



# A Backward Glance: Radharc ar gCúl

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## Mercier's *Irish Comic Tradition* as a Touchstone of Irish Studies

It does not seem accidental that Vivian Mercier's classic book *The Irish Comic Tradition* was published by Oxford University Press in hardback in 1962, the same year that ACIS, the American Committee (now Conference) for Irish Studies was founded—and in paperback for a wider audience in 1969, the same year that IASIL, the International Association for the Study of Anglo-Irish Literature (now Irish Literatures) was founded. No less influential an authority than Declan Kiberd has asserted that, with *The Irish Comic Tradition*, “without ever quite announcing it as such, Mercier had launched the movement that now goes by the name of ‘Irish Studies.’”<sup>1</sup> Kiberd befriended Mercier in the early 1980s and then replaced him during 1987–88 at the University of California-Santa Barbara after Mercier fell ill. Indeed, Kiberd can now be seen as Mercier's closest successor in Irish Studies, as well as a central leading light in his own right; his comments on Mercier shed significant light on his predecessor as well as on our field in general.

Mercier, as an Irishman teaching in New York City was, in fact, known to the historians and literary critics who linked up to found the ACIS in that same year as his great book. Mercier (who died in 1989) lectured as late as 1985 at the national ACIS conference in Washington State, where he spoke on Shaw. His study of Shaw had begun when, as a mere schoolboy, he struck up a correspondence with the Nobel Prize winner.<sup>2</sup> As for the international phenomenon of IASIL, Mercier was—in the words of his author's blurb on his 1964 sequel to *The Irish Comic Tradition*, the Dell anthology *Great Irish Short Stories*—an “Irishman with a French name who teaches English to Americans at the City College of the City University of New York.”<sup>3</sup> Later, Richard Ellmann wanted

1. Declan Kiberd, “Introduction,” in *Modern Irish Literature: Sources and Founders*, by Vivian Mercier, ed. Eilís Dillon (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994), p. x.

2. Kiberd, “Introduction,” p. viii.

3. Vivian Mercier, *Great Irish Short Stories* (New York: Dell, 1964). I call *Great Irish Short Stories* a sequel to *The Irish Comic Tradition* because it continues Mercier's bilingual agenda: rather than sim-

Mercier to succeed him at Northwestern; instead, this peripatetic Irishman journeyed in 1965 to teach at the University of Colorado, for the sake of the health of his first wife, Gina (who died in 1971), before he moved on to Santa Barbara in 1974 and then retired to Dublin in 1987. It was my own honor to be able to correspond with Eilís Dillon, the accomplished novelist whom Mercier married in 1974, and to meet them both in Tacoma in 1985.

Vivian Mercier went way back before ACIS and IASIL. His lofty pedigree is suggested by the striking similarities between Mercier and his fellow internationalized Protestant Irishman, Samuel Beckett. As Mercier himself indicated at the beginning of his long-awaited 1977 book on Beckett, "I entered Portora Royal School, Enniskillen, in September 1928, just over five years after Beckett's departure."<sup>4</sup> He entered Trinity in 1936, where his roommate was Conor Cruise O'Brien, "at the same age as Beckett had done and was accepted by the same tutor, Dr. A. A. Luce. Like Beckett, I read Honors French with Professor T. B. Rudmose-Brown."<sup>5</sup> Before *Waiting for Godot* had even entered Beckett's mind, Mercier had already cleared the path for an appreciation of Beckett's fiction—and pioneered the study of modern Irish fiction in general—in his 1945 Trinity College dissertation, "Realism in Anglo-Irish Fiction, 1916–1940." When *Godot* did appear, Mercier wrote the description of it that is not only the most famous statement ever uttered about Beckett, but also possibly the most quoted phrase from any critical review by anyone on any subject: It is the "play in which nothing happens, *twice*."<sup>6</sup> Deirdre Bair notes that Beckett wrote to Mercier in 1956 after they met in Paris, and Anthony Cronin claims that Beckett named *Mercier et Camier* (1970) after him.<sup>7</sup>

Mercier remained devoted to Beckett all of his life. Both of them died at the end of 1989. Mercier himself explained at the outset of *The Irish Comic Tradition* that he had left out comedians who wrote about other countries, such as Shaw and Wilde, but "I have made an exception in favour of Samuel Beckett."<sup>8</sup> The Beckett connection is key to *The Irish Comic Tradition*, not only because Beckett provided Mercier with some of his key examples there, but also, more

ply collect modern stories, as most other such anthologies do, this one includes five tales from the eighth through the eighteenth centuries, and emphasizes the orality of all Irish stories—with, for example, "Davin's Story" excerpted from Joyce's *Portrait* to help make this point.

4. Vivian Mercier, *Beckett/Beckett* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), p. viii.

5. Mercier, *Beckett/Beckett*, p. ix.

6. Mercier, *Beckett/Beckett*, p. xii.

7. Deirdre Bair, *Samuel Beckett: A Biography* (New York: Harcourt, 1979), pp. 471–72; Anthony Cronin, *Samuel Beckett: The Last Modernist* (New York: HarperCollins, 1997), p. 49. I thank Claire Norris, a Beckett scholar, for these citations from Bair and Cronin.

8. Mercier, *The Irish Comic Tradition* (1962; New York: Oxford University Press, 1969), p. x; hereafter cited parenthetically, thus: (ICT x).

generally, because they shared the same kind of sensibility: as Kiberd puts it about Mercier, the sensibility of “the Protestant gentleman and Trinity graduate who took an equal pleasure in the learned and the obscure.”<sup>9</sup>

Mercier was not content to remain only an Anglo-Irishman and Francophile. He had emigrated to New York because Trinity had offered him no job (nor to Conor Cruise O'Brien, who had to settle for the civil service). When Mercier got a sabbatical from CCNY in the 1950s, he did not take the easy path of, say, collecting into a book the many essays that he had already published in various places ranging from *The Bell* to *Commonweal*. Instead, because he was determined to pursue a more ambitious study bridging Gaelic and Anglo-Irish literatures, he started over and went back to Dublin, where he devoted a year to “studying Old and Middle Irish at Trinity and University Colleges,” as he would recount in the preface to *The Irish Comic Tradition*. He made himself a student all over again under the tutelage of experts including David Greene and Francis Shaw, as he had previously done in New York with Charles Dunn (*ICT* xv). He had already started writing his book before this term of study, and the basis for it is evident in his 1952 anthology *1000 Years of Irish Prose*, in which Mercier included some of the most Gaelic samples of Irish writing in English, such as Flann O'Brien's descriptions of Finn MacCool in *At Swim-Two-Birds*. Mercier wanted to immerse himself more deeply in original Gaelic texts, both older ones and modern ones. The proofs of *The Irish Comic Tradition* would be read and blessed by the dean of Modern Irish Gaelic, Tomás de Bhaldraithe (*ICT* xvi).

Before *The Irish Comic Tradition*, Anglo-Irish and Gaelic literatures were studied separately, even though such notable writers as Patrick Pearse, Liam O'Flaherty, Flann O'Brien, and Brendan Behan had confounded this segregation by writing in both languages. Thomas MacDonagh had outlined a unitary model in *Literature in Ireland* (1916), the book whose galleys he had proofread in the GPO during Easter week. Yet, many scholars of Anglo-Irish literature—especially the growing legions in the United States—held forth about Irish writers while working in virtually complete ignorance of Irish Gaelic. That language was not only the native language of Ireland, but also the main basis of the idioms of the English spoken and written even by those in Ireland who knew little or no Irish. Gaelic pervasively marked the versions of English learned there. Meanwhile, Gaelic scholars had stuck mostly to parsing the forms of Old Irish, ignoring their language's myriad connections to the greatest works of Anglo-Irish literature. Daniel Corkery had composed his stories in that kind of English while insisting in his book on Synge, ironically, that the Irish mind could be truly found only in Gaelic.

9. Declan Kiberd, *Irish Classics* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001), p. 624.

Mercier built his whole book on the thesis that “an unbroken comic tradition may be traced in Irish literature from approximately the ninth century down to the present day,” (*ICT* vii) and he concluded it by asserting about Irish Gaelic that “contemporary Anglo-Irish literature cannot be fully understood and appreciated without some knowledge of that tradition” (*ICT* 246). Though many scholars have continued to write about Irish literature without knowing Gaelic, after *The Irish Comic Tradition* it became, in Kiberd’s words, “harder and harder for experts in Anglo-Irish literature to present themselves to the world with no knowledge of Irish, and patently absurd for Gaelic scholars to deny or discount the massive English influence on the more recent centuries of writing in the Irish language.”<sup>10</sup> Mercier thus revolutionized, at the same time that he helped found, the whole field of Irish Studies, closing the gap between Ireland’s two literatures and fostering a fresh bilingual sensibility. A telling response among the Gaelic scholars came from Proinsias Mac Cana in his review of *The Irish Comic Tradition in Celtica*. Mac Cana struck a purist note by complaining that Mercier may have found more comedy in some of his Old Irish texts than did Old Irish contemporaries, and he claimed that Mercier “may not have achieved his primary aim of bridging the gap between Gaelic and Anglo-Irish literatures.” Yet Mac Cana concluded that Mercier’s book should be “required reading for students of both.”<sup>11</sup>

Mercier himself modestly admitted within the pages of his book that he had chosen to focus only on comic features found in both Gaelic and Anglo-Irish literatures, omitting a chapter that he had written on Stage Anglo-Irishmen because there were no comparable Gaelic plays to link to them, and similarly avoiding such strictly Anglo-Irish “rollicking” humorous forms as malaprops and “bulls” (*ICT* ix). Mercier departed from what would have been an easier outline that could have moved from his mostly older Gaelic texts to his mostly newer Anglo-Irish ones, though he does frame his body chapters between opening and closing, “bookend” chapters on “The Archaism of Gaelic Comic Literature” and “The Archaism of Anglo-Irish Comic Literature.” These parallel titles thus emphasize the two literatures’ similarities, rather than their differences. Instead, Mercier chose in each of his body chapters to take a comic subtype and run it through both Gaelic and Anglo-Irish texts—except in case of “Satire in Modern Irish,” a long chapter which sticks entirely to Gaelic texts that Mercier felt needed special introduction to readers. The book proceeds through increasingly complex comic types—from fantasy and the macabre and grotesque to satire and parody. Even the chapters whose titles might make one think that they focus only on one literature or the other actually combine them: “Satire in

10. Kiberd, introduction, p. x.

11. Proinsias Mac Cana, review of *The Irish Comic Tradition, Celtica*, 7 (1966), 238.

Early Irish,” for example, begins with examples from O’Casey and other Anglo-Irish writers, and “James Joyce and the Irish Tradition of Parody” includes a section of “Examples of Gaelic parody.” Having avoided the differences between them, Mercier confessed that “the reader should therefore be wary of assuming a greater homogeneity between the two literatures than actually exists” (*ICT* ix). Maureen Waters’s *The Comic Irishman* (1984) is valuable because it takes up the Stage Irish tradition and other strictly Anglo-Irish types that Mercier left out. Theresa O’Connor’s collection *The Comic Tradition in Irish Women Writers* (1996) is another important complement to Mercier, because its essayists give greater attention to women than did Mercier in his male-dominated study. Yet Mercier remains crucial to Theresa O’Connor; she is, in fact, now working on a long essay about Mercier, whose focus on the carnivalesque nature of Irish writing she sees as foundational for our postmodern age.<sup>12</sup>

Mercier made one deliciously original yet “archaic” point that is especially important: “Ironically, world critical opinion has admired twentieth-century Irish writing specifically for its freshness, unaware that this quality was derived in large part from the imitation of literary sources unfamiliar to the world at large” (*ICT* 238). This insight was taken up by Kiberd in *Synge and the Irish Language* (1979), where he pointed out that it was bitterly ironic that the *Gaeilgeoirí* and other Dublin philistines rioted in 1907 over Christy Mahon’s use of the words “shifts” when he claims that he would rather be with Pegeen Mike than with other Irishwomen in such undergarments. Synge was inspired by Cúchulainn’s visions of naked Irish virgins in Old Irish texts, and thought he was toning down such venerable Old Irish descriptions by putting “shifts” onto his imaginary modern Irishwomen in *The Playboy of the Western World*.<sup>13</sup> As Kiberd pointed out in his tribute to Mercier, *The Irish Comic Tradition* inspired not only his own thoroughly bilingual work, but also a whole new generation of Gaelic scholars, as the years after Mercier’s book also “saw the emergence of Seán Ó Tuama, Breandán Ó Doibhlin, and entire squads of younger scholar-critics, all suddenly finding their voices and audiences.”<sup>14</sup> Then scholars such as myself read Mercier and others in this vein, and we proceeded to write our own works in this new “Irish Studies” mode. When I studied Irish Gaelic beginning in 1975, in Dublin and on Inis Meáin, Mercier’s admonitions rang in my ears.<sup>15</sup>

12. Maureen Waters, *The Comic Irishman* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1984); *The Comic Tradition in Irish Women Writers*, ed. Theresa O’Connor (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1996). I thank Dr. O’Connor for informing me about her current work on Mercier.

13. Kiberd, *Synge and the Irish Language* (London: Macmillan, 1979), p. 119.

14. Kiberd, “Introduction,” p. x.

15. In Mercier’s tradition, my own scholarship has noted the importance of both languages in Irish literature. For example, I argued that we need both the Gaelic and English texts attached to *The Tai-*

If the only thing that the *The Irish Comic Tradition* achieved was thoroughly to intertwine the Gaelic and Anglo-Irish literatures of Ireland, then that achievement would have been a major contribution by itself. But Mercier's sources were more than literary; his book was interdisciplinary, a form of Cultural Studies. Those of us who were pleased when "new historicism" cropped up in literary studies in the United States during the 1980s were, at the same time, a bit bemused: since at least the time of Mercier, Irish Studies had already involved versions of historicism that were not "new" in our field. Mercier liberally quoted historians and other scholars in other fields. He noted, for example, that there was "scientific proof that the Anglo-Irish dialects spoken in country parts of Ireland are to this day saturated with Gaelic modes of thought and expression. I refer to Dr. P. L. Henry's epoch-making book *An Anglo-Irish Dialect of North Roscommon*" (ICT 93).

Moreover, Mercier's book was so theoretically insightful that it not only cited famous theoreticians, but anticipated the works of others that had not yet appeared. He arrived at Johan Huizinga's work on comic "play" by the ninth page of *The Irish Comic Tradition*, pointing out that it was especially relevant to the Irish tradition, which was particularly archaic; its most innovative text, *Finnegans Wake*, was also the most archaic, as based on the oldest of forms, the pun (ICT 80). Mercier clarified that he had been "working on this book for years before I read *Homo Ludens*, so that Huizinga nourished views I already held rather than implanting them in me" (ICT 247). Similarly, Mercier celebrated the carnivalesque qualities of Irish comedy, yet Bakhtin's influential book on that subject, *Rabelais and his World*, was published only in 1965 and translated into English only in 1984. When Mercier read it—years after he had published *The Irish Comic Tradition*—Bakhtin's book "delighted him. It confirmed the rightness of his approach," and "although he was too modest to say this, it must have demonstrated once again the prophetic instinct at work in all his finest criticism."<sup>16</sup> These kinds of connections also illustrate Mercier's thoroughgoing internationalism. He had immersed himself in Old Irish and Huizinga, in Gaelic and European texts, at the same time. His study of the Irish comic tradition was

*lor and Ansty*, in "Tailor Tim Buckley: Folklore, Literature and *Seanchas an Táiilliúra*," *Éire-Ireland*, 14, 2 (Summer 1979), 110–18; included a section on the Gaelic novelist Eoghan Ó Tuairisc in *Great Hatred, Little Room: The Irish Historical Novel* (Syracuse and Dublin: Syracuse University Press, and Gill and Macmillan, 1983), pp. 169–75; included sections on Gaelic novelists in *The Irish Novelists: A Critical History* (Boston and Dublin: Twayne, and Gill and Macmillan, 1988), pp 112–19 and 281–85; incorporated a chapter on "O'Flaherty's Bilingualism" in *Liam O'Flaherty: A Study of the Short Fiction* (Boston: Twayne, 1991); and interwove entries on "Irish Language and Literature" with entries on English-language texts and developments throughout *Modern Irish Literature and Culture: A Chronology* (New York: Macmillan, 1993).

16. Kiberd, "Introduction," p. xii.

not any narrowly chauvinistic “united-Ireland” endeavor, but, rather, a brilliantly international one, in the spirit of his hero, Beckett.

Bilingualism, Cultural Studies, theory—Mercier was immersed decades ago in all of these bywords of current Irish Studies. It is instructive to think of various chief thinkers and main developments in our field since *The Irish Comic Tradition*, and then to ask if these would exist as we now know them if Mercier had not come onto the scene. In addition to Declan Kiberd, how about Seamus Deane and *The Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing*, that epic, controversial attempt to merge Gaelic, English, and all kinds of other texts? Might we find Mercier's fingerprints not only on critical texts and collections, but even on creative, primary ones—the wonderful Gaelic poems of Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill, for example, recomposed in English on facing pages by such fellow poets as Paul Muldoon and Michael Hartnett? Our habit is to move from literary, “primary” sources to critical, “secondary” sources, but *The Irish Comic Tradition* is a critical book that marked not only the scholarly, but also the creative Irish writing that came after it. It is thus a “secondary” book that became primary. *The Irish Comic Tradition* was more than historically significant. Vivian Mercier remains, still today, key to our undertakings. As Kiberd puts it, “we are all still learning how to be his contemporaries.”<sup>17</sup>

Among those contemporaries are the three distinguished authors whose essays I am pleased to introduce. The poet Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin, the daughter of Eilís Dillon and the stepdaughter of Vivian Mercier, offers here a lovely and perceptive tribute to Mercier and his work, emphasizing his distinctive insights, personality, and attachment to books. Anthony Roche, Mercier's student in Santa Barbara and now an important literary scholar in Dublin, likewise attests memorably to the character and impact of his mentor, underscoring his unique combination of challenging scholarly rigor and supportive personal attention. Patrick O'Sullivan, scholar and authority on the Irish diaspora, vividly recounts how, when he came across it in the Liverpool public library soon after its first publication, *The Irish Comic Tradition* helped make it possible for him not only to see what Irish Studies could be, but also to maintain in a foreign place his own Irish identity in a deep, freshly nuanced way. These three authors draw from their own particular experiences, bringing Mercier and his classic book back to life for us. At the same time, they speak for the great many of us who are still working under Mercier's considerable shadow.

17. Kiberd, “Introduction,” p. vii.