

Lynn Brunet

'A COURSE OF SEVERE AND ARDUOUS TRIALS'

BACON, BECKETT AND SPURIOUS FREEMASONRY
IN EARLY TWENTIETH-CENTURY IRELAND



ireimagining land

The artist Francis Bacon (1909–1992) and the writer Samuel Beckett (1906–1989) both convey in their work a sense of foreboding and confinement in bleak, ritualistic spaces. This book identifies many similarities between the spaces and activities they evoke and the initiatory practices of fraternal orders and secret societies that were an integral part of the social landscape of the Ireland experienced by both men during childhood.

Many of these Irish societies modelled their ritual structures and symbolism on the Masonic Order. Freemasons use the term 'spurious Freemasonry' to designate those rituals not sanctioned by the Grand Lodge. The Masonic author Albert Mackey argues that the spurious forms were those derived from the various cult practices of the classical world and describes these initiatory practices as 'a course of severe and arduous trials'. This reading of Bacon's and Beckett's work draws on theories of trauma to suggest that there may be a disturbing link between Bacon's stark imagery, Beckett's obscure performances and the unofficial use of Masonic rites.

Lynn Brunet is an Australian art historian whose research examines the coupling of trauma and ritual in modern and contemporary art and literature. She was a full-time lecturer in art history and theory from 1994 to 2006 and she is a practising artist. She lives and works in Melbourne.

'A Course of Severe and Arduous Trials'

Reimagining Ireland

Volume 6

Edited by Dr Eamon Maher
Institute of Technology, Tallaght



PETER LANG

Oxford • Bern • Berlin • Bruxelles • Frankfurt am Main • New York • Wien

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Introduction

This study is the product of a developing body of research and a new theory within the creative arts that proposes that particular artists and writers, especially those who appear to express a deep and confusing sense of anxiety and despair, may be representing the traces of initiatory rites found in various fraternities, religious groups, secret societies and cults.

Two of the twentieth century's most important creative figures, the artist Francis Bacon (1909–1992) and the writer Samuel Beckett (1906–1989), both convey in their work a sense of foreboding and confinement in bleak, ritualistic spaces. Gilles Deleuze has suggested that it is in these spaces that Bacon and Beckett 'have never been so close', as Bacon's figures and Beckett's characters 'trundle about fitfully without ever leaving their circle or parallelepiped'.¹ This book provides a reading of Bacon and Beckett's work that demonstrates the many parallels between the spaces and activities they evoke in their work and the initiatory practices of fraternal orders and secret societies that were an integral part of the social landscape of the Ireland of their childhood. As T. Desmond Williams notes, secret societies were probably more a part of everyday life and politics in Ireland than in most other countries and since the eighteenth century new fraternal orders were being formed in Ireland every decade.² Many of these societies modelled their ritual structures and symbolism on the Masonic Order.³

In the modern era the artist's role has often been interpreted as providing an important link to the subliminal currents that underpin the community, revealing those taboo or repressed issues that the society as a whole is unable to confront. Some artists do this by exploring their own struggles and psychological experiences and then externalising these explorations in creative form. The cliché of the tortured artist accompanies this modern concept. By making their struggles visible artists confront their viewers with unresolved issues that some in the public may share.

Often neither the artist nor their audience is fully aware of the implications of their work.

Francis Bacon and Samuel Beckett could each be described as driven by a powerful creative force underpinned by a sense of disturbance that has not yet been fully understood. Both have plumbed the darkest levels of their psyches and transferred their responses onto the canvas, be it a literal piece of linen, a theatrical stage or the pages of a novel. Bacon called this process of transference 'the pattern of one's own nervous system being projected on the canvas.'⁴ Beckett's realisation that his literary voice needed to be based on the dynamics of the psyche and on the 'big blooming buzzing confusion' of his own inner turmoil was a decision that marked him as a new voice in theatre and one that was to be representative of his time.⁵

This book asks whether the sense of disturbance created in their work could be associated with traumatic exposure to initiatory rites that were commonly practised by many secret societies in early twentieth-century Ireland. As there is no evidence to suggest that either man ever joined any secret societies this study asks whether they could have been exposed to the rituals in some other context.

As anthropologists explain, the use of initiatory rites applied to children and accompanied by a series of frightening tricks, enacted as rites of passage into adulthood, is a common practice in many cultures. These rites can often be painful and terrifying affairs and are generally conducted by specially appointed ritual elders. Many societies frown on such practices, regarding them as a sign of a backward culture, one steeped in superstition and fear, and claim a more enlightened view where the child is spared such brutal horrors. But what if similar practices lie behind the work of Bacon and Beckett? The reading here suggests that there may be the traces in their work of a clandestine initiation process, one that draws on a combination of Masonic rites, Druidic lore, Irish mythology, and biblical and classical themes, blended together with a liberal dose of cruelty.

Francis Bacon and Samuel Beckett share a number of commonalities in their life experiences. Both were born in Dublin, Beckett in 1906⁶ and Bacon in 1909.⁷ Beckett spent his childhood in suburban Dublin while

Bacon as a child lived in the rural county of Kildare not far from the city, interspersed with periods living in London. Both lived through the Irish Civil War. For Bacon this was experienced close at hand, while for Beckett it was a more distant reality. Both left Ireland, Bacon in his youth and Beckett in his young adulthood, to pursue their careers in the wider artistic world beyond Irish shores. Both were raised as Protestants and both rejected their religion proclaiming either an atheistic or agnostic position. Bacon's response to religion and its accompanying hypocrisy was one of vehement disgust;⁸ while Beckett rejected his Protestant upbringing regarding it as 'only irksome and I let it go'.⁹ Both grew up in an environment where Freemasonry and other fraternal organizations were close at hand, providing a sanctuary for the men in a socially sanctioned and exclusively male environment.

Both men carried a burden that informed their artistic work. Bacon was homosexual in an age when it was still regarded as a crime. His incompatibility with the ideals of masculinity shared by his male relatives and much of the Irish community of his childhood led to his rejection of the mores of his day and his claim to an outsider status. The theme of homosexuality, violence and turmoil permeate his images, while the chaotic state of his studio, immortalized in his famous comment, '[t]his mess around us is rather like my mind', reflected the state of confusion that accompanied much of his personal life.¹⁰ Beckett experienced problems with depression, night terrors and anxiety attacks in his young adulthood that led him to undergo a two-year period of psychoanalysis in London. While his relationship with his mother was fraught with tension and may have been the cause of some of his emotional difficulties, his period of psychotherapy proved largely ineffectual with the analyst finding no clear causes for his extreme level of anxiety.¹¹ The theme of mental distress, inner turmoil, and a sense of emotional void is one that runs throughout Beckett's work.

The work of both artist and writer has been interpreted in many ways, among them as representing existential themes and a deep level of angst that surrounded mid-twentieth-century culture. The reading here will suggest that the degree of angst in their work may be associated with the subject of a developing body of research, one that suggests that the

initiation of children by members of fraternal groups and secret societies may be one of the more clandestine practices of western culture.¹²

As Alan Axelrod notes, the whole concept of a secret society is a male institution.¹³ Most secret societies incorporate some form of initiation, utilising the themes of birth, death and rebirth found in the primordial practices of many cultures. These initiatory rites typically express a fear of female power and an appropriation of women's power to give birth.¹⁴ Taking the child from the realm of the mother and 're-birthing' him into the reality of war, toughness and masculinity is the principle upon which the ancient practice of male puberty rites is based. As Paul Nettl suggests, these primordial practices may have been the original basis for the evolution of secret societies, which led ultimately in the eighteenth century to the elaborate and formalised rituals of the institution of Freemasonry.¹⁵

Since its inception in the eighteenth century the Masonic Order has spawned a proliferation of allied secret societies and fraternities that have adopted its ritual structures for their initiation practices. In Ireland, by the turn of the twentieth century, much of the male population belonged to one or more of these organizations. These societies were sites of male solidarity and many of them drew on Masonic rites for the form and symbolism of their rituals; many also infused ancient Celtic beliefs and Druidic practices into their ritual processes. The central practice of initiation in these societies took on a range of forms, sometimes reflecting the Irish warrior tradition as well as classical and Egyptian themes, Christian beliefs and Old Testament narratives.

Freemasonry has attracted a continuing debate between apologists and detractors who have argued for and against its role in western society and of more neutral historians and philosophers who have traced its ancestry and attempted to weigh the opposing positions. At the core of these discussions lies a duality; a duality that anthropologists explain accompanies initiatory practices across cultures. Evan M. Zuesse, for example, suggests that there are two forms of liminality created through initiation: positive liminality, which integrates structure and builds up a divine order and negative liminality, which destroys order and isolates its victims.¹⁶ The tradition of initiation involves knowledge of the human psyche that can be utilized in one of two ways: either in its symbolic form

as a signifier of a legitimate spiritual and moral path for the individual, or for the purpose of power over others. Freemasons have devised the terms 'true' and 'spurious' Freemasonry or 'regular' and 'irregular' practice to address this issue and in the history of the Order a number of eminent Freemasons have debated the nature of these two forms. At the heart of this duality lie the nature of power and the application of metaphysical principles for corrupt or benign purposes.

The formal rituals that were eventually sanctioned by Grand Lodge, those practices regarded by Masons as 'regular', 'pure' or 'true' Freemasonry, took on a highly symbolic and spiritual significance that was originally modelled on the principles and trade union practices associated with the craft of building the great cathedrals of the medieval period. Only to be available to willing adults, these sanctified rituals were intended to symbolically express the soul's journey from birth to death, and initiates were to be taught various spiritual, philosophical and moral principles to enable them on their journey through life.¹⁷ Initiation, in this context, is seen to represent the theme of spiritual renewal and the initiate's progress through various degrees, a symbolic expression of his spiritual progression. All Masonic degrees are aimed at edifying the initiate through a series of allegorical and cautionary tales as well as mythological enactments. A set of high moral principles and philosophical ideals, as well as a set of strict guidelines acknowledged by Grand Lodge, has accompanied the Order's official representation of itself since the Enlightenment.

However, as a number of key Masonic authors note, corruption has been woven into the Order since its inception and is present amongst the vast array of loosely related variations of the basic Craft degrees.¹⁸ Freemasons term those rituals regarded as unacceptable to Grand Lodge 'spurious' Freemasonry or 'irregular practice' and the debates among Freemasons as to when and where these forms originated have been long and much argued. Some Masonic authors claim that the difference was based on geographical concerns, with Britain the site of the genuine Order, while other Masonic authors, such as Robert Freke Gould, claim the character of the Enlightenment itself, despite its rhetoric of reason, to be responsible for the emergence of 'all kinds of strange and disordered fancies, the work of disordered imagination, to an extent probably

never known before ...'¹⁹ Individual characters such as the 'magician' Count Cagliostro (Giuseppe Balsamo, 1743–1795), regarded by many as a charlatan, were deemed responsible for spreading irregular versions throughout the Continent.²⁰ Cagliostro was to revive Gnostic practices that contained elements derived from Egyptian sources.²¹ In the eighteenth century initiation into Cagliostro's Egyptian Freemasonry became a fashionable preoccupation amongst the aristocracy, for both men and women alike.

Masonic authors who connect Freemasonry to a more ancient lineage argue that the pure and spurious forms were present in its earlier incarnations. Among them, C. W. Leadbeater, writing in 1926 stated: 'Masonry, as we have it today, is the only true relic of the faith of the patriarchs before the flood, while the ancient Mysteries of Egypt and other countries, which so closely resemble it, were but human corruptions of the one primitive and pure tradition.'²² Albert Mackey, looking at the philosophical roots of Freemasonry in biblical times, argues that the pure form was that practised by the Israelites and involved a belief in the unity of God and the immortality of the soul.²³ The spurious forms, he argues, were those sets of initiatory rites practised by the pagans, including all of the different cult groups of the Classical world. These pagan versions, he suggests, were based on 'a course of severe and arduous trials ... a long and painful initiation, and ... a formal series of gradual preparations', which the candidate voluntarily underwent in order to seek the enlightenment of a mystical experience.²⁴ Mackey locates the spurious forms in terms of their use of terrifying initiation practices and the use of 'a scenic representation of the mythic descent into Hades, or the grave, and the return from thence to the light of day'.²⁵ These two different forms, he argues, merged during the building of Solomon's Temple to produce an immediate prototype of the modern institution.²⁶

The ordeals of the ancient mystery cults were intended to produce altered states of consciousness, a mystical encounter experienced as a state of bliss or a sense of oneness with the Divine. The methods used involved the exploitation of pain, fear, humiliation and exhaustion.²⁷ Such techniques appear to have emerged from the warrior tradition, where, through the exposure to scenes of brutality and the fear of imminent death, a

warrior could experience a blissful state of release and a sense of immortality. These practices were associated with beliefs in the transmigration of the soul that encouraged warriors to sacrifice themselves in battle.²⁸

The relationship between the feeling of terror and the sense of a 'sublime' experience became one of the key themes of the Enlightenment philosophers, many of whom were Freemasons and therefore familiar with the principles of initiation. Immanuel Kant and Edmund Burke were both Freemasons who commented on this theme. Kant had stated that the experience of the Sublime, induced through the feeling of being overwhelmed through terror, is a condition in which the individual's imagination fails to comprehend what is actually occurring.²⁹ Similarly, Burke had argued that the experience of terror had the capacity to produce a set of responses that place the individual in a unique state. This state he called Astonishment, 'that state of the soul in which all its motions are suspended', producing 'the effect of the Sublime in its highest degree.'³⁰ Terror, he argues, is the ruling principle of the Sublime, and involves the impulse for self-preservation. Burke mentions the Druids in this context and comments on the obscurity of their rituals in the dark woods and under the oldest and most spreading oaks. 'To make everything very terrible,' he says, 'obscurity seems in general to be necessary.'³¹

In Ireland in the pre-Christian period the Druids, who were the priestly advisors to the Irish kings, were the overseers of an initiatory process that incorporated a set of painful and terrifying practices. In Druidic initiation candidates were locked up in caves, crawled through long tunnels or were sealed into chests or coffins for days at a time, to emerge 'twice-born'.³² These initiatory practices were euphemistically known as the 'mystic fire' and the candidate's eventual release from these torturous trials was sometimes expressed in terms of an emergence into a blaze of light.³³ In Irish lore the peoples who were regarded as bringing these mystical practices to Ireland were known as the Tuatha dé Danann, a mysterious race that was associated with the gods or the 'fairies'. Some believed they were overthrown by another race, the children of the Gail Glas, who had come to Ireland from Egypt *via* Spain, who also brought their initiatory traditions with them.³⁴ As Dudley Wright notes, '[the Druidic] ceremony of initiation was similar to the Egyptian rites of Osiris,

which were regarded as a descent into hell, a passage through the infernal lake, followed by a landing in the Egyptian Isle of the Blessed.³⁵

Writing in 1894 James Bonwick commented on the interest held amongst Irish Freemasons of the day in the magical powers of these ancient peoples. He states: '[e]nthusiastic Freemasons believe the Tuatha were members of the mystic body, their supposed magic being but the superior learning they imported from the East. If not spiritualist in the modern sense of that term, they may have been skilled in Hypnotism inducing others to see or hear what their masters wished them to see or hear.'³⁶ Such practices, while regarded with high esteem in some circles, were perceived with suspicion in others. In the late seventeenth century the Irish freethinker John Toland had aired his views on the Druids, regarding them as deceivers of the people, who through trickery led the people by the nose.³⁷ As Andrew Prescott notes, there is a body of writing going back as far as Jonathan Swift that connects Masonic practices with that of the Druids.³⁸

When Christianity came to Ireland in the person of St Patrick in the fifth century the Druids were to recognise a number of similarities between Christian and pagan practices that encouraged them to convert to Christianity, allowing a relatively easy transition from one set of beliefs to the next.³⁹ The version of Christianity St Patrick brought with him contained Gnostic elements and was a syncretic blend of Greek and oriental traditions.⁴⁰ Among these traditions was the Gnostic practice of initiation. St Patrick's Purgatory, celebrated at Lough Derg in County Donegal in Ireland, was a practice whereby a priest would be locked up for long periods in a cave, known as the Cave of Death. The pilgrim would proceed through the cave and experience a series of frightening trials incorporating terrifying sounds, visions of fiery punishments and an encounter with demons in order to test his faith.⁴¹ Lough Derg was also thought to have been a site of Druidic initiation.⁴²

By the turn of the twentieth century in Ireland, just prior to the birth of Francis Bacon and Samuel Beckett, the various threads of these metaphysical traditions had merged and were present in a range of forms amongst the secret societies of the day. Many of the men of the ruling Protestant elite belonged to Freemasonry, while working class Protestants

were likely to belong to any number of the various secret societies that utilised Masonic-style rituals for their initiatory practices. Some men belonged to a number of fraternities. While outwardly respectable church-going men embraced the tenets of Christianity, it appears that behind the closed doors of the lodges and meeting rooms these same men may have been practising initiatory rituals derived from various pagan and classical sources.

Male initiation processes in general demonstrate the ever-present threat that men can impose on each other and the close proximity of death in all relations between men. The terror experienced by the novitiate is the central ingredient of the initiation process and his vulnerability throughout the experience marks the power of the group over the individual. Once safely through this process he is then protected by the group provided he adheres to the strict requirements of secrecy. The cementing of male relations through implied terror – we could kill you but we have chosen not to – is the hallmark of all fraternal initiatory structures. Anthropologists have long recognised that central to the initiatory process across cultures is the use of shock to place the candidate into an altered state in order to be receptive to new information.⁴³ The experience of terror is thus a key ingredient of the initiation process and the symbolism of death and rebirth, to represent the change that the initiate must undergo, accompanies most, if not all, initiatory processes.

Contemporary psychology has, over the course of the twentieth century, developed an extensive knowledge of the effects of shock, terror and trauma on the psyche of the individual. Research suggests that dissociation, memory loss and identity fragmentation are common responses to the experience of trauma.⁴⁴ In psychoanalytic terms dissociation refers to ‘... a compartmentalization of experience ... [in which] traumatic memories are characteristically stored separately from other memories, in discrete personality states.’⁴⁵ They result from an experience of overwhelming threat in which the totality of the experience is not accommodated within ordinary memory. Traumatic shock immerses the individual into a state described as ‘a phylogenetically older psychological mechanism – to freeze or play dead, or ... psychic numbing’.⁴⁶ It is produced through a natural biological response where the brain produces a wave of opiates to numb

the individual to what would otherwise be an overwhelming experience, often associated with an imminent sense of death. Such a mechanism clearly has a protective function, serving the psychic preservation of the individual in the context of a terrifying ordeal. This concept of dissociation seems to approximate the eighteenth century philosophers' views on the Sublime, where the individual fails to comprehend what is occurring in front of them and experiences a state of Astonishment, 'that state of the soul in which all its motions are suspended'. In the context of the initiatory ordeal the effect of the brain's natural opiate production can give rise to those sensations associated with the mystical experience such as a state of divine bliss, a sense of going 'into the light' or of blissfully floating away from the body.

Traumatic experiences, if they are repeated often enough, especially in childhood, can remain cordoned off and unavailable to the normal waking consciousness of the individual. This amnesia often manifests as a central and profound absence that is felt as a deep and pervasive sense of confusion. Freudian explanations of this amnesia are that it is 'a defensive process ... in which the memory of the trauma is incompatible with the subject's other conscious ideas'.⁴⁷ While the individual can remain amnesic to the original events, the side effects of traumatic experience can be the serious and debilitating effects of post-traumatic stress disorder, such as anxiety, nervousness and depression, sleep disturbances, the tendency towards addictive behaviours, personality fragmentation, psychosomatic symptoms and so on.

As I will suggest, both Francis Bacon and Samuel Beckett demonstrate many of the traits associated with repressed trauma. For a creative individual, the sense of disturbance that underpins traumatic experience can be a powerful stimulus to the production of creative work. While the events and circumstances of the trauma remain repressed they can nevertheless be felt in all their intensity, as Bacon suggests, as an effect 'on the nervous system' experienced by the individual as a series of dissociated images, sounds, bodily responses and tactile sensations and involving a profound sense of confusion. The following discussion will demonstrate that, coupled with a sense of trauma in their work, there appears to be