. According to gov.ie, the website of the Irish government, 'The Commission of Investigation into Mother and Baby Homes and certain related matters was established by the Irish Government in February 2015 to provide a full account of what happened to vulnerable women and children in Mother and Baby Homes during the period 1922 to 1998.'<sup>26</sup> Catriona Crowe sums up the work of the Commission of Investigation into Mother and Baby Homes as follows:

As part of the work of the commission, established by the state in 2015 following shocking revelations about mortality and burial practices at the mother and baby home in Tuam, two bodies were established to receive testimony from survivors of the institutions: a Confidential Committee, without judicial powers, which heard oral testimony from 550 survivors of the institutions, and an Investigation Committee, with judicial powers, which took testimony from sixty-four survivors along with a range of other witnesses.<sup>27</sup>

The investigation into the Bon Secours Mother and Baby Home at Tuam uncovered

many tales of systemic neglect, abuse, and cruelty, of children taken from mothers, mothers denied knowledge of what happened to their children and, perhaps the most shameful act of all, the bodies of nearly 800 children, aged from one month to nine years, secretly buried in a disused sewage system.<sup>28</sup>

The children in the Tuam home died between 1925 and 1961. Likewise, investigations into Protestant mother and baby homes have revealed that at least 239 children died in these institutions.<sup>29</sup> These institutions, it must be noted, were run and financed by the Irish State. The commission submitted its final report to the minister on 30 October 2020 and the 'Final Report of the Commission of Investigation into the Mother and Baby Homes' was published on gov.ie on 12 February 2021.

Three months after the report was published, on 20 May 2021, an article by Clair Wills was printed in the *London Review of Books* titled 'Architectures of Confinement'. 'For much of the twentieth century,' she writes, 'the Irish population was probably the most institutionalized in the world. It had not only the highest admission rate to mother and baby homes in Europe, but by far the largest percentage of the population in psychiatric hospitals.'<sup>30</sup> Tellingly, she also notes:

Irish literature of the twentieth century has been trying to alert us to this for years: Patrick Kavanagh's 'The Great Hunger', Beckett's *Not I* and *All That Fall* ('Did you ever wish to kill a child?'), McGahern's *The Barracks*, Edna O'Brien's *A Pagan Place* (which features one daughter sent to a mother and baby home in Dublin, and another who is sexually abused by a priest and becomes a nun to spite her parents for their collusion), Tom Murphy's *Bailegangaire*.<sup>31</sup>

To this list could be added Máiréad Ní Ghráda's *An Triall* [*On Trial*] (1964), which deals explicitly with Magdalene laundries. Wills's reference to *All That Fall* (1957) demonstrates that this topic had been a concern of Beckett's for at least fifteen years before the writing of *Not I*. The evocation of the sinister question posed in this earlier play – 'Did you ever wish to kill a child?'<sup>32</sup> – is even more horrific in the context of the recent revelations in Tuam and elsewhere on the island. The inclusion of Beckett's *Not I* in Wills's article suggests a need to interrogate the play closely, counter to the way in which, at least till now, it has only been fleetingly and peripherally examined.

### *Not I*

At the beginning of this essay, Mouth's monologue as a twentieth-century 'survivor's testimony' was foregrounded as the kind which would have been ignored in the Ireland of the time. With no governing body willing to listen to Mouth's testimony, she is left, a traumatized seventy-year-old woman, 'wandering in a field', babbling out what at first seems like an incoherent slew of words, her 'face in the grass'.<sup>33</sup> Having not been listened to all her life (and having been institutionalized for an undetermined period of her life, starting from early childhood), she feels a compulsion to 'tell', to testify, even if only into the grass:

something she had to tell . . . could that be it?.. something that would tell . . . how it was . . . how she— . . . what?.. had been?.. yes . . . something that would tell how it had been . . . how she had lived . . . lived on and on . . . guilty or not . . .<sup>34</sup>

Her testimony is fragmented, but clear. She was born 'into this world' where, in a particularly cruel formulation, she was 'spared' the love 'such as normally vented on the . . . speechless infant'.<sup>35</sup> Abandoned by her mother and father, 'he having vanished . . . thin air [. . .] she similarly . . . eight months later . . .',<sup>36</sup> Mouth reflects on her time as an unwanted, 'aberrant' child,<sup>37</sup> 'brought up' with the 'other waifs',<sup>38</sup> other children like

her who might have been abandoned, orphaned, or born to young single mothers without the means to support them. 'Containing "sexual immorality"', Smith notes, 'specifically illegitimacy and prostitution, behind the walls of Ireland's mother and baby homes and Magdalene asylums helped constitute and perpetuated the fiction of Irish cultural purity.'<sup>39</sup> This emphasizes the truly tragic nature of Mouth's incarceration. She had been locked away in order to preserve appearances in an emerging independent state.

Even before independence, Ireland had attempted to replace the colonizing British with an autocratic Catholic Church during the 'devotional revolution' that came in the wake of the Famine. Many believed that the Famine was punishment from God because their Catholicism wasn't serious or rigorous enough. There were too many lingering 'pagan' elements in Irish Catholicism in the form of – for example – Lughnasa and Samhain celebrations, as well as drunken, orgiastic religious 'patterns' in honour of a saint on its Saint's Day. There was a feeling that Irish Catholicism needed to clean up its act and so it became more rigidly 'holy'.

The Irish wanted to prove to God that they were serious about their faith. They also wanted to prove to the British and the world that they were able to rule themselves, both morally and politically. This trend continued post-independence. The Irish still felt the need to prove they were 'civilized', 'highly moral', and capable of ruling themselves. This sometimes meant locking away (or sending away on emigration ships) those who didn't fit into that new schema; that is, those unlucky enough to be LGBTQ+, outspoken, or 'alluring' (to men) women, or those, like Mouth, suffering from mental health difficulties.<sup>40</sup> Protestants were guilty of the same activities, fearing that they would look bad in front of the papists. It was also in their best interests to show that Ireland was 'civilized' and capable of ruling itself, so 'problem cases' were often hidden or sent away. The impoverished new state was in no condition to set up its own national schools and health system, so it handed the running of such institutions to the Church,

which, from the middle of the nineteenth century until recent decades,<sup>41</sup> had been planning for this eventuality in the decades before independence, involving itself more and more in the running of these state institutions.<sup>42</sup> As Crowley and Kitchin note:

the 'culture of containment' worked to free Irish society from polluting elements while simultaneously rendering the 'contaminated' less visible (in a psychological, social, and material sense). Incarcerating sexualized women and children in religious institutions rendered the compromising reality of their existence invisible while paradoxically confirming society's high standards. It sustained the new 'imagined community'.<sup>43</sup>

Having spent a significant period of her life oppressed under Ireland's 'culture of confinement', Mouth is shocked by her testimony, which spills out of her in a relentless torrent. Having been 'speechless . . . all her days', she barely recognizes her own voice (indeed, the word 'speechless' occurs six times in Mouth's monologue).

The confessional, torturous nature of her predicament is emphasized by Mouth's admission that she had spent time in court: 'that time in court . . . what had she to say for herself'.<sup>44</sup> This 'time in court', arguably the focal point of the text, is likely the result of her mentally ill behaviour in public, deemed 'inappropriate' in twentieth-century Ireland. It is not difficult to understand the poor state of her mental health having spent much of her life incarcerated in some kind of 'home'. She is treated brusquely by a judge who also treats her as a nameless subject: 'stand up woman . . . speak up woman'.<sup>45</sup> With no services in place to support her, and no compassion from those in positions of judicial or legislative power, she is 'led away', a traumatized victim of state-funded institutionalism.

This notion of unjust suffering must be extended. There is a confessional tone in *Not I*, and the notion of punishment is invoked – divine punishment or otherwise: after a 'sudden flash', Mouth realizes that she is 'being punished . . . for her sins'.<sup>46</sup> This might better explain the screams in the play, as if playing the role that her wardens or captors might expect:

no screaming for help for example . . . should she feel so inclined . . . scream . . . [*Screams.*] . . . then listen . . . [*Silence.*] . . . scream again . . . [*Screams again.*] . . . then listen again . . . [*Silence.*] . . . no . . . spared that . . . all silent as the grave . . . no part— . . . what?.. the buzzing?.. yes . . . all silent but for the buzzing.<sup>47</sup>

The 'sudden flash[es]' and 'buzzing' might be interpreted as a current running through her from electro-shock therapy (ECT), which had been in use in Ireland from the late 1930s/early 1940s. Such an idea seems to be compounded by the 'dull roar in the skull . . . and all the time this ray or beam'.<sup>48</sup> This beam, according to Mouth, is part of a plot to 'torment',<sup>49</sup> and yet does not cause Mouth to experience pain, 'not in the least . . . not a twinge . . . so far'.<sup>50</sup> Neither, it should be noted, does ECT cause pain, when administered correctly.

Mouth spent her childhood in a mother and baby home, only to be released as an adult, traumatized from her experience, incapable of speech. Within the play's Irish context, it would not be too much of an assumption to believe that her inability to adapt to life outside of an institution resulted in her being admitted into another institution, an asylum, where she was then 'treated' using ECT. Such an interpretation would also underline the cyclical, interminable, purgatorial nature of her punishment.<sup>51</sup> ECT, particularly when it was first introduced, was a risky treatment, the Mayo Clinic listing 'confusion' and 'memory loss' as two possible side effects.<sup>52</sup> It seems to be in this confused state that we find Mouth, 'wandering in a field' in Croker's Acres, a key Dublin landmark, 'looking aimlessly for cow-slips'.<sup>53</sup>

As demonstrated by the authors of *Samuel Beckett's Library* (2013), biblical references are interwoven into Mouth's testimony in the lines 'God is love . . . tender mercies . . . new every morning'.<sup>54</sup> Further: 'The English version is a combination of 1 John 4: 8 ("God is love"), Psalm 25: 6 ("Remember, O LORD, thy tender mercies"), and Lamentations 3: 22–3 ("his compassions fail not. *They are* new every morning" . . . King James Version).'<sup>55</sup> This demonstrates the extent to which Mouth has internalized these religious ideas of a 'loving'

and 'merciful' God, who would not let an innocent person such as herself be punished for no reason. More importantly, perhaps, they also re-emphasize the cyclical nature of Mouth's trauma. The words 'new every morning' remind us of Mouth's purgatorial predicament, that the trauma she endures will repeat itself morning after morning. This suggests that she is trying to find the crime – a crime which does not exist – that occasioned her punishment. It seems that by speaking these words, testifying into the grass, she hopes to 'hit on it in the end'.<sup>56</sup>

I earlier noted two challenges to the idea of this play as 'testimony'. Indeed, the play's title itself, *Not I*, poses another such challenge. The woman is unable to self-identify or assume her subjectivity: 'what?.. who?.. no! .. she!'<sup>57</sup> Years of institutionalism have stripped her of her sense of self. In his lectures on abnormality, Michel Foucault examines the notions of confession and penitence, detailing how the sins of the flesh became focused on the body: 'the sin of the flesh dwells within the body itself.'<sup>58</sup> Foucault notes that what is new after the sixteenth century is the 'technology of soul and body, of the soul in the body and of the body as the bearer of pleasure and desire': 'Thus we pass from the old theme that the body was at the origin of every sin to the idea that there is concupiscence in every transgression.'<sup>59</sup> In this manner, Foucault asserts, the Church was able to assert and exercise power.

This 'technology' finds a direct parallel in Mouth's description of 'the machine' in *Not I*: 'so disconnected . . . never got the message . . . or powerless to respond . . . like numbed . . . couldn't make the sound . . . not any sound . . .'<sup>60</sup> In such Foucauldian terms, Mouth is completely disconnected – body and soul – and unable to recognize her selfhood, her 'I'. Such disconnection from her own sexuality and body, stemming from years of institutional abuse and control exerted over her by a religious order in a state obsessed with policing women's bodies and sexuality, can be better understood through the invocation of Freud's concept of 'disavowal', which Freud believes 'in an adult would mean the beginning of a psychosis'.<sup>61</sup>

'Disavowal' is a defence mechanism that a subject might use when 'refusing to recognise the reality of a traumatic perception'.<sup>62</sup> For Freud, then, Mouth's castration anxiety would lead to a splitting in two of the subject. Mouth's 'machine', her body and soul, splits after years of punishment for a crime she does not understand – is, in fact, not understandable – forcing the onset of her psychosis (as signified by her shrill, manic laughter at the notion of a 'merciful [. . .] God'). Closely related to 'disavowal' is the Freudian term 'negation', in which 'the subject, while formulating one of his wishes, thoughts, or feeling which has been repressed hitherto, contrives, by disowning it, to continue to defend himself against it'.<sup>63</sup>

In such terms, Mouth's refusal to acknowledge her subjectivity, 'not I', is the result of seventy years of repression in an Irish institution that recognizes her as little more than a sexual 'aberrant' or 'deviant' that needs to be concealed from the wider world lest it further 'pollute' the citizens of a new Irish state. Her identity has been stripped from her since birth: indeed, it seems that she was never truly given an identity due to the early disappearance of her parents. After years of such abuse, forced penitence for her guilt, and impatient accusations of guilt in court (for no other sin than being born), Mouth negates and disavows her sense of self. This leads to a split dissociation, a more catastrophic event, where she becomes both 'I' and 'Not I' in order to 'survive'. This dissociation allows her to split from the trauma whilst retaining some sense of agency. It is too traumatic for her to identify with this other 'she' who has endured such a life. Indeed, witnesses to Mouth's testimony would not expect such a victim to self-identify, recognize herself as 'I', or even fully relate to the words that stream from her mouth in this fragmentary, negated, dissociated form.

Mouth refers to the place of her birth as a 'godforsaken hole'.<sup>64</sup> The word 'godforsaken' has particular Joycean echoes within Irish Studies; in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, Stephen Dedalus's father pronounces the Irish to be a 'priestridden Godforsaken race!'<sup>65</sup> This allusion highlights the negative

influence exerted by the Catholic Church on Ireland and the Irish people. Forsaken so, her prayers too go unanswered: 'something in her begging . . . begging it all to stop . . . unanswered . . . prayer unanswered . . . or unheard . . . too faint . . . so on . . . keep on . . . trying . . . not knowing what . . . what she was trying . . . what to try'.<sup>66</sup>

This notion of 'begging it all to stop' evokes the work of another Irish playwright, Teresa Deevy. In her play *The King of Spain's Daughter*, from 1935, the year in which the Criminal Law Amendment Act inhibited sexual behaviour in public, the female protagonist of the play, Annie, is threatened with the prospect of five years in an institutional factory should she not behave herself 'appropriately', settle down, and marry. Annie finds herself laughing gleefully at the thought that her suitor, Jim, who has been obsessively saving money for their wedding for the last four years, might end her life: 'I think he is a man might cut your throat.'<sup>67</sup> Annie's manic laughter at this prospect mirrors Mouth's ironic laughter at the prospect of a 'merciful [. . .] God'.<sup>68</sup> The very independent Annie recoils in horror at the idea of a man being her saviour. In a similar manner, Mouth automatically, and ironically, equates the notion of a merciful God with the idea of punishment: 'first thought was . . . oh long after . . . sudden flash . . . she was being punished . . . for her sins'.<sup>69</sup> Punished for the Beckettian sin of being born has overt political resonances when we consider the play within Ireland's cultural context of institutionalism. Smith describes how 'Irish society continued to stigmatize single mothers and their "illegitimate" offspring for much of the twentieth century . . . condemning the most unfortunate to incarceration and forced separation at home'.<sup>70</sup> Mouth suffers, thus, not for her own sins, but for the sins of her parents. And because of the culture and architectures of confinement, she feels her punishment is deserved. Yet at the same time, she understands that it is happening for 'no particular reason . . . for its own sake . . . thing she understood perfectly . . . that notion of punishment . . .'.<sup>71</sup> Unlike Annie in Deevy's play, whose choice was to marry or be institutionalized, Mouth, a parentless, illegitimate

infant, would have had no choice in her affairs, nowhere to be placed in other than a state-funded institution. Indeed, when we consider the number of dead bodies discovered at Tuam, Bethany House, and other such institutions, Mouth might count herself lucky to be among the survivors.

## Conclusion

To conclude, it is necessary to invoke again Keegan's recent novella. Turning the page after her dedication, appears her epigraph – an excerpt from 'The Proclamation of the Irish Republic' of 1916, dating from when Beckett was ten years old and the movement towards an Irish republic was in train:

The Republic guarantees religious and civil liberty, equal rights, and equal opportunities to all its citizens, and declares its resolve to pursue the happiness and prosperity of the whole nation and of all its parts, cherishing all of the children of the nation equally.<sup>72</sup>

The promises of the proclamation were never kept, and throughout Beckett's life, the new Irish state stripped away and curtailed the rights of women, particularly through the drafting of Éamon de Valera's 1937 constitution. As is clear from a close examination of *Not I* as Beckett's fictional 'survivor's testimony' of an institutionalized Irish woman, Beckett seems to have been aware that many of the children of the Irish nation were not treated equally, aware that women in Ireland had been victims of traumatic, systematic abuse. The final words of *Not I* are 'pick it up—' as the curtain descends and the voice 'continues behind curtain, unintelligible',<sup>73</sup> suggesting that the torrent of words will continue indefinitely, alluding to the relentless cycle of abuse, institutionalism, and suffering caused to many women living in twentieth-century Ireland.

## Notes and References

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1. Claire Keegan, *Small Things Like These* (London: Faber and Faber, 2021), dedication. Keegan's dedication makes an important, if subtle, distinction between mother and baby homes and Magdalene laundries. This is because mother and baby homes were not all simply Catholic institutions, but many, such as Bethany House in Dublin, were also run by Protestant evangelical groups: see Ceimin Burke, 'Names of 239 children who died in Protestant institutions added to memorial headstones', *thejournal.ie*, 29 June 2018, <<https://www.thejournal.ie/bethany-home-memorial-4100622-Jun2018/>> (accessed 8 November 2021). Two memorial stones were erected in Dublin's Mount Jerome cemetery: one to honour the seventy children, and one mother, who died at Bethany Home, and a separate stone to honour the 169 children who died in other Protestant institutions. I want to note also that my inclination is to believe that the home Mouth was kept in was a Protestant mother and baby home because of the specific biblical references within the text: 'God is love . . . tender mercies . . . new every morning . . .'; 'His mercies are new every morning' is not just a verse from Lamentations but also a line from a popular Protestant hymn dating from 1923, 'Great is Thy Faithfulness', by Thomas Chisholm and William M. Runyan. In addition, Protestants were made to memorize and engage with passages from the Bible to a much greater extent than most Catholics.
2. Keegan, *Small Things Like These*, p. 8.
3. Samuel Beckett, *The Complete Dramatic Works* (London: Faber and Faber, 2006), p. 376.
4. *Ibid.*
5. Sean O'Casey, *Juno and the Paycock*, in *Modern and Contemporary Irish Drama*, ed. John P. Harrington (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 2009), p. 244.
6. Futoshi Sakauchi, 'Not I in an Irish Context', *Samuel Beckett Today/Aujourd'hui*, XIX, No. 1 (August 2008), p. 371–9 (p. 373).
7. Beckett, *Complete Dramatic Works*, p. 381.
8. James M. Smith, 'The Politics of Sexual Knowledge: The Origins of Ireland's Containment Culture and the Carrigan Report (1931)', *Journal of the History of Sexuality*, XIII, No. 2 (April 2004), p. 208–33 (p. 228).
9. Beckett, *Complete Dramatic Works*, p. 376.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 383.
11. *Ibid.*, p. 377.
12. Quoted in Enoch Brater, 'The "I" in Beckett's *Not-I*', *Twentieth Century Literature*, XX, No. 3 (July 1974), p. 189–200 (p. 200).
13. See James Little, *Samuel Beckett in Confinement: The Politics of Closed Space* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2020).
14. Quoted in Deirdre Bair, *Samuel Beckett: A Biography* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1978), p. 662.
15. It is perhaps relevant to note that 'Croker's Acres' is also mentioned in Beckett's late prose work *Company* (London: John Calder, 1980), which also supplies: 'God is love. Yes or no? No' (p. 31, 73).
16. *Pas moi*, Beckett's translation of *Not I*, also has some very explicit references to institutionalism. However, the topographical marker, 'Croker's Acres', has been removed and so the text reads more 'universally' than its English counterpart.
17. Smith, 'The Politics of Sexual Knowledge', p. 208.
18. *Ibid.*, p. 209.
19. Una Crowley and Rob Kitchin, 'Producing "Decent Girls": Governmentality and the Moral Geographies of Sexual Conduct in Ireland (1922–1937)', *Gender, Place, and Culture*, XV, No. 4 (2008), p. 355–72 (p. 355–7).
20. *Ibid.*, p. 357.
21. Smith, 'The Politics of Sexual Knowledge', p. 209.
22. *Ibid.*
23. Crowley and Kitchin, 'Producing "Decent Girls"', p. 357.
24. *Ibid.*, p. 367.
25. *Ibid.*, p. 368.
26. Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, 'Final Report of the Commission of Investigation into Mother and Baby Homes', gov.ie (12 January 2021), <<https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/d4b3d-final-report-of-the-commission-of-investigation-into-mother-and-baby-homes/>> (accessed 8 November 2021).
27. Catriona Crowe, 'The Commission and the Survivors', *Dublin Review*, LXXXIII (Summer 2021), p. 60.
28. Emily Hourican, 'Catherine Corless: "I thought there was something being hushed up. I had to follow the path of truth, always"', *Independent.ie*, 19 September 2021, <<https://www.independent.ie/life/catherine-corless-i-thought-there-was-something-being-hushed-up-i-had-to-follow-the-path-of-truth-always-40863327.html>> (accessed 8 November 2021).
29. Burke, 'Names of 239 children'.
30. Clair Wills, 'Architectures of Containment', *London Review of Books*, 20 May 2021.
31. *Ibid.*
32. Beckett, *Complete Dramatic Works*, p. 191.
33. *Ibid.*, p. 376, 383.
34. *Ibid.*, p. 381.
35. *Ibid.*, p. 376.
36. *Ibid.*
37. Smith, 'The Politics of Sexual Knowledge', p. 228.
38. Beckett, *Complete Dramatic Works*, p. 377.
39. Smith, 'The Politics of Sexual Knowledge', p. 232.
40. For detailed accounts of these practices, see Cliona Rattigan, *What Else Could I Do: Single Mothers and Infanticide, Ireland 1900–1950* (Newbridge: Irish Academic Press, 2012).
41. Tom O'Donoghue and Judith Harford, 'A Comparative History of Church-State Relations in Irish Education', *Comparative Education Review*, LV, No. 3 (August 2011), p. 315–41 (p. 316–17). The authors demonstrate the ways in which the Church took control over these institutions within Irish society during this period, with a particular emphasis on its influence over the education system.
42. For a more detailed breakdown, see Tom Inglis, *Moral Monopoly: The Rise and Fall of the Catholic Church In Modern Ireland* (Dublin: University College Dublin Press, 1998).
43. Crowley and Kitchin, 'Producing "Decent Girls"', p. 369.
44. Beckett, *Complete Dramatic Works*, p. 381.
45. *Ibid.*
46. *Ibid.*, p. 377.
47. *Ibid.*, p. 378.
48. *Ibid.*
49. *Ibid.*
50. *Ibid.*
51. Here I am positing one possible interpretation, and not attempting to exclude the multiplicities of interpretation that are suggested by 'the buzzing' and the

'beam', such as, for example, the lighting of the institution, and so on.

52. See <<https://www.mayoclinic.org/tests-procedures/electroconvulsive-therapy/about/pac-20393894>>, 12 October 2018 (accessed 8 November 2021).

53. Beckett, *Complete Dramatic Works*, p. 376.

54. *Ibid.*, p. 381–2.

55. Dirk Van Hulle and Mark Nixon, *Samuel Beckett's Library* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), p. 179.

56. Beckett, *Complete Dramatic Works*, p. 383.

57. *Ibid.*, p. 377 (original double-ellipses).

58. Michel Foucault, *Abnormal: Lectures at the Collège de France 1974–1975*, trans. Graham Burchell (New York: St Martin's Press, 2004), p. 188–9.

59. *Ibid.* p. 192.

60. Beckett, *Complete Dramatic Works*, p. 378.

61. Jean Laplanche and Jean-Bertrand Pontalis, *The Language of Psychoanalysis* (London: Routledge, 1988), p. 119.

62. *Ibid.*, p. 118.

63. *Ibid.*, p. 261.

64. Beckett, *Complete Dramatic Works*, p. 376.

65. James Joyce, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, in *The Complete Novels of James Joyce* (Hertfordshire: Wordsworth Editions Limited, 2012), p. 184.

66. Beckett, *Complete Dramatic Works*, p. 382.

67. Teresa Deevy, *The King of Spain's Daughter, and Other One-Act Plays* (Dublin: New Frontiers Press, 1947), p. 35.

68. Beckett, *Complete Dramatic Works*, p. 377.

69. *Ibid.*

70. Smith, 'The Politics of Sexual Knowledge', p. 228.

71. Beckett, *Complete Dramatic Works*, p. 377.

72. Keegan, *Small Things Like These*, epigraph.

73. Beckett, *Complete Dramatic Works*, p. 383.