

1 Introduction

When, after repeated frustrations and disappointments, Samuel Beckett's novel *Murphy* was finally published, on 7 March 1938, one might reasonably have anticipated that his reaction would have been a combination of pleasure and relief. After all, not only had this thirty-one-year-old writer's first completed novel, *Dream of Fair to Middling Women*, been roundly rejected by publishers six years earlier, but the number of publishing houses to have also turned down *Murphy* was considerable, as Beckett's own personal list of rejections testifies.¹ And yet, on receiving his author's copies of the book from George Routledge & Sons, Beckett immediately dispatched a letter to his close friend Thomas MacGreevy,² lamenting the colours chosen by the publisher for the book's dustjacket, which, he observed, was 'All green white & yellow'. These were, of course, the colours of the national flag of Ireland, which, following a referendum in July 1937, had in December of that year adopted a new constitution as Éire, replacing the former Saorstát Éireann (Irish Free State). Both the novel's title and the author's name were printed in green on the dustjacket, underlain by a large yellow 'R' for Routledge on a white base. Beckett's conclusion was that the publishers were evidently doing 'their best, and not merely with the blurbs, to turn me into an Irishman' (Beckett, 2009g, 611 n. 1). And, as it happens, he was being presented in that blurb not just as one more Irishman, but as an 'Irish genius'.

Almost a decade earlier, Beckett had opened his first published work – an essay on James Joyce's then 'Work in Progress', published in 1939 under the title *Finnegans Wake* – with a laconic warning: 'The danger is in the neatness of identifications' (Beckett, 1983, 19). That warning bears upon the subsequent sixty years of Beckett's writing life, and it has generally been heeded by commentators on his work, seeking, as they have, for the most part to place the emphasis on failures of identification and the experience of unknowing. And yet, in 1938, Beckett's London publisher was clearly attempting to highlight the author's national identity, and with that a cultural identity as well. In this endeavour, Routledge would prove to be far from alone. For, no matter where one looks, be it in encyclopaedias or the biographical notes often included in editions of his works, among the first things that one learns about Samuel

¹ The publishers who rejected *Murphy* included Chatto & Windus (who had published both *Proust* and *More Pricks than Kicks*), Heinemann, Houghton Mifflin, Dent, Cobden-Sanderson, Constable, and Lovat Dickson. Routledge's decision to publish the novel was in part owing to the intervention of Beckett's friend the painter Jack B. Yeats, who recommended it to Routledge in November 1937. As we shall see, Yeats's paintings would come to play a significant role in the articulation of Beckett's views on cultural nationalism.

² The poet and art critic Thomas McGreevy (1893–1967) changed the spelling of his surname to MacGreevy in 1943. In the present book, it is spelled MacGreevy throughout.

Beckett is that he was not just a writer, but an *Irish* writer. Today, for instance, the street named after Beckett in Paris's fourteenth arrondissement, in which he lived from 1960 until his death in 1989, identifies him as an '*écrivain irlandais*'. A rare exception to this tendency is the English Heritage blue plaque on 48 Paultons Square, an attractive Georgian terraced house in Chelsea, London, where Beckett lived for seven months, from January to July 1934, before relocating in early August 1934 to a house in Gertrude Street in the same part of London, where he began work on *Murphy* a year later, on 26 August 1935. Unlike the sign in Paris, the plaque in London identifies Beckett simply as a 'Dramatist and Author', with no national ascription. That said, the proximity to his name of the words 'English Heritage' might lead the casual observer to imagine that Beckett was in fact an *English* writer. That impression is only strengthened by the other blue plaque on the same house front, which commemorates the physicist Patrick Blackett. Like Beckett, Blackett was a Nobel Prize winner (in Blackett's case for Physics, in 1948), and he lived in the house in Paultons Square from 1953 to 1969. He was born and died in London.

There is, of course, nothing surprising in the fact that Beckett should have so often been identified as an Irish writer or, as Routledge would have it, an Irish genius. After all, he was born in Ireland, on 13 April 1906, and he would hold Irish citizenship until his death. For all his interest in the experience of ignorance and uncertainty, Beckett's Irish nationality would seem to belong to the kind of facts for which the narrator of his first novel, *Dream of Fair to Middling Women*, calls so stridently: 'Facts, we cannot repeat it too often, let us have facts, plenty of facts' (Beckett, 1992, 74). And yet, in another letter to MacGreevy, written on 31 January 1938, shortly after what would prove to be his permanent remove from Ireland to France in December 1937, Beckett remarked that he suffered from a 'chronic inability to understand as member of any proposition a phrase like "the Irish people"' (Beckett, 2009g, 599). Here, Beckett's philosophical nominalism clearly had political implications. If, for him, the idea of the Irish people was quite simply unintelligible, what could it possibly mean to describe him as a member of that people?

As it happens, Beckett himself reflected on that very question. In May 1964, for instance, in response to an enquiry from the Hungarian publishing house Európa Könyvkiadó, he wrote: 'As a writer I have no national attachment. I am an Irishman (Irish passport) living in France for the past 27 years who has written part of his work in English and part in French' (Beckett, 2014, 601). He was clearly seeking here to distinguish between himself as a politically and legally determined person – technically, an Irish citizen – on the one hand, and as a writer on the other. It was in the latter capacity that he considered himself to have no national attachment. Thus, while it might be legitimate to identify

Beckett as Irish, it would not be justifiable to describe him as an Irish *writer*, since as a writer he accepted no such national affiliation.

The crucial importance of this distinction between Beckett the citizen and Beckett the writer is evident when one turns to the statement that he made in the mid-1950s in his brief homage to the work of his friend the writer and painter Jack B. Yeats (1871–1957). There, Beckett declared laconically that ‘The artist who stakes his being is from nowhere, has no kith’ (Beckett, 1983, 149). It goes without saying that, for Beckett, the genuine artist, the only one worthy of the name, did indeed stake his or her being, and that therefore no genuine writer’s work should ever be considered in terms of any ‘national attachment’. To try to make sense of an artist’s oeuvre by situating it within a national-cultural context was, for Beckett, utterly misguided, based as it was on a profound misunderstanding of the nature of art.

Beckett’s insistence on the separation of the artist from any such national affiliation lay at the heart of his view that art and literature are also completely at odds with any form of cultural nationalism. Art, for him, could never be the expression of the spirit of a particular national culture, any more than the knowledge of a national-cultural context could help to cast light on the meaning of a work of art. Indeed, the artist was, for Beckett, someone who had freed him- or herself from all such national-cultural contexts. Art and cultural nationalism were thus, in his view, two entirely unrelated phenomena. Any form of art that sought to be the expression of a national culture, or to articulate a form of cultural nationalism, was betraying the very idea of art as Beckett understood it. This was a view that he took very early in, and maintained throughout, his writing life. His first-hand experience of the violence and destruction wrought by nationalism across Europe did nothing to weaken his conviction that genuine art is never the expression of, and should never be understood in terms of, a national culture.

What led Beckett to take this position on art’s relation (or, more precisely, its non-relation) to national cultures and to cultural nationalism? And what were the implications of that position for his own work? In order to begin to answer those questions, it is first necessary to reflect briefly on the origins of the idea of cultural nationalism against which Beckett was reacting, and the role it had played both in aesthetics and in politics prior to his emergence as a writer in the early 1930s. As we shall see, establishing and then maintaining his detachment from the forces of cultural nationalism was to be far from a simple matter, particularly in an age largely dominated, as Beckett’s was, by the ideology of cultural nationalism.

Unlike cosmopolitanism or even patriotism, nationalism is a distinctly modern phenomenon. As Benedict Anderson observes, the age of nationalism began

in the eighteenth century, in Western Europe, at a time when religious modes of thought were on the wane. Nationalism offered a new kind of ‘imagined community’. The nation was an *imagined* community because its members would never have any personal contact with the vast majority of other members of the nation, although they would feel bound to one another in a collective endeavour. It was also *limited* in the sense that nations were defined in relation to other nations, with no nation conceiving of itself as the nation of humanity as a whole. It was thus intrinsically antagonistic. And it was *sovereign* in the sense that it broke with any ‘divinely-ordained, hierarchical dynastic realm’ (Anderson, 2016, 6–7). In its origins, nationalism was not necessarily racialist, but it did insist upon a unified culture and a national language.

To place the emphasis squarely upon the manner in which a new ideology of nationalism constituted a break with a dynastic model of communities, however, is to miss the fact that nationalism, and in particular cultural nationalism, was largely a counter-reaction to the cosmopolitan universalism of the French Enlightenment. The great theorists of the nation-state, and the champions of national cultures, were, for the most part, challenging the Enlightenment idea of the human, one that was, to be sure, profoundly Eurocentric and Euro-supremacist, but that appealed to universal values and universal characteristics.

Unlike nationalism, cosmopolitanism was anything but a child of the eighteenth century. Its roots lay in ancient Greece and Rome. It is present in Cicero’s *Tusculan Disputations* (c. 45 BCE), for instance, when he quotes the Roman tragedian Marcus Pacuvius (220–130 BCE): ‘One’s country is wherever one does well’ (*Patria est, ubicumque est bene*) (Cicero, 1945, 532–3). Cicero proceeds to remind his readers that, when asked to which country he belonged, Socrates answered: “‘To the world,” for he regarded himself as a native and citizen of the whole world’ (533–5). It was to this ancient conception of the cosmopolitan, confined to and identified with no particular locale, that mid-eighteenth-century writers, above all in France, returned. Among the first writers of the period to engage with the theme was Louis-Charles Fougeret de Monbron (1706–60), in his *The Cosmopolitan, or the Citizen of the World* (1750). Monbron’s debt to an ancient idea is evident in his choice of the line from Cicero as his epigraph – *Patria est, ubicumque est bene*. As someone who had travelled widely across Europe, Monbron advocated the cosmopolitan experience as the one best suited to the true understanding of the world. ‘The universe is a kind of book’, he declared, ‘of which one has read only the first page when one has seen only one’s own country’. That said, the knowledge to be gleaned from this cosmopolitan life was that all countries were ‘almost equally bad’ (Monbron, 2010, 1). Ultimately, the lesson of a cosmopolitan lifestyle was that one might as well stay put.

Voltaire's advocacy of cosmopolitanism was considerably less cynical, even if his best-known work today, *Candide* (1759), ends with a conclusion that would have appealed to Monbrun. Having suffered in various parts of the world, Candide and his 'little society' settle down on a 'little farm', where they duly cultivate their garden (Voltaire, 2005, 93). The emphasis upon 'little' here stands in clear counterpoint to the sweepingly cosmopolitan adventures that precede this retreat. In fact, Voltaire was among the greatest champions of cosmopolitanism during the Enlightenment, albeit one that was profoundly Eurocentric in nature, to the extent that it might more accurately be termed Europoliticism, and even Western Europoliticism. In a letter written in 1767, for instance, he declared that Europe was becoming a 'great republic of cultivated minds' (cited in Rougemont, 1966, 148).³ That republic was transnational and translingual.

In the second half of the eighteenth century, Europe's intellectual elite increasingly saw themselves as inhabiting a space above and beyond any nation-state or particular national culture. In his *Journal of a Tour to the Hebrides* (1785), for instance, Samuel Johnson's biographer, James Boswell, described himself as 'completely a citizen of the world', someone who, in his travels across Europe, 'never felt myself from home' (Boswell, 1958, 6). As for Johnson himself, he is famously recorded in Boswell's *Life of Johnson* (1791) as having considered 'patriotism' to be 'the last refuge of a scoundrel' (Boswell, 1980, 615). Boswell went on to clarify, however, that the patriotism that was being disparaged here was not the kind characterized by a 'real and generous love of our country'; rather, it was 'that pretended patriotism which so many, in all ages and countries, have made a cloak for self-interest' (615). That distinction does not quite have the force to neutralize an apparent contradiction in Johnson's cosmopolitanism, reflected in his view that 'all nations but his own' were 'barbarians' (Boswell, 1958, 6). In addition to highlighting a contradiction at the heart of the cosmopolitan mentality that was far from being limited to Johnson, Boswell's remarks also help to show how the conception of nationalism would evolve out of that of patriotism within the new, late-eighteenth-century context of nation-statism.

Jean-Jacques Rousseau was another major writer of the period to remark upon the disappearance of national characteristics in a new cosmopolitan European space. 'There are', he asserted, 'no more Frenchmen, Germans, Spaniards, even Englishmen, nowadays, regardless of what people may say; there are only Europeans. All have the same tastes, the same passions, the same

³ On Enlightenment cosmopolitanism, see Robertson (2020, ch. 12). On its Eurocentrism, see, for instance, Weller (2021, ch. 2).

morals, because none has been given a national form by a distinctive institution' (Rousseau, 1997, 184). Unlike Voltaire or Boswell, however, Rousseau was far from being an advocate of this absence of national-cultural characteristics. Indeed, in his reflections on the formation of a Polish government, he argued forcefully that Poland should not follow the model of the Western European nations, where there was, in his view, an ever greater 'general European tendency to adopt the tastes and morals of the French', the result being forms of national-cultural degeneration (185).

Rousseau's critique of Enlightenment cosmopolitanism was to exert a considerable influence on German thinkers of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, among whom Johann Gottfried Herder and Johann Gottlieb Fichte would in due course be particularly influential. Taking their inspiration in part from Rousseau, these counter-French Enlightenment German intellectuals introduced concepts such as the 'spirit of the nation' (*Nationalgeist*), the 'spirit of the people' (*Geist des Volkes*), the 'soul of the people' (*Seele des Volkes*), and the 'genius of the people' (*Genius des Volkes*) into both philosophical and political discourse. In his widely read *Ideas on the Philosophy of the History of Humanity* (1784–91), Herder argued that 'every nation is one people, having its own national form, as well as its own language'. Each nation had what he termed its 'original national character', this being something that could be destroyed and that thus needed to be nurtured and protected (Herder, 1800, 166). According to Herder, the culture produced by each nation was distinguished by this original national character, and no work of art could be understood unless it was considered within the context of that national culture. His long essay on Shakespeare was an attempt to demonstrate precisely this point. The abstract universalism of the French Enlightenment, in which all such national-cultural differences were dissolved, was anathema to Herder, as it was to those German Romantic thinkers who followed in his wake, including the Schlegel brothers. One of the things that they, like Rousseau, had rightly detected in French Enlightenment cosmopolitanism was that beneath its universalist veneer lay a privileging of French culture and the French language. In other words, such cosmopolitanism was, in no small part, a form of French cultural imperialism.

Among the most strident articulations of the emerging cultural nationalism in the wake of the French Revolution and the Napoleonic Wars was that by the German Idealist philosopher Johann Gottlieb Fichte, particularly in his *Addresses to the German Nation*, first delivered as a series of lectures in Berlin from 1804 to 1805, at the height of Napoleon's domination of Continental Europe. In the first of his fourteen addresses to what he identified as the German nation (*die deutsche Nation*), which at that time consisted of

a number of separate states, of which Prussia was but one, Fichte declared that 'it is solely by means of the common trait of Germanness that we can avert the downfall of our nation threatened by its confluence with foreign peoples and once more win back a self that is self-supporting and incapable of any form of dependency' (Fichte, 2008, 11). First and foremost, what was required, according to Fichte, was an identification of the distinctive traits of Germanness, and then the establishment of a new German national education to ensure the preservation and cultivation of that Germanness and Germanic culture. Fichte's attempt to define Germanness was pursued by way of a reflection on that which was foreign, both linguistically and culturally. Indeed, for Fichte, the distinction between the Germans and the other peoples of Teutonic descent in Europe was owing above all to the former having remained in the 'original homelands' of the 'ancestral race', as well as their having continued to be native speakers of German, the 'original language' of that race. In contrast, the other Teutonic tribes had migrated, and as a result they had adopted that most contaminating of all cultural forms: a foreign language (Fichte, 2008, 48). The Germanness that Fichte wished to identify, protect, and cultivate was one that found its expression in all cultural forms, not least in art. Consequently, it was possible to determine the value of works of art, including literary works, by assessing the extent to which they conformed to, and expressed, these national-cultural characteristics.

This ideology of cultural nationalism, tied to the idea of national languages, would continue to percolate across Europe throughout the nineteenth century, with its more benign manifestations including the establishment of national galleries, national theatres, and national literary canons. It was an important element in the nationalist movements that resulted in the establishment of major new nation-states in Europe in the second half of the nineteenth century, including Italy in 1861 and Germany in 1871, following the Franco-Prussian War of 1870–1. The founding of the Irish Free State would take another fifty years, being achieved only after the First World War, when Beckett was a teenager.

In the later decades of the nineteenth century, ever more strident forms of nationalism were increasingly shaped by an idea of nationality that extended beyond a shared national language and culture to a shared ethnicity, an element that was already present in the work of both Herder and Fichte. Indeed, the emergence of race theory in the second half of the century led to Europe being increasingly mapped in ethnic terms. Founding publications in this emerging theory of race were the English anatomist and physiologist Robert Knox's *The Races of Men: A Fragment* (1850) and Arthur de Gobineau's influential *Essay on the Inequality of the Human Races* (1853–5). According to Knox, it was

possible to distinguish not only between superior and inferior races, but also between the so-called ‘European races’, those races differing from one another ‘as widely as the Negro does from the Bushman’ (Knox, 1850, 151). He anticipated a necessary ‘war of extermination’ against what he variously described as the ‘savage’, ‘inferior’, ‘dark’, and ‘depraved’ races (162). As for the ‘Jewish race’, Knox considered it to belong to those ‘dark races’ against which this war of extermination would need to be waged (300). He thereby established a hierarchical racial mapping that not only distinguished the European from the non-European, but also differentiated hierarchically between racial types within Europe.

It is in this context that one needs to assess the engagement with race theory in the works of thinkers such as Schopenhauer and Nietzsche. It is worth bearing in mind that the Schopenhauer whom Beckett read with such interest in 1930, when preparing his short book on Marcel Proust’s *In Search of Lost Time* (1913–27), and whose work he continued to value throughout his life, was the philosopher who could assert that ‘The highest civilization and culture, apart from the ancient Hindus and Egyptians, are found exclusively among the white races’ (Schopenhauer, 1974, II, 158). This conjunction of nationalism and race theory would culminate in the horror of the Nazi ideology, and ultimately in the death camps, in which some of Beckett’s friends and acquaintances would die during the Second World War. Beckett would experience Nazism first hand when he spent six months in Germany from 1936 to 1937, shortly after having completed *Murphy*. It is an experience to which we shall return later in this book.

As noted above, Beckett was a teenager when Ireland secured independence from Britain, following a period of considerable violence on both sides, including the brutal actions of the Black and Tans during the Irish War of Independence (1919–21). Far from putting an end to the violence, the establishment of the Irish Free State in 1922 was followed by the Irish Civil War (1922–3). That Free State, which lasted until December 1937 – as it happens, the month in which Beckett left Ireland to reside permanently in France – was one in which cultural nationalism was particularly prevalent, and one with which Beckett felt no affinity whatsoever. While it is certainly possible to explain this alienation partly in terms of Beckett’s coming from a well-to-do Protestant family, it is also important to bear in mind that the writer he valued more than any other – James Joyce – not only came from a Catholic background, but had left Ireland in 1904, never to return, and that his novel *Ulysses* (1922) had been banned in Ireland. In other words, the Irish cultural nationalism in which Beckett grew up was one that excluded the art that he revered the most. Any reflection upon Beckett’s Protestantism needs to remain mindful of his

unstinting appreciation of Joyce's work and, indeed, of Joyce's life of exile, in which, like his hero Stephen Dedalus, he sought to escape the 'nets' not only of language and religion, but also of 'nationality' (Joyce, 1991, 254).

Beckett's resistance to cultural nationalism was apparent from the outset of his writing life, and certainly before his visit to Nazi Germany. And it was far from being incidental. Indeed, as we shall see, it was present in much of his work, taking different forms in different periods. It was never, however, simply a matter of rejecting cultural nationalism in favour of some form of abstract universalism. Things were to prove to be far more complicated than that. It would be a mistake to assume, for instance, that Beckett became a cosmopolitan writer, comfortably inhabiting a European republic of letters of the kind to which Voltaire referred. In certain key respects, Beckett was closer to Monbrun. Having travelled across Europe, including visits to London, Constantinople, Rome, Naples, Venice, Florence, Berlin, Dresden, Barcelona, and Madrid, Monbrun came to realize not only that he was completely indifferent to where he resided, as long as he was free, but that the cosmopolitan experience was in fact a nihilistic one. As he scathingly put it: 'I confess in all good faith that I am worth precisely nothing, and that the only difference there is between others and myself is that I am bold enough to take off the mask' (Monbrun, 2010, 16).

Moreover, while the cosmopolitan believes that, as Boswell put it, s/he belongs everywhere, Beckett's work testifies increasingly to the experience of those who feel themselves to belong nowhere. Beckett's figures are far closer in spirit to medieval Christians such as the twelfth-century Saxon canon Hugh of Saint Victor (c. 1096–1141), who considered the true mode of being to be a fundamental homelessness. As Hugh of Saint Victor put it in his *Didascalicon*: 'The man who finds his homeland sweet is still a tender beginner; he to whom every soil is as his native land is already strong; but he is perfect to whom the entire world is as a foreign land' (Saint Victor, 1991, 101). Beckett's resistance to cultural nationalism would lead him not to cosmopolitanism, but towards an experience of foreignness, although not one grounded in the Christian belief in a spiritual home, even if he often resorted to Christian motifs and images, these remaining in place even when almost all other markers of cultural affiliation had been stripped away.

The following three sections chart Beckett's various attempts to break free from any national-cultural context, to escape above all the net of cultural nationalism, and to explore the experience of being what might be termed a citizen of nowhere – or, to take up a term from Joyce's *Finnegans Wake*, an uneasy inhabitant of 'Noland' (see Ellmann, 1987, 103–4). Section 2 focuses on Beckett's struggle against cultural nationalism in his English-language works between 1929 and 1945. Section 3 turns to his major works in French between

1946 and the late 1950s, where he undertook an extraordinary disorientation of cultural references, in part through his (often painful) work of self-translation. Section 4 explores his later works of prose and drama, in which it is ever less possible to locate human beings in relation to anything that might be termed a nation-state or a national culture, even though the Christian motifs remain. This late vision of the human is neither national nor cosmopolitan. Rather, it offers a new way of imagining the human, one in which the distinctions between nations and cultures break down, and in which one can glimpse another way of being. It is far from a reassuring vision, but it is one that challenges us to question some of our most fundamental assumptions about imagined communities, and about possible ways of being and belonging.

2 A Nameless and Hideous Mass

Beckett's resistance to cultural nationalism is evident even in his earliest literary efforts. In certain respects, his first substantial literary work, the posthumously published novel *Dream of Fair to Middling Women* (written in 1931–2), is a profoundly cosmopolitan work. Those cosmopolitan credentials are evident not least in the setting, which ranges across a number of European capitals, from Dublin to Paris to Vienna. In its language and range of literary references, too, *Dream* seems to insist upon its cultural cosmopolitanism. Latin, French, German, and Italian phrases pepper its English, while Continental European writers and thinkers dominate the novel's cultural landscape. These range from the Ancient Greek and Roman (Homer, Virgil, Horace, Sallust) to French (Ronsard, Malherbe, Racine, Sade, Chenier, Stendhal, Vigny, Balzac, Musset, Rimbaud, Mallarmé, Gide, Proust), German and Austrian (Hölderlin, Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, Sacher-Masoch, Freud), Italian (Dante, Leopardi, D'Annunzio), Russian (Pushkin, Dostoevsky), and Spanish (José Ignacio de Espronceda y Delgado). There are also references to numerous English writers, including Marlowe, Shakespeare, Byron, Austen, and Dickens. Far less frequent are the references to writers of Irish extraction. The nods to European painting and music are just as cosmopolitan, including the artists Botticelli, Bosch, Dürer, Rembrandt, El Greco, Watteau, Blake, and Cézanne, and the composers Mozart, Beethoven, Chopin, Brahms, and Wagner. As for the novel's protagonist, his name, Belacqua, shorn of any family name, is taken from Dante's *Purgatorio*, and could scarcely be less Irish.

While all of the above might seem to suggest a decidedly Eurocentric cosmopolitanism, Beckett was careful to counter this impression through the inclusion of references to the Persian poets Saadi and Hafez, and, more importantly, a number of references to Chinese culture. There is, for instance, the 'little