

Introduction: Beckett, Ireland, and the Postcolonial Novel

From this place nineteen years ago the Republic of Ireland was proclaimed. This was the scene of an event which will ever be counted an epoch in our history – the beginning of one of Ireland’s most glorious and sustained efforts for independence. It has been a reproach to us that the spot has remained so long unmarked. To-day we remove the reproach. All who enter this hall henceforth will be reminded of the deed enacted here. A beautiful piece of sculpture, the creation of Irish genius, symbolising the dauntless courage and abiding constancy of our people, will commemorate it modestly, indeed, but fittingly.

(Eamon de Valera’s dedication of the Cuchulain statue at the Dublin GPO)

In Dublin ... Neary ... was recognized by a former pupil called Wylie, in the General Post Office, contemplating from behind the statue of Cuchulain. Neary had bared his head, as though the holy ground meant something to him. Suddenly he flung aside his hat, sprang forward, seized the dying hero by the thighs and began to dash his head against his buttocks, such as they are. The Civic Guard on duty in the building, roused from a tender reverie by the sound of blows, took in the situation at his leisure, disentangled his baton and advanced with measured tread, thinking he had caught a vandal in the act.

(Samuel Beckett’s *Murphy*)

On April 21, 1935, Irish Prime Minister Eamon de Valera commemorated the nineteenth anniversary of the Easter Rising by dedicating a statue of the mythic hero Cuchulain at the Dublin General Post Office, where the Irish rebels had proclaimed their country’s independence from British rule and made their courageous but ill-fated stand. De Valera’s speech had been preceded by an elaborate military procession of nearly 7,000 Irish Regulars and Volunteer forces, including some 2,500 survivors of the 1916 rebellion, who marched past large crowds lining Dublin’s main thoroughfare, O’Connell Street. Following the unveiling of the statue, the masses along the street saw the largest military parade that had ever passed through the

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-11388-5 - Samuel Beckett and the Postcolonial Novel

Patrick Bixby

Excerpt

[More information](#)

2

Samuel Beckett and the Postcolonial Novel



2. *The Death of Cuchulain* (1911–12) by Oliver Sheppard. Courtesy of An Post.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-11388-5 - Samuel Beckett and the Postcolonial Novel

Patrick Bixby

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction: Beckett, Ireland, and the Postcolonial Novel*

3

city and heard the alternating reverberations of a rifle volley fired by a party of 1916 veterans, an artillery salute discharged on O'Connell Bridge, and the national anthem played by the Army bands. Offering up these tributes, de Valera sought to legitimize his post-independence regime by aligning it with not only the heroic deeds of 1916, but also the mythic heroes of Gaelic antiquity. In selecting the Cuchulain statue to honor the Easter Rising, the Irish Prime Minister called on the symbolic force generated by the greatest of the Knights of the Red Branch, whose courageous self-sacrifice had inspired the architects of the 1916 rebellion and whose name offered a timeless, metaphysical authority to the new government. What is particularly striking about de Valera's gesture, his aestheticization of politics, is its renegotiation of the terms of tradition to transform a contentious present into the signs of not just a national mythos, but a communal history. Although it takes place in the discourse of national liberation, this renegotiation threatens to repeat the ethical and political formulas of imperialism insofar as it calls on monological tropes of Irishness that provide the postcolonial community an original, unchanging identity, one that all but discounts the fractures of the contemporary moment by invoking a foundational narrative. Samuel Beckett would soon rejoin this narrative, albeit in his inimitably comical way, by setting a scene of his first published novel at the GPO, where one Mr. Neary performs his own awkward self-sacrifice on the altar of Irishness.

Beckett's General Post Office scene, written within months of de Valera's dedication, gives us a glimpse of a writer whose concerns are decidedly political as he calls into question dominant cultural values.¹ While de Valera's commemoration asserts the importance of a univocal history and authentic traditions for the newly liberated nation-state, Beckett's response protests the hazards of fetishizing essentialist identities, condemning both the uncritical celebration of the past and the homogenization of the present within an increasingly rigidified national community. It presents us instead with the image of a heterogeneous postcolonial society in which the extraordinary gesture of a one-man minority confronts, on the one hand, the symbolic deployment of a national mythology meant to silence the discord of contemporary history and, on the other hand, the last vestiges of a colonial police state that promises to forcibly interpellate the postcolonial subject. Despite its apparent futility, Neary's demonstration on the "holy ground" of the Irish Republican movement demands that no political ideologies, particularly those that would limit and enclose the postcolonial nation in archaic images of Irishness, can claim transcendent or metaphysical authority. What is perhaps most striking for readers of Beckett,

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-11388-5 - Samuel Beckett and the Postcolonial Novel

Patrick Bixby

Excerpt

[More information](#)

however, is simply the image of a man in history, an image that, when placed alongside de Valera's rhetoric, elicits a number of pressing political concerns, while it belies our assumptions about the disengaged modernist writer: when Beckett enters into dialogue with his Prime Minister, he not only disturbs those gestures by which national communities claim cultural homogeneity and historical priority, but also contests the vision of a nation-state that appears to imitate the political hegemony of the British Empire as much as to uphold the revolutionary ideals of the 1916 rebellion. Simply put, Beckett's novel invests deeply in the postcolonial circumstances from which it emerged. In so doing, the narrative challenges the very ideologies of personal and national development underpinning modernity by articulating a critical position that disrupts the integration of the individual into the coercive structures of the nation-state.

The time has come to read Beckett in these terms. Since Georg Lukács first identified his writing as the "*ne plus ultra*" of "bourgeois modernism" in 1957, the large and varied body of Beckett criticism has done relatively little to dispute his supposed status as an "ahistorical" and "apolitical" artist.² Whether critics have described the evolution of Beckett's writing as moving toward modernist psychologism or postmodernist *écriture*, they have routinely portrayed his novels as progressively relinquishing their tangential concern with social realism for an outright rejection of the external world. This critical perspective, while identifying Beckett's prose as an important contribution to twentieth-century literature, views his writing as somehow hermetically sealed – cut off from any ideological investments that would require readers to acknowledge its relevance to the historical and political, much less the postcolonial. When critics have placed Beckett's writing in conversation with other texts, it has almost always been to position him at the vanguard of modern European literature. Meanwhile, critical responses to James Joyce, W. B. Yeats, J. M. Synge, and other Irish modernists have long since begun to view their writing with an acute awareness of the political conditions in their native land, the first nation to decolonize in the twentieth century.³ Once the insights of postcolonial theory and criticism are acknowledged, Ireland's fraught modern history cannot simply be ignored, and the detachment of Beckett's writing gives way to a sense of its insistent interaction with other discourses and hence with political interests. This acknowledgment in turn raises several important questions for the present study: if Beckett's novels have been seen as striking anomalies within the canon of European literature, might this be because they enunciate an alternative response to the issues of nation, language, identity, and even humanity? If we investigate the relation of Beckett's novels to the Ireland they persistently

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-11388-5 - Samuel Beckett and the Postcolonial Novel

Patrick Bixby

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction: Beckett, Ireland, and the Postcolonial Novel*

5

address, even as the author experienced a growing sense of cultural dispossession, might we discover a postcolonial rhetoric that critically rearticulates colonial discourse? How might this postcolonial rhetoric speak to the assumptions that bolster not only a bourgeois modernism, but also a nationalism that replicates the political and cultural dominion of empire?⁴

To address these questions is to recover Beckett's novels as early examples of postcolonial writing concerned in previously unexamined ways with the legacy of British imperialism and the vicissitudes of postcolonial identity. Rather than detaching these novels from their specific historical coordinates and reading them as canonical works of literary modernism or postmodernism, *Samuel Beckett and the Postcolonial Novel* describes an emergent form of writing that complicates these ascriptions by confronting the enduring forms of colonial identification that ground essentialist nationalisms and restrict postcolonial subjectivity. In this regard, Beckett's novels bear comparison to more recent postcolonial texts in which, as Timothy Brennan writes, "the contradictory topoi of exile and nation are fused in a lament for the necessary and regrettable insistence of nation-forming," so that "the writer proclaims his identity with a country whose artificiality and exclusiveness have driven him into a kind of exile – a simultaneous recognition of nationhood and an alienation from it."⁵ In the case of Beckett's novels the conjunction of exile and the nation is particularly well marked. While the texts considered here, beginning with his long-unpublished first novel, *Dream of Fair to Middling Women* (1932; 1992), and culminating with his renowned trilogy (*Molloy*, *Malone Dies*, *The Unnamable*, 1951–53), were written during periods of residence in Ireland, England, and France, each interrogates the tropes of national belonging, each reassesses the territorial and identitarian concerns that have shaped modern Irish history. Beckett wrote the iconoclastic General Post Office scene in *Murphy*, for instance, soon after departing Dublin for London in 1935, a journey retraced by his wandering protagonist, whose life story articulates both a longing for home and a critique of calcified national identities. Considered in this light, Beckett's novels reveal themselves as remarkable examples of how postcolonial writing registers the exchanges between the inner life of individual consciousness and an outer world of public imperatives, as well as those between the self-contained space of the novel form and a discursive environment including not just the literary tradition, but also political rhetoric, painterly texts, and anthropological representations. By examining the topoi of exile and nation contrapuntally, revising the critical perception of Beckett as a determinedly isolated figure to include the historical context of Ireland, I seek to understand better not just the formal and ideological

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-11388-5 - Samuel Beckett and the Postcolonial Novel

Patrick Bixby

Excerpt

[More information](#)

significance of his narratives, but also the extent to which his work predicts, inflects, and challenges our notions of postcoloniality.⁶

When Samuel Barclay Beckett was born near Dublin in 1906, the whole of Ireland was still part of the United Kingdom as it had been since the Act of Union in 1800 – and under British rule as it had been since the English Reformation and King Henry VIII's decision to reconquer the island. The Home Rule movement had once again stalled after the split of the Home Rule Party and the death of its erstwhile leader Charles Stewart Parnell in 1891, events precipitating more than a decade of strife within the movement itself. The Irish Government Bill of 1893 had been defeated in the House of Lords and, although elections in the year of Beckett's birth produced a landslide for the Liberals, Home Rule was no longer a priority in the British Parliament. Beckett was raised in an Irish Protestant family of Huguenot lineage that belonged to an upper-middle class of businessmen and professionals remote from the Catholic mainstream of Irish culture. He grew up in Foxrock, a fashionable enclave on the outskirts of Dublin, where his childhood was one of bourgeois comfort and social respectability, largely divorced from sectarian resentments and the tormented aspirations of Home Rule. One night when Beckett was 10, however, his father took the boy and his brother up Glencullen Road to a vantage point from which to view the city ablaze in the aftermath of the Easter Rising. It was an image that was to remain deeply etched in his mind. Sent off a few years later to be educated at the Portora Royal School near Enniskillen, County Fermanagh, Ulster, Beckett was residing in one of the six counties that were cordoned off and rechristened Northern Ireland as a result of the 1921 Anglo-Irish Treaty. As his biographer James Knowlson suggests, the young man could not have but discerned the ongoing violence on both sides of the partition as he returned home to the Free State for holidays and saw the British troops stationed at the newly drawn border.⁷ If Beckett was largely isolated from such images as an undergraduate at Trinity College, Dublin's Protestant university, he nonetheless developed a political conscience that was rather glibly summed up by his professor and mentor, Thomas Rudmose-Brown, who described his protégé as "a great enemy of imperialism, patriotism and all the churches."⁸ The young man's impatience with the stifling inheritance of British imperialism and the conservative ethos of the new state accompanied him abroad to France, where he spent a year tutoring at the École Normale, and to England, where he joined many other down-and-out migrants looking for opportunity at the depths of the Great Depression.

Although Beckett essentially left Ireland for good in the 1930s, and although his career first flourished in the artistic circles of Paris, his literary

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-11388-5 - Samuel Beckett and the Postcolonial Novel

Patrick Bixby

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction: Beckett, Ireland, and the Postcolonial Novel*

7

imagination never strayed far from his native land. He shared this preoccupation with James Joyce, with whom he became friends during his first visit to Paris in the late twenties and whom he continued to visit until the older writer's death. Living in the cosmopolitan atmosphere of Paris between the wars, where Surrealism and the avant-garde reigned, the expatriates might have found it easy to forget Ireland or, at least, to exclude it from their art, but the problem of "home" remained central to the work of both Irishmen. Whatever its other imaginative investments, Beckett's early writing is grounded in the social and cultural circumstances of the Irish Free State, with its conservatism, Catholicism, and history of colonialism. His first protagonists, Belacqua and Murphy, find themselves estranged from a society that had ceased to heed its revolutionary calling and had instead become increasingly restrictive, so that – like Joyce's Stephen Dedalus before them – each must abandon Ireland in the hope of being "set ... free in his mind."⁹ With the events of the Second World War and Beckett's involvement with the French Resistance, the willing exile only grew more disenchanted with his homeland since he could not abide its neutrality as he saw the world around him crumbling. While his postwar texts have often been identified with a kind of existential void, where identifiable cultural and historical markers have been elided, they continue to explore the exigencies of Irishness by revisiting the "old scenes" of his homeland and reworking them from the perspective of dispossession. Consider Beckett's allusion in *Mercier and Camier* (1946; 1970) to Noel LeMass, captain of an IRA Brigade, "who died that the Republic might live," or his reference in *Malone Dies* to the Lord Mayor of Cork, who perished in a hunger strike for the Home Rule cause, or, more faintly but no less insistently, the nostalgic Irish voices of his late prose and drama. If Beckett could be claimed by both Ireland and France upon his receipt of the Nobel Prize in 1969, our recognition of his achievement should obscure neither his critique of nationalism nor his denunciation of empire behind a veil of cosmopolitan modernism or mystified humanism. It is the aim of the present study, rather, to reveal his ambivalent yet ongoing engagement with the role of cultural nationalism, with the material and discursive aftermath of colonialism, and with the production of alternative forms of identity which makes his writing integral to the study of postcolonial literature and culture.

The central concerns of Beckett's fiction and the trajectory of its development should be understood in relation to the cultural and political context of decolonization as a postcolonial people confront the legacy of colonialism, often rearticulated in the chauvinism and insularity of their cultural nationalism. It is a testament to the value of this perspective that it can illuminate the

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-11388-5 - Samuel Beckett and the Postcolonial Novel

Patrick Bixby

Excerpt

[More information](#)

relation of Beckett's writing to the history of the novel and to the history of literary modernism, as well. Take, for instance, his notorious fascination with the theme of failure (his most succinct formulation was simply, "I'm not interested in stories of success, only failure")¹⁰ which subverts the narratives of identification that ground both the modern nation-state and the *Bildungsroman* or "novel of formation": from his earliest forays into the novel genre, Beckett rewrites the plot of the *Bildungsroman* so that narrative is directed less toward successful individual development and social assimilation than toward the cancellation of these terms, which are written ever further into dissolution and disintegration. Beckett's protagonists, from Belacqua and Murphy to Malone and Mahood, pursue identity through all manner of means – failed vocations, failed love affairs, failed maternal connections, failed relations with the Other – but above all through failed attempts to "express themselves," to place their identities securely in some fixed and reliable linguistic formulation. Beckett's celebrated formal experimentation fragments the developmental narratives associated with both imperialism and nationalism and thus refuses to reterritorialize or reauthenticate the dislocated identities of postcolonial subjects. While his writing is indispensable to understanding the fate of literary modernism for this very reason, it finally belies those features of modernism deemed either narrowly formalist or fixated on individual psychology. To be sure, Beckett's fiction has been vulnerable to these very assumptions, as has been amply demonstrated in the critical response to his work, but such readings have only occluded the suppressed histories and signs of cultural difference that persist even in his most minimalist prose. Acknowledgment of the role these elements play in producing the formal and thematic ruptures in his writing defies, in turn, any myopic vision of a modernist obsession with privatized subjectivity, while rejecting the facile labels of "ahistorical" and "apolitical." For Beckett's narratives of failure serve to successfully critique both canonical literary forms and canonical forms of identity, a critique that extends to the assumptions that support the autonomy of the bourgeois individual and the authority of the bourgeois nation-state. It is this critical capacity, moreover, that links Beckett's novels with those of celebrated postcolonial writers such as George Lamming, Salman Rushdie, and Nuruddin Farah, whose experiments with the form have contested universalizing notions of individual and national development.

BECKETT AND IRISH HISTORY

The Irish Free State which took hold after independence in 1922 has often been seen as failing utterly to live up to the promise of the revolution that

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-11388-5 - Samuel Beckett and the Postcolonial Novel

Patrick Bixby

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction: Beckett, Ireland, and the Postcolonial Novel*

9

helped give it birth. No doubt the new state faced a number of daunting challenges: coming to terms with the British government, quelling the tensions that had led to civil war, dismantling a large militia, establishing an Irish civil administration, and managing the partition of the country. Not least, the new government sought to legitimize itself as the unifying force for a nation that had suffered fragmentation not just during the recent civil war, but during more than 700 years of British occupation. It is perhaps all the more disappointing, then, that the administrators of the new state seemed to lack a liberatory postcolonial vision. In their single-minded focus on social and political stability, they adopted almost wholesale the institutions of the former colonizing power and perpetuated its legacy of schools, jails, courts, and asylums. Meanwhile, the dynamic cultural nationalism of the pre-independence period was increasingly co-opted by the state, which wasted little time in legislating the monolithic image of a Catholic and Gaelic Ireland into existence. Promptly establishing itself as the official ideology of the nation, this brand of neo-traditionalism represented a failure of the national imagination insofar as it transformed revolutionary energies into a cultural hegemony that in many ways repeated the restrictions of the previous imperial administration. The heroic will so evident in the architects of the Easter Rising and the figures of Gaelic mythology had been relegated to the service of consolidating political power and constructing a stable citizenry. By the end of the 1920s the new state had expanded its bureaucratic and judicial functions in the service of largely rural and Catholic social values, intervening in the realms of divorce, contraception, and censorship. The rise to power of de Valera and his Fianna Fáil Party in 1932 only bolstered this conservative agenda with sentimental appeals to the charms of Gaelic Ireland and the moral mission of Catholicism, calls which exempted the nation from participation in the profane modern world, despite the pressing realities of social discontent, economic stagnation, and unchecked emigration. Ireland, in the eyes of many, seemed a model of insularity that was at least as repressive as the regime that it had thrown off – and remained so well into the 1960s.

If a decolonizing nationalism had once served Ireland as an effective means of resistance to British dominion, resulting in political independence for the island's southern twenty-six counties, the state-centered nationalism dominant after independence inclined toward the status of a restrictive ideological authority. In the late colonial period, cultural forces such as the Irish Ireland movement brought together myths of cultural purity, common heritage, and collective rootedness in particular territories; in the early postcolonial period, cultural nationalists sought, perhaps even

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-11388-5 - Samuel Beckett and the Postcolonial Novel

Patrick Bixby

Excerpt

[More information](#)

more forcefully, to redeem these myths by ridding them of the taint of colonialism and resurrecting an authentic Irishness in the name of a fully independent people. But, in the event, this ideal was to be achieved by a state-sponsored pedagogical culture eager to protect Ireland from the impure influences of the modern world in general and Great Britain in particular, effectively cordoning off the traditions of national culture and limiting the forms of national belonging. In the ten years following independence, the nascent state undertook to suppress those cultural influences that might impinge on its vision of Irishness: the 1923 Censorship of Films Act created a film censor with the authority to edit or even refuse a license to films that were deemed “subversive to public morality,” and the 1929 Censorship of Publications Act established a five-member censorship board to prohibit the sale and distribution of any periodical or book judged “in its general tendency indecent or obscene” or, for that matter, in support of birth control. While many other nations were observing new obscenity laws in the twenties and thirties, the nationalist motives in the Irish case are clear. It was in such legislation, Terence Brown has argued, that “the interests of those who sought censorship from moralistic impulses alone and the interests of those, like the Irish Irelanders, who desired cultural protectionism, met and often overlapped,” so that those “authors whose work might encounter moral disapproval could also be suspected of a lack of national authenticity.”¹¹ What is more, the measures betray a political consciousness that has been the fate of many postcolonial regimes caught up in both a triumphant nationalism and a mounting isolationism in the early stages of independence as they attempt to regulate the forms in which the narrative of the newly sovereign nation can be articulated.

Although Beckett has long been seen as a rather laconic figure in relation to Irish politics and society, he responded directly to these troubling developments in his early critical and occasional writings. While still a student at Trinity, he published “Che Scigura” (1929), a mock-Socratic dialogue which satirizes the Irish ban on contraceptives by reiterating the eunuch’s lament in Voltaire’s *Candide*, “what a misfortune to be without balls.” Written in riposte to the recommendations of the Committee for Enquiry into Evil Literature, this rather arcane bit of burlesque also attacks the Catholic Truth Society (CTS), which had organized public demand for the Censorship Bill and its provisions against the sale and advertising of contraceptives. To protect the supposedly distinctive Irish way of religious life and practice that was an essential component of national identity, the CTS had even printed up a pamphlet with a series of recommendations to the Committee. It is in this context that the declarations of Beckett’s unnamed speakers take on