

# THE HIDDEN TRACK

## CLOWNING ABOUT & MESSING WITH THE PAINTWORK: BOWIE, YEATS AND BECKETT

by EÓIN DEVEREUX

David Bowie, Jack B. Yeats and Samuel Beckett were rule-breakers who shared many similar thematic concerns in their work. Bowie's nexus with Yeats and Beckett is based on a shared interest in German Expressionism, modernism and surrealism, but, most tellingly, it is the figure of the clown that connects all three. Yeats painted numerous clowns (e.g. 'Alone' (1944); Beckett placed clowns at the centre of many of his stage plays (e.g. 'Waiting For Godot' (1954)) and Bowie performed as Pierrot the clown at several critical junctures of his career (e.g. 'Ashes to Ashes' video, 1980). For Bowie, Beckett and Yeats, the clown functions as an avatar for the outsider artist and the human condition, more generally (for an elaboration on the Bowie/Pierrot relationship see Devereux, Dillane and Power, 2018 and Dillane, Devereux and Power, 2015).

In using clowns, Bowie, Beckett and Yeats may be seen as a continuation of a much older clowning tradition that can be traced back to the *commedia dell'arte* in Sixteenth-Century Italy, and which subsequently surfaced in dramatic forms across the continent, from Italy to Spain and from France to England in particular. As Pierrot, (Pierre or Little Peter) clowns manifested themselves in variety of guises - as sad, love-lorn buffoons, as funny tricksters and occasionally as evil. Black-hatted Sea-Side Pierrots, for example, were familiar to French and English audiences in the late Nineteenth Century and were widely associated with storylines concerning murder and killing. Pierrot, in his darker and more menacing guise was, in turn, appropriated by the Expressionists.

Writing about David Bowie's influences and his use of same presents us with a challenging task. Bowie was, all at once, a polyglot engaged with the Avant-Garde; a genius and a trickster who adopted and performed through various personae and by masquerade. (Putting it more accurately, David Jones performed as David Bowie, who in turn expressed himself creatively through a series of changing identities, e.g. Ziggy; Major Tom; the Thin White Duke, Pierrot and 'straight' David Bowie).

As a songwriter; writer; essayist; performer; recording artist; music producer; actor; film producer and painter, Bowie drew from a very wide palette of influences including Buddhism; German Expressionism; Surrealism; Dadaism; Kabuki; Philosophy; Occultism; Communications Theory; Mime; Oriental Culture and Jungian Psychology. Bowie's many strengths included his ability to divine and synthesize complex ideas from these and other sources, but also not reveal too much as to their actual origins when they surfaced in his art. His capacity to obfuscate – to mess with the paintwork - was highly effective, but it's possible, through a close critical reading of his work, to trace at least some of his influences, creative practices and recurring key thematic concerns.

So, what of Bowie's cultural connections with Ireland? Bowie's more general interest in Irish writing is evidenced in his decision to list Spike Milligan's *Puckoon* (1963) as one of his *One Hundred Favourite Books* in 2013. A phrase most associated with the satirist Myles Na Gopaleen – 'Tá Sé Mahogany Gaspipé' – was included in Bowie's attempts at on-stage banter through Irish at the Point Depot, Dublin, in November 2003. Samuel Beckett's father William's alleged last words 'What a morning' are cited by Bowie in the song 'Law (Earthlings on Fire)' on his 1997 album *Earthling*. In the same year, Bowie noted a parallel between his then current hairstyle and Beckett's on a BBC radio interview celebrating his 50th Birthday. In one of his last creative endeavors before his death, in January 2016, Bowie collaborated with the noted Irish playwright Enda Walsh to create the musical *Lazarus*.

Strongly influenced by German Expressionism and the work of Erich Heckel, in particular, David Bowie was a formidable and productive painter in his own right. Bowie's extensive personal art collection included paintings by Irish artists Colin Middleton ('Shipyard Family'), Louis Le Brocqy ('James Joyce's Head') and Jack B. Yeats ('Sleep Sound'). Bowie bought 'Sleep Sound' for £45,500 from Sothebys in 1993. With its title (presumably) referencing a line from William Butler Yeats' poem 'Lullaby' (1933) – 'Beloved, may your sleep be sound', it was painted in 1955, two years before Jack B. Yeats' death.

Bowie's interest in Yeats was an important focal point, when discussing his 1999 album *Hours* with the journalist, musician and poet Eamon Carr. Given Bowie's practice of covering his tracks, somewhat unusually, he stated: 'There's something about the life and death motifs in his (Jack B. Yeats) work that maybe are not dissimilar. Just to have that kind of work around me, I find, influences me tremendously.' When Carr asked him to propose a visual analogy between the songs on *Hours* (which aimed in Bowie's words 'to capture a kind of universal angst felt by many people of my age.') he suggested Yeats. Bowie said: 'I have a painting of his [referring to 'Sleep Sound'] of two bums lying on a hillside, sleeping. The apocryphal story is that it was one of the paintings which influenced Samuel Beckett when he was writing *Waiting For Godot*, which I'd love to believe.' Beckett's widely documented admiration for and friendship with Jack B. Yeats may have contributed to the emergence of this myth, (Beckett bought Yeats' painting 'A Morning', in 1936, and gradually paid for it by instalments) but Bowie was correct to describe the reported connection between the painting and Beckett as apocryphal. The writing of *En Attendant Godot*, was completed by January 1949 and the play premiered four years later in Paris - two years before Yeats painted 'Sleep Sound.'

There are some interesting parallels between Jack B. Yeats and David Bowie. Both were strong proponents of Expressionism. Yeats befriended the Austrian Expressionist Oskar Kokoschka who spent time in Ireland in the late 1920s and during World War 2. Bowie's interest in this movement is evidenced not only in his many paintings (including his self-portraits) but also in the colour, texture and landscapes used in his album artwork and promotional videos.

Like Bowie and Beckett, Yeats worked across a number of artistic genres. He was a set-designer, playwright and experimental novelist (e.g. *The Careless Flower*, *The Amaranthers*). Similarly, Yeats had more than one identity. He used the pseudonym 'W. Bird' (presumably because of political sensitivities) when working as a cartoonist for *Punch Magazine*.

Yeats was an advocate of outsider art and Bowie seems to have been particularly taken with the modernist and expressionist phases of that characterized the final years of his career. It is also noteworthy that both Yeats and Bowie self-referenced themselves in their art. Yeats appeared in many of his own paintings, while Bowie regularly referenced his past selves in his creative work. Over seven decades, Yeats' work was focused on the themes of migration; mental illness; alienation loneliness; political and social change - themes not too far removed from Bowie's own recurring concerns.

In common with other European painters, circuses and clowns also feature heavily in his work e.g. 'The Clown Amongst The People' (1928) and 'Johnny Patterson Singing Bridget Donaghue' (AKA 'The Singing Clown'), (1932). In his latter phase, Yeats repeatedly painted clowns and circuses as a way of examining the role of the alienated artist in society and to explore themes such as the Holocaust and the mass migration of Jewish and other refugees in the wake of World War 2.

An interest in clowns, mime and mortality bind Bowie and Beckett. Bowie was a fan of the famous actor and clown Buster Keaton for whom Beckett wrote his only cinematic offering 'Film' (1965). Like Bowie, Samuel Beckett was no stranger to using clowns in order to stress the binary relationship between comedy and tragedy and the very absurdity of human existence. The 1985 German television version of Beckett's final short (and overtly political) play *What, Where* (1983) features the lit faces of four characters who are reputed to be based on Russian Clowns. There are remarkable similarities between this version of *What, Where* and two promotional videos made for Bowie's songs 'Where Are We Now?' and 'Love Is Lost' (2013).

Bowie's self-directed video for 'Love Is Lost' is of particular interest. While in the past, Bowie 'performed' as Pierrot, most notably in the video for *Ashes to Ashes* (1980) and in the artwork used to promote the album *Scary Monsters* (1980) in *Love is Lost*, something of greater significance occurs. Here, his use of Pierrot (including the merging of Bowie and Pierrot) with its rehearsal of the key elements of the 'Pierrot in Turquoise' (1967) storyline, suggests that the song is about killing, murder, violence, and guilt. Is Bowie killing off his earlier personae? By positioning Pierrot and a merged Pierrot/Bowie centre-stage, the video allows the 'real' Bowie to sing the truth about his pasts. The 'Lunatic Men' referred to in the song's lyrics (the Black Pierrot and the Thin White Duke) allow for secrets to be unveiled and purged (for example Bowie's Nazi Salute expressed during his cocaine-addled Thin White Duke manifestation and his 1976 comments to *Playboy Magazine* that he believed "...very strongly in fascism..." and "Adolf Hitler was the first rock star"). Bowie uses two versions of the Pierrot clown. The Pierrot we are already familiar with from 'Ashes to Ashes' (1980) and a more sinister Pierrot - redolent of the more macabre Seaside Pierrot - who wears a black conical shaped hat - to signify murder.

Beckett's influence on Bowie is most apparent in the closing chapter of his career. Bowie's relative silence and the way in which he managed to retain his privacy when recording *The Next Day* and *Blackstar* was strikingly similar to how Beckett conducted his creative life.

The surprise video for 'Where Are We Now?' (2013) directed by Tony Oursler with its strange conjoined two-headed figure (which had originally been used as a showcase piece in an exhibition for Bowie's 50th Birthday in 1997), set amongst the detritus of an artist's studio, sees Bowie 'walking the dead' in an attempt to put old ghosts to rest from the highly productive Berlin phase of his career. Apart from the feelings of joy that Bowie was recording again, my immediate reaction to the song was to think of Samuel Beckett. Here was Bowie singing with a maturity about growing old, saying goodbye to some of his pasts and facing up to his mortality. The two-headed male/female figure; the scattered debris and video screen showing footage from key points of interest from Bowie's Berlin past all suggested the spectre of Beckett. Like a Yeats painting, the 'real' David Bowie also appears fleetingly as an observer.

If there were allusions to Beckett in *The Next Day* (2013), the parallels with Beckett were even more apparent in Bowie's final record *Blackstar* (2016). Beckett's final prose piece *Stirrings Still* (1988) was not unlike a Bowie video, it features a man in a cell-like room who is fleetingly visited by his double. He revisits his past and contemplates whether he has a future or not. Writing in *The New Yorker*, Ben Greenman noted how *Blackstar* reminded him of 'What Is The Word' the last poem said to be written by Samuel Beckett. By then, nursing home bound, Beckett undertook the work from his sick-bed. However, Beckett, like Bowie, was in fact revisiting old ground in that his 'final' poem was a translation of his 'Comment Dire' (1982) and, in doing so, in Greenman's words 'The inexpressible is expressed twice, one the echo of the other, emptiness mirroring emptiness.' Bowie's stoicism and determination to go on in spite of chronic illness best evidenced in the video for 'Lazarus' (2016). Not unlike *Stirrings Still* the video's protagonist, who is mainly bed bound, but occasionally seen writing at a desk, is located in a tiled cell-like room. In case of life imitating art (Beckett's "You must go on. I can't go on. I'll go on") Bowie was dogged in his determination to record *Blackstar*, complete the musical *Lazarus* and to record two highly sophisticated promotional videos for the songs 'Lazarus' and 'Blackstar'. In doing so, he managed to turn his imminent death into a work of art in its own right, something that Yeats and Beckett would have been very proud of.

### References:

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