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For a Migrant Art: Samuel Beckett and Cultural Nationalism¹

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Abstract

This essay charts Samuel Beckett's linguistic migration from English to French at the end of the Second World War, locating this within the context of other twentieth-century literary migrations. It then proceeds to identify some of the principal ways in which Beckett seeks to resist forms of cultural nationalism (Irish, French, and German). The distance that Beckett takes from these European forms of cultural nationalism is reflected not only in the migrant status of his characters, but also in the way in which he deploys national-cultural references. The essay argues that Beckett's aim in this respect bears comparison with that of the 'good European' as defined by Nietzsche. An important difference, however, is that in Beckett's case the emphasis falls not upon cosmopolitanism but rather upon a perpetual migrancy that is captured above all in his movement between languages.

Keywords

Samuel Beckett, Paul Celan, cultural nationalism, Europe, 'good European', migration, Nazism, Friedrich Nietzsche

Article

The traumas of twentieth-century European history, from the Russian Revolution to the Nazi domination of the continent, followed by the Soviet control of Eastern Europe, resulted in the migration of many writers from one country to another, from one culture to another, and even, on occasion, from one language to another. Vladimir Nabokov's flight from Russia after the Revolution, first to Athens and then London in 1919, to Germany in 1920,² to France in 1937, to the United States in 1940, and finally back to Europe in 1959,³ and his switch from Russian to English as his language of literary composition, is a well-known example of such cultural-linguistic migration. Moreover, the fact that Nabokov never owned a property following his departure from Russia, and that he ended his days, like Joseph Roth

¹ An earlier version of this article was delivered at the British Ambassador's Residence in Paris on 14 March 2017 as the University of Kent's Annual Paris Lecture.

² While Nabokov's family migrated to Berlin in 1920, he was an undergraduate at Cambridge from autumn 1919 to summer 1922, and thus only lived there following his graduation.

³ From 1961 until his death in 1977, Nabokov lived with his wife, Véra, in a hotel in Montreux, Switzerland.

before him, in a hotel, is indicative of his profound commitment to a state of what might be termed perpetual migrancy.

Other examples are not hard to find. Walter Benjamin fled from Germany following the Nazi takeover in 1933, eventually settling in Paris, where he never owned a property and whence he was in turn forced to flee in 1940, committing suicide later that year when he had come to what, in a tragic irony, proved to be the mistaken conclusion that he would not be able to escape from Europe via Spain. Just as Nabokov continued to write in Russian during his time in Germany and France, so Benjamin remained a German-language writer in France, with only the odd, if impressive, foray into French.⁴

Following the murder of his parents in a concentration camp and his own internment, the Romanian-born poet Paul Celan migrated first to Vienna and then to Paris shortly after the end of the Second World War. Celan, too, clung to his mother tongue, remaining a German-language poet throughout his years in France, and observing that the one thing that remained in place for him, through the traumas that prompted and then characterized his migrant life, was precisely that mother tongue. As he put it in his speech on receiving the Literature Prize of the Free Hanseatic City of Bremen in January 1958, following the publication of two major volumes of poetry – *Poppy and Remembrance* (1952) and *From Threshold to Threshold* (1955) – through the experience of catastrophe that would deprive him first of his parents (who were murdered in a concentration camp) and then of his home in Czernowitz in the Bukovina:

Only one thing remained reachable, close and secure, amid all losses: language. Yes, language. In spite of everything, it remained secure against loss. But it had to go through its own lack of answers, through terrifying silence, through the thousand darkneses of murderous speech. It went through. It gave me no words from what was happening, but went through it. Went through and could resurface, ‘enriched’ by it all. (Celan 1986: 34)

Celan is certainly not suggesting here that language simply remained immune to history. Far from it. The kind of ‘enrichment’ of the German language to which he refers in his Bremen speech is also, paradoxically, a form of impoverishment, hence the carefully deployed quotation marks. Indeed, Celan was acutely aware of the fact that the horrors of twentieth-

⁴ For instance, in 1939 Walter Benjamin produced a French-language version of his exposé ‘Paris, Capital of the Nineteenth Century’, which he had originally written in German in 1935.

century European history, and above all of the Nazi years, had a profoundly transformative effect on that language.⁵ His own poetry constitutes nothing less than a counter-transformation of German, but, it should be noted, not one designed to restore that language to some prelapsarian state. As he put it in 1958, in his reply to a questionnaire from the Flinker bookshop in Paris:

German poetry is going in a very different direction from French poetry. No matter how alive its traditions, with most sinister events in its memory, most questionable developments around it, it can no longer speak the language which many willing ears seem to expect. Its language has become more sober, more factual. It distrusts 'beauty'. It tries to be truthful. If I may search for a visual analogy, while keeping in mind the polychrome of apparent actuality: it is a 'greyer' language, a language which wants to locate even its 'musicality' in such a way that it has nothing in common with the 'euphony' which more or less blithely continued to sound alongside the greatest horrors. Celan 1986: 15–16)

As a migrant from Eastern Europe, Celan remained acutely aware of his never quite belonging in France, even though his wife, the artist Gisèle Celan-Lestrange, was a French citizen. This experience of cultural unbelonging was, for him, that of those European Jews who had survived the Holocaust. In his prose text *Conversation in the Mountains*, written in August 1959 and inspired by a missed encounter with the philosopher Theodor Adorno, Celan writes openly of this Jewish migrant status as one characterized by a lack of any possession: 'because the Jew, you know, what does he have that is really his own, that is not borrowed, taken and not returned' (Celan 1986: 17). The closest thing to a possession for such a migrant is language, and yet that sense of non-ownership extends to language itself. In his own poetry, Celan would proceed to forge a German unlike any other, a language in which he sought not simply to memorialize the dead, but to give them a voice, albeit one marked by the constant threat of silence. His work on the German language was undertaken with a view not to repossessing it, but rather to rendering its strangeness, its own migrancy, apparent.

⁵ The great analyst of that linguistic transformation is Victor Klemperer, author of *LTI – Lingua Tertii Imperii. Notizbuch eines Philologen* (*The Language of the Third Reich: A Philologist's Notebook*; 1947).

The German of Celan's later poetry – and, above all, the 1968 volume *Threadsun* – is a migrant language in the sense that it is estranged from, and estranging of, the German of the *Wirtschaftswunder*, the latter being a German characterized by what Celan terms 'euphony', untroubled by the monstrous purposes to which that language had been put between 1933 and 1945. His German is discordant, disconcerting, difficult. Tellingly, its migrant status was noted by a number of German reviewers whose barely veiled Nazi sympathies Celan was quick to highlight in his correspondence. And yet, for all that, the language of Celan's poetry nonetheless remained his mother tongue: German. Notwithstanding his formidable abilities in French, not least as a translator of French poetry (including the work of challenging contemporary poets such as André du Bouchet and Jean Daive), Celan chose to remain faithful to that mother tongue in his art, and thus precisely to emphasize his own migrant status in Paris in the 1950s and 1960s, the city in which he had sought to make his home and his career as a writer, while securing a living as a teacher of German at the *École Normale Supérieure*.

Towards the end of his life, living alone in rented accommodation in Paris and suffering from severe mental illness, the symptoms of which included a profound sense of alienation from the society in which he lived, Celan identified Samuel Beckett as perhaps the only writer in Paris with whom he had a profound literary affinity. As he put it following a missed opportunity for the two writers to meet in person, Beckett was 'probably the only person with whom I might have got along'; that is, the only living person whose conception of literature, and what was required of the writer in the darkest of times, was akin to his own (Celan 1995: 250; my translation).

Beckett, too, was a migrant writer – having made France his permanent home in late 1937, when he was 31 years old. In Beckett's case, however, the migration from Catholic Ireland to Paris was very much a free choice, shaped not by persecution but rather by his profound sense of cultural estrangement from the Irish republic. Prior to his migration to France, Beckett was often scathing in his remarks on Catholic Ireland, most notably in his unpublished 1935 essay on Irish censorship, 'Censorship in the Saorstát', where, remarking on the country's literary censorship and its banning of contraceptives, he characterizes Ireland as a nation-state in which there is 'Sterilization of the mind and apotheosis of the litter' (Beckett 1983: 87).

Beckett's attitude to the burgeoning state-sponsored Irish cultural nationalism of the 1920s and 1930s was not altered by his migration to France. In his August 1945 review of his close friend Thomas MacGreevy's book on the painter Jack B. Yeats, for instance,

Beckett observes that, for MacGreevy, Yeats is ‘the first great painter, the first great Irish painter, that Ireland has produced, or indeed, could have produced, the first to fix, plastically, with completeness and for his time finality, what is peculiar to the Irish scene and to the Irish people’ (Beckett 1983: 95–6). While assessing MacGreevy’s interpretation of Yeats’s painting as art criticism of a ‘high order’, however, Beckett proceeds to emphasize the fact that his own take on Yeats’s work is altogether different, and that the ‘national aspects’ of Yeats’s ‘genius’ have been ‘over-stated’ by MacGreevy and other art critics. For Beckett, in contrast, Yeats is a major painter with a place alongside other contemporary European painters such as Karl Ballmer, Georges Braque, Wassily Kandinsky, Paul Klee, Georges Rouault, and Bram van Velde, not on account of any ‘national’ characteristics in his work, but rather because he ‘brings light, as only the great dare to bring light, to the issueless predicament of existence’ (Beckett 1983: 97). A decade later, in his homage to Jack B. Yeats published in *Les Lettres Nouvelles*, and subsequently translated by Beckett into English, he reiterates this anti-nationalist take on the painter’s work, extending it to all artists of genuine worth: ‘The artist who stakes his being is from nowhere, has no kith.’ (Beckett 1983: 149) This characterization of artistic genius as coming ‘from nowhere’ finds its inverted echo in our own time, in the British Prime Minister Theresa May’s championing of a sense of national belonging and her denigration of cosmopolitanism, expressed most laconically in her assertion in October 2016 that ‘If you believe you are a citizen of the world you are a citizen of nowhere’. For Beckett, such unbelonging is not simply a badge of honour, but a requirement of all great art.

Beckett’s objection to the understanding of Yeats as a ‘national painter’ was lodged in print only months after the end of the war in Europe. His position with regard to cultural nationalism had been sharpened considerably by his experiences between 1935 and 1945, first during his six-month stay in Nazi Germany in 1936–7, when he travelled across the country, with halts in various cultural centres, including Hamburg, Berlin, Weimar, Leipzig, Dresden, and Munich,⁶ and then by his experiences during the Second World War, when he served as a member of the French Resistance. The 1936–7 trip to Germany followed upon two years spent in London, where he had tried and failed to establish himself as a writer, the novel that he wrote there, and which was largely set there, *Murphy*, being published in 1938 to little critical attention and abysmal sales, the numerous unsold copies eventually being

⁶ For Beckett’s full itinerary on his 1936–7 trip to Germany, see Nixon 2011: 193.

destroyed in a warehouse blaze during the Blitz. In that novel, Beckett's protagonist is already a migrant – an Irishman in London, isolated and alienated.

Notwithstanding the obvious risks, Beckett's letters from Germany in 1936–7 include a number of remarks that reveal his attitude towards the Nazi regime's rabid cultural nationalism.⁷ On 28 November 1936, for instance, in a letter to MacGreevy, he observes that 'living art' is only to be found in private art collections in Germany now that many galleries have been closed by the authorities, and that 'the campaign against "Art-Bolshevism" is only just beginning' (Beckett 2009b: 387). In the same letter, he notes his encounter with a 'Proust fiend' who was working on a doctoral thesis on the French-Jewish writer, observing that 'there is something magnificent in doing a doctorate in 1936 with a work on not merely an "exquisite", but a non-Aryan' (Beckett 2009b: 389). From Munich, he wrote to MacGreevy on 7 March 1937 of Nuremberg that 'it is the industrial centre of Bavaria and with Munich & Berlin the third centre of Nazidiffusion and the seat of Jewbaiting Streicher & his rag' (Beckett 2009b: 461). The 'rag' in question was *Der Stürmer*, the anti-Semitic journal founded by Julius Streicher in 1923, with a circulation of almost half a million at the time of Beckett's letter. On 15 January 1937, Beckett noted in his diary that 'the expressions "historical necessity" & "Germanic destiny" start the vomit moving upwards' (Beckett cited in Nixon: 2011: 87). While in Germany, he read the nationalistic book *Deutschlands Leben* ('The Life of Germany'; 1930) by Hans Pferdmenges, only to dismiss it in his diary as 'NS Kimmwasser' ('Nazi bilge').

On his return from Germany, Beckett's anti-nationalism continued to be directed against Ireland. On 28 September 1937, for instance, he wrote to MacGreevy: 'There is no animal I loathe more profoundly than a Civic Guard, a symbol of Ireland with his official Gaelic loutish complacency & pot-walloping Schreinlichkeit.' (Beckett 2009b: 555 n. 5)⁸ And, anticipating the view expressed in his 1945 review of MacGreevy's book on Yeats, he remarked in a letter to MacGreevy on 31 January 1938 that, in both his painting and his writing, Yeats turns 'away from the local'. In the same letter, Beckett confesses to his own 'chronic inability to understand as member of any proposition a phrase like "the Irish people"' (Beckett 2009b: 599). This notwithstanding, he sensed that he himself was already being pigeonholed as an *Irish* writer. Commenting on the London-based publisher's dustjacket of *Murphy* in a letter to MacGreevy on 7 March 1938, for instance, he writes: 'All

⁷ For a recent study of Beckett's politics more generally, see Morin 2017. For a reading of Beckett as a profoundly political writer, see also Gibson 2010.

⁸ As the editors of Beckett's correspondence observe, 'Schreinlichkeit' is a portmanteau word meaning 'chest-ishness'.

green white & yellow [...] They do their best, and not merely with the blurbs, to turn me into an Irishman.’ (Beckett 2009b: 611)

Prior to his permanent migration to France in late 1937, six months after his return from Germany, Beckett had spent time on and off in Paris since his appointment as a *lecteur* in English at the *École Normale Supérieure* in 1928–9. From 1938 onwards, he returned ever less frequently to Ireland, his mother’s death in 1950 removing the only compelling reason for him to spend any time there at all.⁹ During his first extended residence in Paris, in 1928–9, he had made the acquaintance of an earlier literary migrant from Ireland, James Joyce, whose work he revered above that of any other living writer. Beckett’s own early work, especially his first novel, *Dream of Fair to Middling Women* (written in 1931–2; published posthumously sixty years later), was profoundly indebted to what would prove to be Joyce’s last major work, *Finnegans Wake* (1939), known only as ‘Work in Progress’ for much of the seventeen years of its genesis. Indeed, when sending the manuscript of *Dream of Fair to Middling Women* to the editor Charles Prentice at the London publisher Chatto & Windus, which had published his short monograph on Proust’s *In Search of Lost Time* in 1931, Beckett acknowledged that his novel ‘stinks of Joyce in spite of most earnest endeavours to endow it with my own odours’ (Beckett 2009b: 81). In *Finnegans Wake*, the migrant Joyce had committed himself to the creation of what was, in effect, a new language, one that was, to be sure, grounded in English, but that through the application of a principle of paronomasia and the creation of portmanteaux words – indeed, a portmanteau language – constituted a radical challenge to the idea of any *national* language. For Joyce was seeking to create a new universal language, one that drew on the resources of many extant national languages, but that was ultimately *sui generis*.

Following an initial phase of weak imitation, the migrant Beckett’s linguistic path would prove to be a very different one from Joyce’s, although, as would eventually become clear, with a not dissimilar aim in respect to cultural nationalism. In Beckett’s own view, his path would come to be diametrically opposed to that of his one-time literary master. Shortly after his return from Germany, and before his move to France, Beckett wrote (in German) on 9 July 1937 to an acquaintance he had made in Germany, the bookseller Axel Kaun, that his profound language scepticism had led him to the conclusion that the only solution for him as a writer was to turn his own language – ‘my language’ (*meine Sprache*), as he refers to it

⁹ In a letter to MacGreevy on 15 June 1938, six months into his residency in Paris, Beckett writes: ‘As you can imagine I am not anxious to go to Ireland, but as long as mother lives there I shall go every year’ (Beckett 2009b: 630).

(Beckett 2009b: 513) – against itself, boring holes in the language ‘veil’ in order to reach the ‘things (or the nothingness) lying behind it’ (Beckett 2009b: 518). The result would be what in the letter to Kaun he terms a literature of the ‘non-word’ or ‘unword’ (*Literatur des Unworts*) that would stand in antithetical relation to what he saw as Joyce’s ‘apotheosis of the word’ in ‘Work in Progress’ (Beckett 2009b: 519–20). However, for all his championing of such a literature of the unword, Beckett concluded his letter to Kaun with the confession that he was currently producing nothing, the implication being that perhaps such a literature would prove impossible to realize.

Shortly after his move to Paris later that year, Beckett signalled his intent to move away from Joyce’s language revolution by beginning to experiment in the writing of poetry in French. As he noted in a letter to MacGreevy on 3 April 1938: ‘I have the feeling that any poems there may happen to be in the future will be in French.’ (Beckett 2009b: 614) This turn to French coincided with an ongoing sensitivity to forms of aggressive cultural nationalism, and may thus be seen in that political light. In a letter to his literary agent George Reavey from Paris on 27 September 1938, for instance, he mentions having heard ‘Adolf the Peacemaker’ on the radio, and having ‘thought I heard the air escaping – a slow puncture’ (Beckett 2009b: 642). Six months later, on 18 April 1939, with war looming, he wrote to MacGreevy from Paris: ‘If there is a war, as I fear there must be soon, I shall place myself at the disposition of this country.’ (Beckett 2009b: 656) What had become clear to Beckett, then, was that his allegiances now lay more with France than with Ireland, to the point of his being prepared to sacrifice his life in that country’s defence. Ireland’s neutrality during the war was one that he could not endorse. On the outbreak of war in 1939, he was again back in Dublin, but he immediately decided to return to France, seeing the latter as his home and the place he wished to be at such a critical time. Following the German defeat of France in 1940, he joined a French Resistance group, known as Gloria. This group was soon betrayed, however, and Beckett and his companion (much later his wife), the French piano-teacher Suzanne Deschevaux-Dumesnil, fled south, eventually finding refuge in Roussillon, in the Vaucluse region of France.

Although committing himself to France in face of the Nazi aggressor, and despite his tentative experiments in French, when in 1940 he eventually started work on his next novel, *Watt*, Beckett returned to the English language and to a decidedly Irish world. Much of the novel was written in Roussillon, and Beckett would later describe the work as a form of escape from the horrors through which the whole of Europe was then passing, under the

yoke of Nazi tyranny.¹⁰ Among the many striking features of this strange novel is that, while written in France during the war, it is very clearly set in a world resembling the one in which Beckett grew up, and plays with the genre of the Irish ‘big house’ novel. Almost nothing in the work suggests a French culture or French environment, or alludes to the experience of war. Completed in 1945, *Watt* proved even less attractive to publishers than had its predecessor, *Murphy*, and Beckett soon abandoned the attempt to place it. Although written in English, it was finally published in Paris in 1953 by an Anglo-American group of writers known as Merlin.

If the end of the war in Europe was a major historical event for the European nations, and the beginning of the project that would one day lead to the creation of the European Union, it was also a decisive moment in Beckett’s own life. Following a brief visit back to Ireland, he returned to France in 1945 to serve as an orderly in the Red Cross hospital established in the town of Saint-Lô, in north-west France, which had been devastated by bombing raids in the latter stages of the war. It was his experience at Saint-Lô that inspired Beckett to write a short (never broadcast) radio text entitled ‘The Capital of the Ruins’, which ends with his evoking a vision of what he terms ‘humanity in ruins’, this vision being, he asserts, the one in which our human ‘condition’ might be rethought in the post-war world:

some of those who were in Saint-Lô will come home realizing that they got at least as good as they gave, that they got indeed what they could hardly give, a vision and a sense of a time-honoured conception of humanity in ruins, and perhaps even an inkling of the terms in which our condition is to be thought again. These will have been in France. (Beckett 1995: 278)

It was just such a vision of ‘humanity in ruins’ – not available to those who had remained in neutral Ireland throughout the war years – that would find such powerful expression in Beckett’s post-war plays, novels, and short stories, the most important of which he would write in French between 1946 and 1950. These works, which would establish his enduring reputation as a writer of international status, included the three novels *Molloy* (1951), *Malone meurt/Malone Dies* (1951), and *L’Innommable/The Unnamable* (1953) and the play *En attendant Godot/Waiting for Godot* (1952). His second major play,

¹⁰ Many years later, on receiving a book of photographs of the Warsaw Ghetto taken by a German soldier in 1941, Beckett would thank the sender for ‘the book on that hellish place at that hellish time’ (Beckett 2016: 639).

Fin de partie/Endgame (1957), was written slowly and painfully between 1950 and 1957. Thus, following the abject failure of his career as an English-language novelist, and after having lived for eight years in France, including through the darkest days of the war, Beckett finally abandoned the English language for French. This remarkable decision would be the making of him as a writer, and bears significantly upon his relation to ideas of cultural nationalism.

There is considerable evidence to suggest that Beckett has long contemplated the possibility of writing in French rather than in his mother tongue. In his first, unpublished, novel, *Dream of Fair to Middling Women*, he has his protagonist, a would-be writer named Belacqua, reflect that ‘Perhaps only the French language can give you the thing you want’. The thing wanted here is to be able to write ‘without style’, in the manner, according to Beckett’s protagonist, of Racine and Malherbe (Beckett 1992: 48). Later, when asked about his switch to French after the war, Beckett would explain that he saw it as a way of ‘impoverishing’ himself – that is, denying himself the riches of his mother tongue – for the greater demands of a foreign language that, for all his remarkable proficiency in it, remained something other than his own.¹¹ This more impoverished language struck Beckett as better suited to the expression of his vision of ‘humanity in ruins’. A comparison of Beckett’s early (English-language) works with his post-war French works certainly bears out his assessment of the matter. The post-war French works are written with a syntactical and lexical simplicity that sets them apart from his earlier work in English. One need only compare the opening of his first English-language novel with the opening of his first published French novel, *Molloy*, to appreciate the radical transformation in Beckett’s style. Both novels open with a scene involving vehicles; both place the emphasis upon abjection, and yet stylistically they could not be more different:

Behold Belacqua an overfed child pedalling, faster and faster, his mouth ajar and his nostrils dilated, down a frieze of hawthorn after Findlater’s van, faster and faster till he cruise alongside of the hoss, the black fat wet rump of the hoss. Whip him up, vanman, flickem, flapem, collopwollop fat Sambo.

¹¹ In a letter dated 3 October 1982 to the bibliographer Carleton Lake, Beckett explained his switch to French as an ‘Escape from mother Anglo-Irish exuberance & automatisms’, accompanied by an ‘Impoverished form in keeping with revelation & espousal of mental poverty’. He added that ‘English grown foreign resumable 10 years later’ (Beckett 2016: 593). This makes it clear that, for Beckett, language was acceptable only as long as it remained in some sense foreign to him, thereby preventing any comfortable inhabitation of it.

Stiffly, like a perturbation of feathers, the tail arches for a gush of mard. Ah ...! (Beckett 1992: 1)

Je suis dans la chambre de ma mère. C'est moi qui y vis maintenant. Je ne sais pas comment j'y suis arrivé. Dans une ambulance peut-être, un véhicule quelconque certainement. On m'a aidé. Seul je ne serais pas arrivé. (Beckett 1951b: 7)¹²

Beckett soon managed to place his new French-language works with the recently established publishing house Les Éditions de Minuit, based in the heart of Paris. Founded during the war as a Resistance press, this publishing house's clandestine nature was clearly reflected in its name. Under the direction of Jérôme Lindon, it would go on to publish all of Beckett's works in French, as well as those originally written in English and translated into French by him. With the worldwide success of *Godot*, first performed on the stage in Paris in 1953, Minuit's financial security would be assured, and it would go on to publish some of the most important French-language writers of the post-Second World War era, including Alain Robbe-Grillet, Marguerite Duras, Claude Simon, and Jean Echenoz, as well as one of the most controversial books to be written during the Algerian War, Henri Alleg's *La Question* (1958), on the French army's use of torture in the colony.

Beckett's migration from Dublin to Paris, and from English to French, was, then, the making of him as a writer of international standing. On the one hand, it remains an extraordinary, if not unprecedented, feat of linguistic migration, bringing remarkable cultural riches to the country in which he sought to make his new home. The uniqueness of Beckett's linguistic migration lies in the radical transformation in literary style that accompanies it, as well as the creation of a bilingual oeuvre, Beckett going on to translate his French works into English, and the majority of his English works into French.

What, though, of the culture into which Beckett transplanted himself? To what extent is French culture present in the works written in French? And, more importantly, to what extent might Beckett's post-war work be seen as affirming a form of French cultural nationalism? In *Beyond Good and Evil* (1886), in which he champions the idea of the 'good European', Nietzsche asserts that 'The Jews are without a doubt the strongest, purest, most

¹² Beckett's English translation reads: 'I am in my mother's room. It's I who live there now. I don't know how I got there. Perhaps in an ambulance, certainly a vehicle of some kind. I was helped. I'd never have got there alone.' (Beckett 2009c: 3)

tenacious race living in Europe today. They know how to survive in even the worst conditions.’ Without distinguishing between the situation in Eastern and Western Europe, Nietzsche goes on to claim that what the Jewish populations in Europe wish to achieve is ‘to be absorbed and assimilated into Europe; they thirst for some place where they can be settled, permitted, respected at last and where they can put an end to the nomadic life, the “wandering Jew”’ (Nietzsche 2002: 142). Might the same be said of the migrant Beckett as regards the literary works that he produced in French? Was his aim to produce novels and plays that might come to belong within the canon of French literature, and that might contribute in some way to French cultural nationalism?

Beckett’s knowledge of, and interest in, French literature and thought was both extensive and enduring. Having studied French (and Italian) at Trinity College Dublin in the 1920s, he would go on to write the first book-length study of Proust’s *In Search of Lost Time*. And his first published poem, entitled *Whoroscope* (1930), which was written in Paris, on hotel notepaper, takes as its subject the life of the French philosopher René Descartes. Beckett’s love for the plays of the great French seventeenth-century dramatist Jean Racine was an abiding one, as evidenced not least by his rereading of Racine in the mid-1950s, at a time when he was struggling to write *Endgame*.¹³ In the late 1930s, he read with admiration the Marquis de Sade’s *One Hundred and Twenty Days of Sodom*, and even expressed an interest in translating it into English, before deciding that such an act might jeopardize his own slim chances as a writer.¹⁴ He produced magnificent English translations of works by some of the most important modern French poets, including Arthur Rimbaud, Guillaume Apollinaire, and Paul Éluard. He read and admired Jean-Paul Sartre’s first novel, *Nausea* (1938), as well as Albert Camus’s masterpiece, *The Outsider* (1942), a work steeped in the experience of colonial Algeria. And in later life, he produced some remarkable translation/adaptations of maxims by the eighteenth-century French nobleman Sebastien de Chamfort. And some of his own works contain frequent allusions to French literature.

There would certainly seem, then, to be ample evidence to support the claim that the migrant Beckett fully embraced French literature and thought. And yet, when one turns to his own works, and in particular to those written in French after 1945, one is immediately struck by the very particular function of these French cultural references. In Beckett’s best-known work, *Waiting for Godot*, for instance, the names of the characters serve not to locate the

¹³ On the composition of *Endgame*, see Van Hulle and Weller 2018.

¹⁴ In a letter to his literary agent George Reavey on 20 February 1938, Beckett indicates that he would ‘very much like’ to undertake the translation of Sade’s novel, but that ‘I don’t want to be spiked as a writer’ (Beckett 2009b: 604).

play within France or even within a distinctly French culture, but rather to internationalize the play's world, making it in effect a world of migrants. In early drafts, one of the characters was called Lévy, suggesting that he was Jewish.¹⁵ In the published version, the cast consists of the Russian-named Vladimir, the Italian-named Pozzo, the English-Irish-American (and decidedly ironically) named Lucky, the French-named Estragon (whose name means 'tarragon'), and the unnamed Boy. In the dialogue, there are some passing references to French place-names, including Roussillon, in the Vaucluse, where Beckett had taken refuge during the Nazi occupation of northern France, and, in Lucky's dialogue, to Seine-et-Marne and to Normandy (Beckett 1952: 61–2).¹⁶ The Vaucluse, however, becomes the object of a scatological wordplay, Estragon dismissing it as the 'Merdecluse'.¹⁷ Mention is also made of the Eiffel Tower, from which the hapless couple Vladimir and Estragon might, the former reflects, have done better to have thrown themselves many years before: 'La main dans la main on se serait jeté en bas de la tour Eiffel, parmi les premiers. On se portait bien alors. Maintenant il est trop tard. On ne nous laisserait même pas monter.' (Beckett 1952: 11)¹⁸ Nothing could be more clearly a marker of France, and indeed of French cultural nationalism, than the Eiffel Tower. In Beckett's play, though, it is associated not with French cultural grandeur, but with a missed opportunity to commit suicide. The same is the case when the River Durance,¹⁹ in south-east France, is mentioned: Vladimir recalls having thrown himself in, the implication clearly being that this was another suicide attempt.

Turning to Beckett's celebrated trilogy of novels, *Molloy*, *Malone meurt*, and *L'Innommable*, one finds that they, too, contain some obvious references to French culture, but again these serve a very particular function, one that is completely at odds with any form of cultural nationalism. The first-person narrator in part two of *Molloy* is named Jacques Moran, and is of Catholic affiliation, but, his first name notwithstanding, he inhabits a decidedly Irish landscape. *Malone meurt* opens with a reference to 'le Quatorze Juillet, fête de la liberté' (Beckett 1951a: 7), this being of particular importance in relation to Beckett's feelings about an oppressive Ireland. Here, too, however, the association is with death: Malone mentions the Fourteenth of July in the context of his own imminent demise, which

¹⁵ On the composition of the play, see Van Hulle and Verhulst 2018.

¹⁶ In Beckett's English translation of the play, these place-names become 'Fulham Clapham' and 'Connemara', respectively (Beckett 2010c: 41).

¹⁷ In Beckett's translation, this wordplay is on 'Macon' and 'Cackon' (Beckett 2010c: 57).

¹⁸ Beckett's translation reads: 'Hand in hand from the top of the Eiffel Tower, among the first. We were presentable in those days. Now it's too late. They wouldn't even let us up.' (Beckett 2010c: 6)

¹⁹ The river becomes the Rhône in Beckett's English translation (Beckett 2010c: 51).

he sees as a liberation that is existential rather than political in nature; that is, from a life of suffering. And in *L'Innommable*, the narrator mentions 'le prix Goncourt' and recalls a time when he was stuck in a vase outside a restaurant in the rue Brancion in Paris, where he was watered by a woman named sometimes Madeleine and sometimes Marguerite (Beckett 1992: 94, 154).²⁰ These references to a French context suggest not an experience of belonging to French cultural life, but precisely one of unbelonging.

In *Fin de partie*, which, following failed negotiations with a Paris theatre, was first performed in French at the Royal Court Theatre, London, in 1957, the references to suffering, violence, and death by way of allusions to French culture become considerably more pointed. The characters Nagg and Nell, now confined to dustbins, lost their legs in a bicycle accident that occurred on the way out of Sedan in north-east France. The passage in question reads:

NAGG. — Tu te rappelles ...

NELL. — Non.

NAGG. — L'accident de tandem où nous laissâmes nos guibolles.

Ils rient.

NELL. — C'était dans les Ardennes.

Ils rient moins fort.

NELL. — A la sortie de Sedan. *Ils rient encore moins fort.*

(Beckett 1957: 31)²¹

On the one hand, this reference to Sedan and to the Ardennes region might be read as random: any other place-names would have done as well. On the other hand, however, they might be seen as signifiers of major historical events that would shape the entire twentieth century and beyond, events arising out of nineteenth-century European nationalisms. In the Franco-Prussian War of 1870–71, the French Emperor Napoleon III's forces suffered a devastating defeat at Sedan, and this Prussian victory over the French would soon be

²⁰ The rue Brancion is located in the 15th arrondissement, on the Left Bank. In Beckett's English translation, he retains this location, but changes the 'prix Goncourt' to the 'Pulitzer Prize'; that is, an American literary award, there being no well-known English literary award at that time (Beckett 2010b: 57, 96).

²¹ In Beckett's translation, the exchange reads: 'NAGG: Do you remember— NELL: No. NAGG: When we crashed our tandem and lost our shanks. [*They laugh heartily.*] NELL: It was in the Ardennes. [*They laugh less heartily.*] NAGG: On the road to Sedan. [*They laugh still less heartily.*]' (Beckett 2009a: 13) In the English version of the play, Beckett has the accident take place on the way to, rather than on the way from, Sedan.

followed by the siege of Paris and the unification of the German states into a new Reich. Seventy years later, in what became known as the Second Battle of Sedan in May 1940, Hitler's forces would overrun the French army at Sedan, paving the way for the defeat of France in the Second World War, and Beckett's own desperate flight south from the Nazis. As for the Ardennes, in December 1944–January 1945 it would be the site of the last major German offensive of the Second World War. The failure of this offensive effectively marked the end of any serious German resistance to the Allied forces in Western Europe, and was soon followed by the total collapse of Nazi Germany. Rather than being merely incidental references to a French context, then, it is modern Europe's dark history that is subtly inscribed into one of Beckett's darkest plays through these references to Sedan and to the Ardennes as the place where the characters suffered life-changing mutilations. From the Franco-Prussian War to the Second World War, what is captured in Beckett's choice of place-name is the catastrophic consequences of the forms of romantic nationalism that emerged in the early nineteenth century, first finding their articulation in works such as Fichte's *Addresses to the German Nation* (1808).

The retention of essentially Irish landscapes in many of Beckett's post-war works might lead one to conclude that, despite his change of language and despite his making his home in France, Beckett's work is shaped for the most part not only by an Irish childhood but also by an enduring attachment to Irish culture. When the French state decided to commemorate Beckett, it did so in a manner that might be seen to fit with just such an interpretation. The street named after Beckett in the fourteenth arrondissement of Paris, in which he lived from the 1960s until his death in 1989, identifies him as an 'écrivain irlandais'. While this ascription is, of course, perfectly accurate in the sense that Beckett was born in Ireland, any association that it might be taken to suggest between Beckett's work and a form of Irish cultural nationalism sits very much at odds with his attitude to the Irish nation state and its culture. As for the French cultural markers in Beckett's French-language works, these point not towards a new cultural identification, but rather towards Beckett's resistance to *all* forms of cultural nationalism.

And just as the profoundly negative nature of the inscriptions of French culture and history in his post-war work insists upon his critical distance from that culture when conceived in terms of cultural nationalism, so his decision to write in French after the Second World War was motivated not by a desire to embrace French culture as his true cultural home or to establish himself in the canon of French literary history, but rather by the wish to locate his work in a zone between cultures. This experience of betweenness, and

indeed of Beckett's bilingual oeuvre as such, is not to be understood as according with a logic of the both/and; rather, it accords with the logic of the neither/nor, as articulated by Beckett in the short prose text 'neither' (1976): 'as between two refuges whose doors once neared gently close, once turned away from gently part again' (Beckett 1995: 258).

The point, then, is that the migrant Beckett sought precisely to free himself as far as possible from any national cultural identification, and to explore a world in which we are all migrants, as suggested by the names of the characters in *Godot*. This is not to say that he sought simply to abolish his own past – Ireland is most certainly very present, sometimes in subtle ways, even in his most abstract late works. The local is never completely erased. However, by writing that Irishness in French, Beckett takes his distance from it, without ever identifying with another culture. The result is a migrant art that resists all forms of cultural-nationalist identification. It would thus be a mistake to speak of Beckett as an *Irish* writer in any but the most literal sense of official nationality, just as it would be a mistake to speak of him as a *French* writer. Such national qualifiers are precisely what his migrant art works against.

In this respect, Beckett's oeuvre might be described as that of a 'good European'. According to Nietzsche, the 'good European' is acutely aware of 'the pathological manner in which nationalist nonsense has alienated and continues to alienate the peoples of Europe from each other' (Nietzsche 2002: 148). For Nietzsche, the 'good European' is 'an essentially supra-national and nomadic type of person' (Nietzsche 2002: 133). In Beckett's case, that nomadic quality manifests itself in his movement between languages – and his concerted engagement with the German translation of his works also needs to be taken into account here, weakening, as it does, any sense of a binary structure of Ireland/France, or English/French. Beckett is ultimately no more an Irish writer than he is a French writer because such national ascriptions are subject to the pressure of a perpetual migrancy in his work, captured most effectively, perhaps, in the single syllable 'on'.

This returns us in conclusion to Beckett's extraordinary text on the Red Cross hospital in the devastated French town of Saint-Lô, where he worked briefly at the end of the Second World War. As we have seen, that text ends with Beckett evoking what he describes as a 'vision of humanity in ruins', a vision that, he suggests, should lead us to rethink what it means to be a human being in the wake of the most devastating war in human history, a war that had been provoked by the most extreme form of cultural and, indeed, racist nationalism. In the wake of that catastrophe, through which he lived as a first-hand witness and in which he lost close friends, Beckett's concern becomes not what it means to be Irish

or French, but what it means to be a human being. At a time when none of us can afford to ignore the strong wind of nationalism, at once cultural, economic, religious, and ethnic, and when global conflict as a result of such nationalism is once again an ever more real possibility, Beckett's attempt to find a way of evoking the shared experience of what it means to be human, and how important it is to reach out beyond any form of cultural nationalism, could not be more timely.

Arguably the greatest political lesson of the century in which Beckett lived and wrote is that nationalism, the privileging of one nation's interests and culture over those of others, and the shaping of a national culture in antagonistic relation to others, can lead to but one fateful outcome. Beckett's work, for all its apparent darkness, for all its unremitting focus on suffering, weakness, and loss, stands as one of the greatest literary testaments to the importance of our thinking first and foremost not about what it means to have been born in one place rather than another, or to speak one language rather than another, or to inhabit one culture rather than another, but what it means to be a human being in the most impoverished sense, stripped of all cultural possessions. And for Beckett, to be a human being is, at the most fundamental level, to be a migrant. One might even go so far as to say that, if there's a message in his work (something that he would certainly have denied), then it is precisely that *we are all migrants*, and that all national identifications are mythic in nature. The work of critical thought would become, as Roland Barthes suggests, the exposure of the process of mythologization as such.

In one of his last plays, *Catastrophe* (1982), which was dedicated to the then imprisoned Czech political reformer and playwright Václav Havel,²² Beckett depicts a theatre director seeking to force an actor to become an icon of human suffering. The play clearly evokes the experience of authoritarianism and the depriving of human beings of their freedom. At the end of the play, the oppressed actor looks up, and stares at the audience. When a reviewer suggested that this ending was ambiguous, Beckett responded: 'There's no ambiguity there at all. He's saying, you bastards, you haven't finished me yet.' (Beckett cited in Knowlson 1996: 597) For all the ruin-strewn landscapes in his work, it is precisely such acts of resistance to oppression – not least the oppressions that inevitably follow from cultural nationalism – that lie at the heart of Beckett's all-too-timely migrant art.

²² In response to a letter from Havel following the latter's release from prison, in which Havel remarked on the importance of Beckett's work to him, Beckett wrote on 29 May 1983: 'To have helped you, however little, and saluted you and all you stand for, was a moment in my writing life that I cherish, It is I who stand in your debt.' (Beckett 2016: 614)

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