

José Francisco Fernández

“The same blinding void as before”: Irish Neutrality in Samuel Beckett’s *nouvelles*

<https://doi.org/10.1515/arcadia-2017-0022>

Abstract: When the Second World War ended, Samuel Beckett returned to his flat in Paris and set about writing. The experiences that he had gone through during the conflict (his subversive activities with the Resistance, his two-year period of hiding in Roussillon, his first-hand knowledge of the human cost of war as a hospital attendant in Saint-Lô) found their tortuous expression in the literary production that ensued. The Irish government’s official status as neutral over the previous five years was also a matter of concern for the exiled intellectual in Paris, and his opinions on this matter can be gleaned from a close reading of his *nouvelles*, particularly “The Calmative,” a narrative in which the blinding lights of the city of Dublin stand out as a disturbing element that demands an interpretation.

Keywords: Samuel Beckett, *nouvelles*, World War II, Irish neutrality

The four *nouvelles* that Samuel Beckett wrote in 1946 (“The End,” “The Expelled,” “First Love,” and “The Calmative”) signaled the beginning of five years of intense creativity, known as “the siege in the room” (1946–1951), in which Beckett finally found his true voice as a writer, producing a number of seminal works characterized by a combination of austere prose, metaphysical echoes, rich intertextual allusiveness and scathing humour that is normally associated with his mature period. Indeed, it is in “The End” (“La Fin”) that his legendary switch of languages can be seen, in a line that he drew across the page halfway through the piece indicating the point where he left off writing in English and turned, mid-story, to French. The *nouvelles*, then, constitute a landmark in his oeuvre, an extraordinary turning point in the development of a major writer.

The four stories share a number of structural and thematic features. They present a circular pattern, as if each of them starts the same story from scratch, and they each have the same individual as a protagonist, a destitute character

with an ailing body, coupled with an active, inquisitive mind, but who at the same time has serious difficulties in communicating with the outside world. In three of the four stories the nameless protagonist has been expelled from his room in a house or institution (in "The Calmative" he simply abandons his den) and, as a consequence, must devote his energies to finding a quiet place where he can be alone with his thoughts, obsessed by "the search for the oblivion of womb or grave" (Finney 69). Over the course of his perambulations in the city, the countryside and by the sea, he is admonished by policemen, is looked on with disgust by passers-by, or is simply ignored by people. Although the four pieces share the same picaresque quality, there are some differences between them. Thus, in "First Love" the main character comes the closest in the series to experiencing a romantic or affectionate relationship, including a night of love; the subtext of "The Calmative" concerns our need for stories and the assuaging power of fiction; "The Expelled," more than any other, offers an allegory of life on earth, including the expulsion from the womb and the search for shelter and company in a narrative heavy with symbolism; meanwhile, "The End" gravitates towards the idea of death, preparing the ground for the physical and mental decay of the protagonist.

Overall, the stories constitute a synthesis of Beckett's main topics and motifs, offering themselves as the perfect introduction for newcomers to the Beckettian universe; despite a lack of connection between certain events, as well as numerous digressions, they also employ some more conventional features of narrative, such as a well-defined protagonist and at least some kind of progression in terms of action. These "comforts" of fiction, as Robert Cochran has termed them, include the pleasure of having "characters, too, with real names, some of them, Mr Weir and Mrs Maxwell, instead of grotesques with names like Otto Olaf bboggs" (21). Ruby Cohn notes similar literary characteristics in the stories, such as the presence of recurrent patterns (protagonists coming from the margins of society, the ominous absence of a dead father, the continuous and pointless journey, etc.) and also the colloquial style, as if the narrator were addressing the reader directly: "Collectively, the stories testify to the arbitrary nature of narration, so that the overriding point of these stories is that they *are* stories." (Cohn 151, italics in the original)

The present paper, however, aims to read the stories, and in particular "The Calmative," as the author's personal response to his native country's neutrality in World War II. My contention is that in the *nouvelles* Beckett delved into his ambivalent feelings about his native city, Dublin, and by extension into the question of Ireland as a whole during the Second World War. These stories inaugurated a period of deep introspection in which Beckett eschewed any unnecessary support that makes narratives more amenable, seeking an honest

confrontation with the vacuity of words and the mirages of fictionality. As part of this movement towards authenticity, the stories also capture his coming to terms with his immediate past, and this includes the mixed feelings that Ireland had always provoked in him, a deep mistrust as regards institutional politics coupled with an attempt to reach for the Ireland of the dispossessed. In what follows, a close reading of the stories will reveal an author deeply concerned with the direction taken by his country in a crucial period of its history, and it will be shown that even in his most austere prose, memories of Ireland were indelibly engraved in his memory. Special attention is paid to "The Calmative" because of its representative status as Beckett's new mode of writing acquired after the war: "The Calmative' [...] is a more finished effort, more certain in the 'fidelity to failure' soon to be articulated as an aesthetic credo by its author, more assured in its possession of the means of defeat." (Cochran 33) Here the author is shown to be at his most absurdist, developing a narrative in which disconnected episodes abound, and thus historical references stand out as part and parcel of a world gone mad.

There are of course many difficulties in trying to draw personal information from Beckett's texts (it was the author himself who wrote at the beginning of his career that "[t]he danger is in the neatness of identifications," "Dante ... Bruno" 495), in that he took pains to erase all traces of himself from his work. Yet it would be equally misguided to overlook the fact that "Beckett's works are loaded with political resonances" (Porter Abbott 130). Furthermore, it can be argued that he never abandoned an engagement with Ireland, however oblique, in his major plays and novels: "Beckett's status as an Irish writer," writes Willy Malley, "specifically an Anglo-Irish writer, a Protestant playwright alienated from an emerging Catholic state, is at the root of an identity crisis that can be read in all his work." (69)

Political readings of Beckett's stories have been made elsewhere. David Lloyd, to mention a well-known precedent, describes a particularly cryptic passage in "First Love" in which the narrator speaks of "history's ancient faeces" that are "sought after, stuffed and carried in procession" (Beckett, "First Love" 34) by Irish patriots. Lloyd interprets this as the representation of (and Beckett's subsequent ironic distance from) Gaelic culture by Irish nationalist writers and as "lost, past, primitive, fragmented and, indeed, feminine" (Lloyd 45), which would explain the presence of this fragment in a disquisition on the nature of love. More recently, Michael Rubenstein has convincingly argued that there is a rejection of the Irish Free State's policy of public works, "a very primal kind of protest" (38), by the protagonist in that same story. In a crucial episode in "First Love," Lulu takes the main character to her flat and he accommodates himself in her living room after having removed all the furniture except the sofa. When Lulu offers to

tell him where the toilets are (not in the apartment but presumably in the building), the protagonist asks instead for a chamber-pot. "His attitude," explains Rubenstein,

has to do with Beckett's background as part of the Protestant Dublin middle class: the public utilities in Lulu's apartment and in her building are no longer his public utilities. The Free State had made him homeless, or, homeland-less, and he refuses the provision of public utilities because he feels excluded from what he understands as the state's definition of the common good. (37)

This paper will take the same kind of approach as followed in the studies cited above, in the knowledge that Beckett "couched and contoured his artistic productions with the seeming greatest possible detachment to subjective concerns" (Sussman 3), but also bearing in mind that precisely because of his willingness to distance himself from the environment around him, every minimal reference to external events is usually ideologically charged and emerges as a unique occasion for the exploration of the socio-political dimension of his work. Katherine Weiss observes that although Beckett did not write historical fiction, his stories "reveal historical trauma, and depict a way to write about and as such *work through* the fragmented civilization of post-World War II Europe" (157, italics in the original). There is a telling episode in "The End" that seems to hint at the way in which the author wanted his texts to be analyzed. Almost at the end of the story we find the protagonist begging on a street corner in the city. One day he is accosted by a fanatic Marxist who is delivering a speech on top of a car to the people in the street. "He was bellowing so loud that snatches of his discourse reached my ears. Union ... brothers ... Marx ... capital ... bread and butter ... love. It was all Greek to me." (Beckett, *Three Novellas* 61)¹ When the orator explicitly addresses the protagonist, trying to arouse his conscience as an underdog, the hero of the story simply picks up his things and leaves the scene, avoiding any confrontation: "He must have been a religious fanatic, I could find no other explanation. Perhaps he was an escaped lunatic. He had a nice face, a little on the red side" (62), thinks the protagonist. By humorously avoiding the issue, the author suggests that there is no possibility of a direct political pronouncement being taken from the text and that any approximation to the politics of the time or to concrete historical events must be found in the interstices between the different episodes, that is, in the gaps within the narration.

¹ The novellas "The Expelled," "The Calmative," and "The End" are quoted after the 1999 edition *Three Novellas*.

A brief overview of the period in question and the details of Beckett's life during the years before the writing of the stories seems necessary to provide the necessary context for the analysis of the excerpts under study. During the Second World War, Ireland's government remained neutral, avoiding any obvious interference with the actions of the belligerent countries, although it is commonly agreed that under the cover of impartiality, it nevertheless favoured the Allies. At the same time, the Irish cabinet led by Éamon de Valera adopted in domestic affairs a series of measures that actually resembled the conditions of a nation under siege. This episode in Irish history is known as the Emergency and it lasted from September 1939 to September 1946.

Samuel Beckett spent most of the war outside Ireland. He had settled permanently in the French capital in 1937, determined to make a living as a writer. When the war erupted, he was in Dublin for a short visit, but he immediately returned to Paris. Soon after France was invaded by Nazi troops, Beckett joined the Resistance. When his cell was discovered, he and his partner Suzanne Deschevaux-Dumesnil went into hiding in Roussillon, in the south of France, where they remained for two years (from October 1942 to October 1944). It is revealing to know that at this early stage he came to understand how Irish neutrality did not amount to much as far as his own security was concerned. Shortly after arriving in Roussillon, he wrote to the Irish legation in Vichy to let them know that he was being harassed by the police: "If this is indeed the extent of my rights, in what exactly do the advantages of Irish nationality consist?" he wrote. "Might I not as well be a Pole?" (Qtd. in Craig xviii). Eight months later, in June 1943, in order to complain about the constant obstacles to his freedom of movement by the *gendarmérie*, he wrote again to the Irish Minister to France: "I feel obliged to appeal to you to intervene. Would a Swiss citizen be baited in this manner, or a Swedish? Or is an Irishman less entitled than they to the common courtesies and privileges extended to non-belligerents?" (Qtd. in Craig xviii).

Despite being in a remote region of France, he was well acquainted with the developments of the conflict and had a clear picture of the international scene as it unfolded in the outside world: "Like everyone else in Roussillon, he followed with keen interest BBC news reports on the progress of the fighting in North Africa, then in Italy and France as the Allies invaded and began to drive back the German forces and make slow progress through the country." (Knowlson 326) Lois Gordon refers to the "newspapers that were passed from hand to hand and went from village to village, crossing from one zone to the other, and thus were available to an enormous population" (*The World of Samuel Beckett* 170). Naturally, Beckett got his own impressions of the state of the country during his visit to Dublin in April 1945, when technically the war had not ended, with the strict measures of the Emergency still having a year to run.

Beckett spent less than four months in Dublin before returning once more to France. For the second half of 1945 he then worked at the hospital set up by the Irish Red Cross in the heavily bombed city of Saint-Lô, and by the end of June 1946 he was back in Paris, where he devoted himself to writing. Having already experienced feelings of alienation from his native land in the 1930s for a number of reasons (philistinism of the authorities of the Free State, provincialism in cultural matters, censorship...), the news of his country that he received during the war might have contributed to a widening of the abyss that he felt between himself and Ireland. His experience as an unprotected Irish exile, in comparison to what he thought were the better conditions of the citizens of other neutral countries, might also have predisposed him against the course of action taken by the Irish government.

Ireland's neutral position in the war provoked complex responses in Beckett, who was no longer a young or inexperienced man, and these can be seen obliquely in his descriptions of the city of Dublin and its inhabitants in the stories of 1946, particularly in "The Calmative," a narrative in which all the action takes place outdoors (save for a brief visit to a church) and in which descriptions of the urban landscape abound. In this story, written in the winter of 1946² and often considered "the most difficult to interpret" (Cohn 147), the narrator-protagonist moves around a city, and what he sees is a surreal, hazy, dream-like cityscape, allowing a glimpse of Beckett's reaction to a place he had visited only a year and a half previously. Dublin is in all probability the city described in the stories: "there was never any city but the one" (*Three Novellas* 24), says the narrator in "The Calmative." It is portrayed as having two canals, a river and a harbor in which there is little movement of boats, as would have been the case at a time when the maritime connections with neighbouring countries were seriously limited. The references to the bay and the mountains behind the town reinforce the familiarity of the landscape for Beckett's readers. Other minor aspects, like the forced inactivity of soldiers sardonically depicted by Beckett in "The End": "A kind of parade ground was also to be seen, where soldiers played football all year round" (62), a situation that at the time could only have existed in a neutral country,³ strengthen the idea that Dublin was foremost in his mind when writing the stories.

² "Le Calmant," together with two other *nouvelles*, was first written in French and published as *Nouvelles et Textes pour rien* in 1955 by Minuit ("Premier Amour" not included). The stories were translated into English by Beckett himself and published in 1967 in the volume *Stories and Texts for Nothing* (Grove) and in *No's Knife* (Calder).

³ Clair Wills comments on the low morale of the Irish Army as time passed and as the danger of invasion diminished: "The most serious problem for morale was that the army never fought –

As noted, the four *nouvelles* follow the same basic pattern: the protagonist is expelled from his family house (or some kind of asylum in "The End") and the course of the action he then takes involves his search for an alternative. During this, he meets an assortment of people: a cab-driver in "The Expelled," Lulu in "First Love," the boy with the goat and the man with the phials in "The Calmative," and the man with the donkey in "The End," although as is the norm with all Beckettian heroes, his ability to make himself understood to others is seriously impaired. Normally he stays for a period of time in precarious lodgings, then proceeds with his journey. A difference in "The Calmative" is that the protagonist finds no alternative lodgings and feels impelled to return to the shelter he had left at the beginning of the story. The description of his refuge, "a kind of den littered with empty tins" (*Three Novellas* 23), is one of the many details that bears a faint trace of history, in that it recalls the experience of being in hiding for a long time, a situation that Beckett experienced during the war and which he surely knew from many other people as well. In "The Calmative," the narrator approaches the city from the outskirts, coming out of the grove where his shelter is located, crossing fields, following paths and entering the town by "Shepherds' Gate" (26). There is a mention of the walls that stand between the city and the fields, and also of the "cyclopean and crenellated" (25) ramparts on the outskirts of the city, and this does not correspond to a recognizable picture of Dublin. However, in his writings of this period, Beckett created his own oneiric universe, mixing elements from his experience in wartime France and his memories of the Irish capital. As Andrew Gibson shows in his contextualization of *Mercier et Camier*, written just before "The Calmative," the novel "contains a fitful, non-evocative evocation of a spectral Ireland" while, at the same time, "one can adduce a countervailing set of French specifications" (Gibson, "Franco-Irish Beckett" 26). Likewise, in "The Calmative," the initial description of the city's environs would correspond not to Dublin but to rural France, as Marjorie Perloff notes: "Here is the landscape of the Vaucluse, with its caves and cowsheds, its ramparts and stone remnants of medieval castle keeps." (18) Yet, as Perloff also accepts, there is an intentional ambiguity with regard to the wider picture as the narrative moves on and the protagonist enters the town.

What he finds in this unreal version of Dublin is a deserted city (he later discovers it is Sunday) that echoes the conditions of living in the Irish capital during the Emergency: shop windows lit up, few trams and buses and no private cars, a situation which recalls petrol rationing. Following the river on his way to

instead, from 1941 large sections of the force were employed on turf-cutting. Soldiers spent the summer months under canvas on the bogs." (224)

the harbor, he meets hardly anyone, and with those he does talk to, communication is barely possible, immersed as they are in an atmosphere of suspicion, even fear: pedestrians all going in the same direction, passers-by who do not answer when questioned, a stranger who demands information but keeps essential details to himself, and a throng whose members behave in unison, like an individual. Here again, Beckett's experiences of the war seem to have played an important part in the description of the atmosphere in the city, transplanting onto the streets of Dublin what had been a constant source of anxiety in occupied France:

Four long years of occupation, of never knowing, each time you left your house, whether you would ever return, of living in constant fear of the knock on the door at 3:00 or 4:00 a. m. or a simple *rafle*, a roundup in a public place by the German SD or their Gallic lackeys, the equally dreaded *milice*. (Seaver 46–47)

However, what the narrator remarks on with an almost obsessive quality is the blinding lights of the city. In "The Calmative," there is a remarkable insistence on the glare in the streets from public lighting, as in the following examples from the text:

"The further I went into the city the more I was struck by its deserted air. It was lit as usual, brighter than usual."

"I was struck more and more by the contrast between the brightly lit streets and their deserted air."

"The extraordinary radiance shed by the street lamps and traffic-lights."

"So I went in the atrocious brightness [...]."

"The light was so dimmed by the brilliancy flooding the boulevard [...]."

"For the light I stepped in put out the stars [...]."
(*Three Novellas* 27, 33, 39, 40)

The foregrounded element of light, used in the manner of expressionistic effects in a film, contributes to the image of an extravagant, careless waste of resources. In contrast to most European capitals during the conflict, which suffered blackouts due to the fear of night bombardments, Dublin was able to maintain its city lights as in peace time. Dubliners suffered similar rationing of basic products as other capital cities, and experienced particularly severe restrictions as regards access to information, but they certainly were not "fumbling about in the dark like the rest of Europe was," as Irish artist Patrick Scott remarked. Scott, a student in Dublin when the war began, remembered having "the lights on, and no blackout curtains or anything else like that" (qtd. in Grob-Fitzgibbon 278–279).

This was a visual aspect of the city frequently noticed by visitors, most of them coming from London or from other cities in Britain or Northern Ireland. Naturally, Beckett had experienced the suppression of lights at night during the

war. In his last letter from Paris four days before the Nazis entered the city, dated 10 June 1940, he mentioned the “blue glass” (*Letters* 683) coating that the authorities had ordered to be put on windows. Hence the contrast between night living conditions inside and outside Ireland was remarkable for anyone who journeyed to Ireland at that time. As Clair Wills writes: “According to these narratives, to travel from Britain to Ireland in wartime was to journey from darkness into light” (5), and she mentions that travellers frequently recalled what it was like “to be greeted by the blaze of lights in neutral Dublin – a veritable rebirth from the cave of darkness that was Britain at war” (5). For Ulster poet Robert Greacen, writing in 1943 just after arriving from Belfast, Dublin was “the most fascinating city in these islands [...] an oasis of light in the surrounding gloom” (qtd. in Share 16).

The truth is that Dublin was not really as bright as was generally thought. Electricity, strongly dependent on power-stations fed by coal, was in short supply due to Britain’s closure of its frontiers and because of the lack of commercial activity. The Electricity Supply Board imposed energy restrictions on the inhabitants of the main Irish cities in 1942 and 1944: “For the ordinary citizen, however, particularly the city-dweller, it was the failure, or near failure, of gas, electricity and coal supplies which bit deepest.” (11) Yet, in many respects, life went on as usual, at least the sort of social life that is easily perceived by newcomers: people entering and coming out of bars and restaurants, dances, horse-races and shopping, as Benjamin John Grob-Fitzgibbon describes in relation to the habits of Dubliners during the Emergency: “Another well-liked place to visit was Grafton Street on a Saturday morning. It was a fashionable road to be seen on and although primarily a shopping area, most of those strolling down the street – all kitted out in their most stylish clothing – were not interested in purchasing anything at all.” (47) When Beckett returned to Dublin after two years in hiding, “he was very conscious of what seemed like Irish abundance, as contrasted with French deprivation” (Gibson, *Samuel Beckett* 109), so that with the visual image of “atrocious brightness” in the streets, he perhaps sought to transmit the idea of a blatant lack of restraint in a world of suffering, almost a shameful act on the part of the Irish authorities.⁴

An essay he wrote in the spring of 1946 reinforces such an interpretation. Beckett had intended to send “The Capital of the Ruins” to be read on RTÉ, the public radio of Ireland, but it is unlikely that it was ever broadcast. On a first reading it deals with the Red Cross hospital in the ruined city of Saint-Lô where

⁴ A well-known comment by Beckett to Freda Young summarizes his feelings towards this contentious issue: “My friends eat sawdust and turnips while all of Ireland safely gorges.” (Qtd. in Gibson, “Franco-Irish Beckett” 23)

Beckett worked as a driver, storekeeper and interpreter. It describes in detail the premises, the first-class materials used in the construction of the medical huts, and the kind of sanitary attention that the hospital provided for the local population. But on a second reading a subtle message can be discerned, one having to do with the ethical implications of such a humanitarian enterprise: "This broadcast is of interest in that it gives not only an account of the Irish hospital, but describes also the emotional consequences of the experience, or, at least, what the emotional consequences were for one of Beckett's sensitivity" (O'Brien 337). The article seems to have been written in response to comments in the Irish press regarding "France's ostensible lack of appreciation of the Irish effort in Saint-Lô" (Gordon 200). Essentially, the idea that Beckett wants to transmit in "The Capital of the Ruins" is that the contact with deprivation, sickness and malnutrition was almost as beneficial to those who went there to help as to those who received treatment, and that the terms upon which human relations should be grounded must be based on an understanding of human suffering:

I mean the possibility that 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 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. (Beckett, "The Capital" 278)

If the issue of Irish neutrality is examined, there were practical reasons that impelled the Irish government to pursue such a policy during the war (lack of military power and defences, fear of internal divisions, the sensitive issue of partition...),⁵ but the idea of Ireland remaining isolated from the conflict was nevertheless considered repugnant by many intellectuals with a link to the country, Beckett included: "Many of Ireland's wartime writers – cosmopolitan in outlook, European-minded – became during the course of the conflict vociferous critics of neutrality, or impatient with aspects of the policy." (Wills 12) What probably upset Beckett was the impossibility of remaining uninvolved in a conflict that was so clearly based on moral choices: "The obvious difficulty with Irish neutrality," writes Andrew Gibson, "was that it led to a policy of impartiality or even-handedness in a war founded for so many on a categorical morality" (Gibson, "Franco-Irish Beckett" 22). It was a kind of conflict that had caused men

⁵ The question of Irish neutrality during World War II has generated acrimonious debates between critics and defenders of the government's position at the time. An intermediate stance is held by John A. Murphy, who claims that "Irish neutrality was never a dogma or an ideological principle but rather a political orthodoxy and a formative feature of the developing personality of the State from the 1940s to the 1960s" (9).

like himself, not clearly inclined to action, to get involved in the fight. Beckett took very seriously his commitment to what he clearly saw as a cause against injustice, as Lois Gordon has described:

Beckett may have dismissed his World War II activities as 'boy-scout stuff,' a typically modest response, but he was one of the earliest to join the Resistance in Paris in 1940. In addition, when his circuit was discovered in 1942 and he became 'a wanted man,' he took refuge in Roussillon and rather than cower in hiding, fought with the *maquis*. (110)

There were probably a number of reasons for his personal involvement, among them his "acute awareness of totalitarianism [...] [his] mature sense of justice and an acute sensitivity to suffering" (Gordon 110). He also had a sense of loyalty to his adoptive country, France, and knew of the doomed fate that some of his friends there had met, like the writer Alfred Péron, interned in a concentration camp, so that Dublin's blaze of lights probably stood for him as a symbol of moral imperviousness, almost an indifference to the suffering of others.

Beckett had a history of dissatisfaction with the policies of the Free State over many years, particularly on issues such as censorship and contraception. The essays he wrote in the 1930s, such as "Censorship in the Saorstát" (1935), testify to his profound discomfort as regards the essentialist ideology behind those measures, which he described with bitter irony: "The Register of Prohibited Publications is a most happy idea, constituting as it does, [...] a free and permanent advertisement of those books and periodicals in which, be their strictly literary status never so humble, inheres the a priori excellence that they have annoyed the specialist in common sense" ("Censorship in the Saorstát" 86). It is not a minor detail that one of Beckett's early works, the collection of short stories *More Pricks than Kicks* (1934), was included in the list of forbidden books, but more than complaining about his personal circumstances, he lamented the self-righteousness and sense of superiority that these measures encouraged in Irish society at large:

These early, angry essays display, in short, a distinct antipathy towards the insularity and historical mythologizing of Ireland. Particular scorn is poured on the country's self-aggrandisement at the expense of other nations, as well as the mytho-cultural narrative of its Phoenix-like rise from the ashes (which results merely in self-eviscerating sterility). (Boyce 498)

Beckett increasingly reacted against the cultural hegemony of the Catholic middle class that had imposed their values on the policy of the nation, and much of what he wrote in his frenzy of writing is a coming to terms with pending issues he felt about Ireland. For instance, Seán Kennedy has argued that the *nouvelle* "First Love" "is avowedly anti-nationalist, and seems deliberately conceived to offend Ireland's nationalist imagery" (86) with respect to the Irish Free State policy of fertility.

"The Calmative," for its part, presents a succession of images that depict a full picture of a city with a pervading lack of concern toward those who have not got a safe roof over their heads, as if the author were extending to the Irish people the insouciance that he detected in the Irish authorities, as in the description of people locked in their houses ("But I felt the houses packed with people, lurking behind the curtains they looked out into the street," *Three Novellas* 27), or in the ineffectual encounters of the protagonist with people in the street, people who appear "as if sunk in themselves" (33). These minor comments, almost in passing, serve to reinforce this idea of a malignancy that was then rife in Ireland, bearing a striking similarity to the effects of neutrality on Irish society as observed by commentators of the time, such as Seán Ó Faoláin: "Our people, are, it would seem, self-absorbed to an amazing degree, so self-absorbed as to be cut off, in a way that one would hardly have thought possible in this modern world of constant inter-communication, from all detachment, critical sense, a sense of proportion and even a sense of humour" (qtd. in Patterson 62). All these elements make us think that in the *nouvelles*, among other topics, he was reflecting on the kind of neutrality that Ireland was implementing during the war. It is as if the overexposure to light, instead of providing a clear perspective of things, had produced by contrast a "moral miopia" (62) on the part of the authorities, with such episodes as de Valera's "infamous visit" (62) to the German delegation in Dublin after Hitler's suicide, something that Beckett, being in the Irish capital at the time, surely knew of. Similarly, Beckett implied that the intense brightness had also affected the capacity for perception in citizens, as the narrator of "The Calmative" remarks on a man he has bumped into in the tower of the church: "All that remained to me was the vision of two burning eyes staring out of their sockets under a check cap." (*Three Novellas* 32)

Andrew Gibson is probably right when he says that, "[i]t is not clear, however, that he [Beckett] shared a Churchillian contempt for Irish neutrality in itself" ("Franco-Irish Beckett" 23), but it can safely be argued that he loathed the feeling of moral superiority that neutrality had instilled in the Irish authorities. Additionally, he might have personally felt that the governments of other neutral countries did not leave their citizens abroad to their own devices during the war, "nor did they develop the emotional dimension, self-righteousness and moral superiority which distinguished Irish neutrality" (Ó Drisceoil 153–154). He certainly belonged to that minority spoken of by Terence Brown, those who saw an element of ignominy in the efforts of keeping safe at all costs, those who believed "that to remain a spectator in such desperate times was to place Ireland in grave moral jeopardy" (173). By using the image of a blinding light in the streets of Dublin in "The Calmative," he might be pointing to the consequences of this attitude for the rest of the country, the lack of concern for suffering, a sort of indecency that had to be exposed.

At the end of the story, when the protagonist is trying to run away from the city, he is literally engulfed by a crowd. He nevertheless lapses into a momentary state of calm and bliss, only to discover that, when the throng disperses, "I had no need to raise my head from the ground to know I was back in the same blinding void as before" (*Three Novellas* 40). Thus, we might infer, Ireland had not changed much for Beckett. On the contrary, the war might have served to reinforce those traits in public life that he had despised when he lived in Dublin; for Beckett the moral high ground occupied by the political and religious hierarchy, and which had spread toward the rest of society, was still immoral and hypocritical. It is especially significant in this respect that over the course of his excursion through the city, the narrator twice exclaims, "I'll never come back here" (*Three Novellas* 28, 30).

In the present examination of Beckett's *nouvelles*, and in particular "The Calmative," I have tried to identify clear evidence of Beckett's unease with Irish neutrality during World War II. Behind the bleak description of an oneiric universe, these stories contain allusions to historical events which can be seen as inviting the reader to consider Beckett's indignation with the Irish authorities of the time, especially as regards their role in a conflict in which the author was himself deeply involved, first working with the Resistance and later as a volunteer for the Red Cross. Despite the smokescreen of ambivalence in these narratives, then, I believe that they indeed present traces of an Irish context, and that from these we can gain a deeper understanding of Beckett's complex relationship with his native country. Although in the case of Beckett there is always a risk of overinterpreting the author's intentions, it is nevertheless true that the elements from the texts discussed here, together with supporting evidence from letters and articles that he wrote at around the same time, make unmistakable reference to an alienated subjectivity in relation to Ireland. The street lighting of Dublin during the Emergency, despite its ambiguous position as an enticing symbol which simultaneously invites and resists a historical reading, as is common elsewhere in Beckett's work, points in this case to a negative political outlook. It was one that Beckett could not disguise completely, as if this time he had not been able to fully conceal his sense of outrage behind a blurred landscape and the dream-like experiences of the protagonist as he ambles through the city.

Acknowledgement: I would like to thank CEI Patrimonio (Universidad de Almería) for their support.

Works cited

- Beckett, Samuel. "The Capital of the Ruins." *Samuel Beckett: The Complete Short Prose 1929–1989*. Ed. S. E. Gontarski. New York: Grove Press, 1995. 275–8.
- Beckett, Samuel. "Censorship in the Saorstát." *Disjecta*. Ed. Ruby Cohn. New York: Grove Press, 1984. 84–8.
- Beckett, Samuel. "Dante...Bruno. Vico..Joyce." *Samuel Beckett. The Grove Centenary Edition*. Vol. IV. Ed. Paul Auster. New York: Grove Press, 2006. 495–510.
- Beckett, Samuel. "First Love." *Samuel Beckett: The Complete Short Prose 1929–1989*. Ed. S. E. Gontarski. New York: Grove Press, 1995. 25–45.
- Beckett, Samuel. *The Letters of Samuel Beckett 1929–1940*. Vol. I. Eds. Martha Dow Fehsenfeld and Lois More Overbeck. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2009.
- Beckett, Samuel. *Three Novellas: The Expelled. The Calmative. The End*. London: Calder, 1999.
- Boyce, Brynhildur. "Pismires and Protestants: The 'lingering dissolution' of Samuel Beckett's *All That Fall*." *Irish Studies Review* 17.4 (2009): 499–511.
- Brown, Terence. *Ireland. A Social and Cultural History 1922–79*. Glasgow: Fontana, 1981.
- Cohn, Ruby. *A Beckett Canon*. Ann Arbor: The U of Michigan P, 2005.
- Cohran, Robert. *Samuel Beckett. A Study of the Short Fiction*. New York: Twayne, 1991.
- Craig, George, et al. "General Introduction." *The Letters of Samuel Beckett 1941–1956*. Vol. II. Eds. George Craig et al. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2011. xiii–xxviii.
- Finney, Brian. "Assumption to Lessness: Beckett's Shorter Fiction." *Beckett the Shape Changer*. Ed. Katharine Worth. London: Routledge, 1975. 63–83.
- Gibson, Andrew. "Franco-Irish Beckett: Mercier et Camier in 1945–6." *Samuel Beckett: Debts and Legacies*. Eds. Peter Fifield and David Addyman. London: Bloomsbury, 2013. 19–38.
- Gibson, Andrew. *Samuel Beckett*. London: Reaction, 2010.
- Gordon, Lois. "France: World War Two." *Samuel Beckett in Context*. Ed. Anthony Uhlmann. New York: Cambridge UP, 2013. 109–25.
- Gordon, Lois. *The World of Samuel Beckett 1906–1946*. New Haven: Yale UP, 1996.
- Grob-Fitzgibbon, Benjamin John. *The Irish Experience during the Second World War: An Oral History*. Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2004.
- Kennedy, Seán. "First Love: Abortion and Infanticide in Beckett and Yeats." *Samuel Beckett: Debts and Legacies*. Eds. Erik Tønning, Matthew Feldman, and Matthijs Engelberts. Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2010. 79–91.
- Knowlson, James. *Damned to Fame. The Life of Samuel Beckett*. London: Bloomsbury Paperbacks, 1997 (1996).
- Lloyd, David. *Anomalous States. Irish Writing and the Post-Colonial Moment*. Dublin: The Lilliput Press, 1993.
- Malley, Willy. "Bend it Like Beckett: Class Rules in Irish Literature." *The Irish Review* 47 (2013): 63–85.
- Murphy, John A. "Irish Neutrality in Historical Perspective." *Ireland and the Second World War. Politics, Society and Remembrance*. Eds. Brian Girvin and Geoffrey Roberts. Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2000. 9–23.
- O'Brien, Eoin. *The Beckett Country*. Dublin: The Black Cat Press, 1986.
- Ó Drisceoil, Donal. "Censorship as Propaganda: The Neutralisation of Irish Public Opinion during the Second World War." *Ireland and the Second World War. Politics, Society and Remembrance*. Eds. Brian Girvin and Geoffrey Roberts. Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2000. 151–64.

- Patterson, Henry. *Ireland since 1939. The Persistence of Conflict*. Dublin: Penguin, 2007.
- Perloff, Marjorie. "In Love with Hiding: Samuel Beckett's War." *Iowa Review* 35.2 (2005): 1–31.
- Porter Abbott, H. *Beckett Writing Beckett*. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1996.
- Rubenstein, Michael. *Public Works. Infrastructure, Irish Modernism, and the Postcolonial*. Notre Dame, Indiana: U of Notre Dame P, 2010.
- Seaver, Richard. *The Tender Hour of Twilight*. New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 2012.
- Share, Bernard. *The Emergency. Neutral Ireland 1939–45*. Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1987.
- Sussman, Henry. "Introduction. The Politics of Language-Based Systems." *Engagement and Indifference. Beckett and the Political*. Eds. Henry Sussman and Christopher Devenney. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2001. 1–10.
- Weiss, Katherine. "...Humanity in Ruins...": The Historical Body in Samuel Beckett's Fiction." *Samuel Beckett: History, Memory, Archive*. Eds. Seán Kennedy and Katherine Weiss. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009. 151–68.
- Wills, Clair. *That Neutral Island. A Cultural History of Ireland during the Second World War*. London: Faber, 2007.

Note: This essay is part of the research project FFI2016-76477-P, funded by the Spanish Ministerio de Economía y Competitividad and by AEI/FEDER.