

# Murphy: That Harmless Lunacy<sup>1</sup>

Patrick Fish

## Summary

The most problematic part of Beckett's *oeuvre* centres around his relation to madness. It is known that he was a psychiatric nurse for some period of time, that he was interested in the work of Freud and Jung but that goes but a little way in explaining his interest, his absorption with madness. This paper argues that this fascination is not one registered from the outside – as one observing – but from an intuitive realisation that the categorising that both signals and comforts Western civilisation attempts to invalidate something that is already there. Murphy's journey (or languid perambulation) seeks to explore the limits of the category of unreason and the tragedy exists in his inability to transgress that limit as much as he wills it. Unlike death, madness accepts no volunteers. *Murphy*, it is argued, designates a turning point in Beckett's writing whereby he realises the full impact of this paradox, a paradox that not only is absorbed into his later writing but one that points to the "essential fiction" that preserves Western consciousness and maintains the facade of sanity. For Beckett the rot has already set in and it is embedded in the entrails of sanity. Sanity may wear a different, more acceptable, face but always it hides the damage already done. It is this damage that will become Beckett's *modus operandi* in his subsequent work and it for this reason that the author grants Murphy the esteemed Beckettian gift: death.

## Opsomming

Die mees problematiese deel van Beckett se *oeuvre* setel in sy relasie tot kranksinnigheid. Dit is bekend dat hy 'n psigiatriese verpleër vir 'n rukkie was, dat hy belanggestel het in Freud en Jung se werk, maar dit verduidelik geensins sy geïnteresseerdheid in en beheptheid met kranksinnigheid nie. Hierdie referaat maak die stelling dat die gefassineerdheid nie van buite af registreer – soos deur een wat waarneem – nie, maar vanuit 'n intuïtiewe gewaarwording dat die kategorisering wat die Westerse beskawing kenmerk sowel as troos, probeer om iets ongeldig te verklaar wat alreeds bestaansreg het. Murphy se reis (of rustige omwandeling) streef om die limiete van die kategorie van onsinigheid te verken en die tragedie lê daarin dat hy nie by magte is om die grense te oorskry soveel as hy graag wil nie. In teenstelling met die dood, aanvaar kranksinnigheid nie vrywilligers nie. *Murphy*, so word geredeneer, dui die keerpunt in Beckett se skryfkuns aan waar hy die volle trefkrag van hierdie paradoks besef, 'n paradoks wat nie net in sy latere werk geabsorbeer word nie, maar een wat wys na die "essensiële fiksie" wat Westerse bewussyn bewaar en 'n fasade van gesonde verstand voorhou. Vir Beckett het die verrotting reeds ingetree en is dit onlosmaaklik ingebed in die rasionaliteit. Rasionaliteit mag 'n ander, meer aanvaarbare front voorhou, maar dit verdoesel altyd die skade wat alreeds aangerig is. Dit is hierdie skade wat Beckett se *modus operandi* sal word in sy daaropvolgende werk en dit is om hierdie rede dat dié skrywer Murphy die gewaardeerde Beckettse geskenk verwys: die dood.

For Foucault, ever since the classical exclusion of madness, humanity has been held captive by the consequences of that exclusion. Modernity (which Foucault saw as beginning in the nineteenth century) has sustained this exclusion. On the one hand the signs of madness have been expunged as a public eyesore, removed to the asylums – those institutions of red brick that merely reflect and admit to the sight no penetration, no way of seeing beyond their walls. On the other hand, madness retains its power because it has been internalised, it has been locked away in the invisible asylum of the self. As Foucault points out, the work of Pinel and Tuke liberated the madman from

“the mute dialogue between reason and unreason” (1965: 262) into a space reigned over by silence:

Delivered from his chains, he is now chained, by silence, to transgression and to shame. He feels himself punished, and he sees the sign of his innocence in that fact; free from all physical punishment, he must prove himself guilty. His torment was his glory; his deliverance must humiliate him.

(1965: 261)

However, if this applies to the madman then it is equally pertinent to the sane individual who, being sane, dwells under the threat of this new madness, a madness that dwells within. If madness now exists within the self, rather than externally, recognition and responsibility are entirely in the hands of the individual. Gone are the old readings of madness as divinely inspired, as an imbalance of humours or as, at least, containing the wisdom that comes with folly. For the sane and mad alike, the threat is an internal one; the self becomes the criminal, the jury and the executioner. This version of the self (and one finally established by Freud’s work) leads to a vast introversion. The self is doomed to play out its days warding off, symptom by symptom, its internal dysfunction: the threat that one may wake to find the world changed, the body made of amber glass and the radio broadcasting threats that one cannot help but decode. In Beckett’s world the internalisation of madness is so thorough that sanity and insanity achieve an intricate state of imbrication. It is a world governed not so much by the absurd as by its root, the surd. The surd is both an exact number that occupies a place in mathematical space and time, and also an irrational number – that which defies that which it defines. It also describes a deafness, an inability on the part of the sufferer to hear, to participate fully in the conventions of intercourse. Like the “aural circumcision” (1979: 3) of which Kermode speaks, the surd entails a hearing that is a mishearing. Within the various resonances of the word there is, perhaps, the glimmer of a single content; that which Murphy realises when his labour is refused by a chandler:

Sometimes it was expressed more urbanely, sometimes less. Its forms were as various as the grades of the chandler mentality, its content was one: “Thou surd!”.

(1979: 47)

So ingrained is the surd mentality into the protagonists that each seems to belong to a family in which dementia is all that unites them. This family resemblance places Beckett’s writings within an ancient tradition: an isolated legacy with no insights to bequeath to those who follow. Roland Barthes (*Sade/Fourier/Loyola*: 1976) touches on many aspects of this tradition. He calls these writers “Logothetes, founders of language” (1976: 3) and detects in all of them a withdrawal from society in order to create a language capable of articulating and ordering their worlds according to the particular (and often perverse) hierarchy they establish. And as founders of language they are necessarily found in language:

Sade is no longer an erotic, Fourier no longer a utopian, Loyola no longer a saint: all that is left in each of them is a scenographer: he who disperses himself across a framework he sets up and arranges *ad infinitum*.

(1976: 6)

What is implicit and yet never articulated by Barthes is the enormity of the task and its implicit failure. Yet in spite of this they pursue this infinite arrangement with a vehemence that mocks the finitude and mortality of the self. In writing the impossible text each of them withdrew from the world into the text that was to become their life. That this arrangement cannot reach completion, cannot really begin, requires on the part of the author, a sense of irreverence, an iconoclasm that makes ridiculous both the self and the conventional aims of writing: to represent, to order, to end. Like Beckett, these writers are always confronted with the inexhaustibility of their assignment – and thus their own exhaustion – and yet they write, mocking the exhaustion that haunts them in life and in the text. In Sade's case, confinement made writing a reasonable way to pass 26 years – he was obliged to write by the legal restraints that denied him action. But for Fourier, Loyola and (perhaps the greatest of them all) Thomas Aquinas, the same obligation of which Beckett speaks, hurries them onward along their untenable course: in exhaustion, irreverence and obligation we can append the Thomistic world of *Summa Theologiae*. And we have Beckett, whose writings (his poems, plays, novels and his one film) constitute a world of language that can correctly be called Beckettian.

There are two points in which Beckett differs from Barthes's pioneers of language. The first difference is a desperation in Beckett's work: there is no hierarchy of order (no Loyolian God or Sadean libertine overseer) that blesses his work and exonerates him from the failure of not finishing. Secondly, Sade, Fourier and Loyola begin this infinite tract in a state of knowledge (if not grace):

for them the reconstitution of the whole can be no more than a summation of intelligibles: nothing indecipherable, no irreducible quality of ejaculation, happiness, communication: nothing is that is not spoken. . . .

(Barthes 1976: 4)

In the case of Sade there is no evidence of development as an author, no chance that he will finish and begin a different task. Once created, the Sadean language is always present – requiring only the careful arrangement and rearrangement of the syntax of bodies and crimes. Beckett, however, has both to learn his language and to unlearn a certain academic pedantry: the latter was achieved in *More Pricks Than Kicks* and in his early poetry; the former (and formative) took place in *Murphy* and *Watt*. These novels display an experimentation, a honing and destruction of the possibilities of language to arrive at a discourse that never is discarded, only endlessly arranged and repeated. *Murphy* and *Watt*, then, are transitional works that seek to resolve the position of one learning to write and one learning to find habitat in that writing.

What this has to do with madness is “simply” this: in *Murphy* and *Watt* Beckett not only conducts his most direct exploration of madness but also, as will be argued, inculcates madness into the fabric of the texts that follow. It is not with these transitional works that I will begin, but rather when his discourse is in full bloom and decay.

Consider, for example, the madman in *Endgame*. Hamm describes a mad friend of his; one who, like Blake

was a painter – and engraver. I had a great fondness for him. I used to go and see him, in the asylum. I’d take him by the hand and drag him to the window. Look! There! All that rising corn! And there! Look! The sails of the herring fleet! All that loveliness! (Pause.) He’d snatch away his hand and go back into his corner. Appalled. All he had seen was ashes. (Pause.) He alone had been spared. (Pause.) Forgotten. (Pause.)

(Beckett 1958: 32)

Ironically, this madman’s vision has become that which, in reality, lies outside the windows of the play. But if this is different from Blake’s vision, it has a comprehensiveness reminiscent of another painter – Pieter Bruegel. For both Beckett and Bruegel the ashes and the corn co-exist. Foreground merges with background (in Bruegel’s work both are always in focus) to produce an endless canvas where Icarus falls, a farmer toils, the innocents are slaughtered, village fairs are celebrated and skeletons disrupt an idle feast. This makes more specific Beckett’s inexhaustible text and explains Watt’s appearance in an attempt to reconcile Mercier with Camier, their memories of Murphy’s demise and more typically Malone’s disgruntled assertion:

Then it will be all over with the Murphys, Merciers, Molloy, Morans and Malones, unless it goes on beyond the grave. . . . How many have I killed, hitting them on the head or setting fire to them? . . . There was an old butler too, in London I think, there’s London again, I cut his throat with his razor.

(1959: 217)

Malone as the arch-mover in *Murphy*, solving the mysterious “suicide” of the butler 20 years earlier? If there is a freedom in Beckett’s world it is the freedom to range freely among the ruins of that world while being held captive by it. Like the Beckettian body, these characters not only overflow the dimensions of their physicality but transgress the boundaries of the text, flowing from one to the other but prisoner still to the unenviable logic of Beckett’s world. And it is that *logos* that first becomes apparent in *Murphy* and establishes the range of pigments available for the “endless” Beckettian canvas.

What is the nature of existence within the Beckettian canvas, what is it to exist there? The Latin root of “to exist” is *ex – sistere*, “to stand out” and as such is a word whose genesis is spatial. This has useful ramifications both for the comparison to the collapsed perspective of Bruegel and Beckett as well as partially explaining the distortion of space in madness. And so it is with the question of space that we begin.

In *Murphy* the action is set in Dublin and London, between the months of June and October. In fact the narrative is extremely finicky about these

specifics of time and place. Murphy first appears “in a mew in West Brompton” (p. 5); his meeting with Celia occurs when she

had turned out of Edith Grove into Cremorne Road, intending to refresh herself with a smell of the Reach and then return by Lot’s Road, when chancing to glance to her right she saw, motionless in the mouth of Stadium Street, considering alternately the sky and a sheet of paper, a man.

(p. 11–12)

Even his proposal to her “the following Sunday” takes place “in the Battersea Park sub-tropical garden, immediately following the ringing of the bell” (p. 13). It is tempting, after this little foray into exactitude, to join with Mr Kelly as he pleads for a break from “all these demented particulars” (p. 12). And indeed, there is something demented in these particulars – especially in terms of the grey landscapes (“Lessness”) and primal ooze (*How It Is*) of his later work. But the dementia goes further. This meeting, courting and proposal, as recounted by Celia, is as factual as the narrative ever becomes. This is where the conventional novel ends: from here on (with the exception of the asylum sequence) the novel flounders in a more abstract realm. This is not to say – as one can say of his work from *Watt* onwards – that the plot recedes, but that the focus is elsewhere. That Celia brings Mr Kelly (and the reader) up to date is nevertheless something that is incontrovertibly in the past. This “striking case of love requited” (p. 13) has reached full cadence, as has the conventional world to which each, uncomfortably, belongs.

Apparently in *Murphy* the stability of the real is always in the past, before the novel began and somewhere else. Once started, the world of particulars is rendered unstable by the very people that should objectify it. With the sole exception of Celia (and I shall have recourse to clarification later), the book is full of people in various stages of physical and mental decline: Mr Kelly on his deathbed, Neary’s attempted suicide at the “hands” of a statue, Miss Counihan’s anthropoidal form (p. 69), Miss Carridge’s stink, Miss Dew’s Ducks disease, Mr Endon’s apnoea, Cooper’s acathisia (perfectly described as “deep seated and of long standing” (p. 69)) and Murphy. Murphy’s dress (p. 45) betrays him as something between a clown and a beggar with all the resultant odour of his pilgrimage locked in. And as for the rest of him

his troubles had begun early. . . . With what sorrow [the obstetrician] recorded that of all the millions of little larynges cursing in unison at that particular moment, the infant Murphy’s alone was off the note. To go back no farther than the vagitus.

(p. 44)

Finally, even when the particulars are scientific there is something “off note” in the way they are presented, the way their status is ridiculed. The physiological description of Celia, in its measured precision (p. 10), detaches her from the lifelessness of the data that constitute her body.

Murphy fares no better. Even placed in his mew in West Brompton, his posture – bound, naked in a rocking chair – if not quite impossible (the lost seventh scarf) presents one desperately trying to escape, through confinement, the space his body occupies:

it gave his body pleasure, it appeased his body. Then it set him free in his mind. For it was not until his body was appeased that he could come alive in his mind, as described in section six.

(p. 6)

Apart from its obvious Cartesian resonances, the oddity of this ritual of release demarcates Murphy's search for a space that is other than that of West Brompton. By stilling his body – in nakedness and a primal rhythm – he can escape (if only for a while) its exhausting demands. And the consequence of coming alive in his mind is not to give it precedence over the body, but to obliterate the voice of the body as a step towards a greater obliteration that entails both: to silence, finally, the dialogue of woe between antinomies. The desire to still the body is thus not an attempt to take sides with either of these warring factions, but merely to declare a momentary truce. Bound to a rhythm that is both coital and prenatal, he simulates a time of undifferentiation, a moment when he is either lost in the act of coitus, or hidden in the womb and unaware of the acting to come. Within this rocking, there is the dim possibility of negating the chatter of opposites: life and death, subject and object, self and world, mind and body.

As promised by the considerate narrator "section six" does indeed clarify Murphy's relation to the mind, body and rocking chair. Murphy's body is in a position common to all Beckett's protagonists from Belacqua to the persona in "Stirrings Still". The body is more or less perennially in a state of exhaustion – exhausted not only by the decrepitude of a body forever waning, but by its traffic with the mind. For motion to be at all possible it must occur while one is at rest: for the rat to move, the man must be asleep (p. 64–5).

The movement of the mind through "the three zones, light, half light, dark" arises from the rest of the body. The first zone, an imaginative mockery of the prevalent terms of existence, allows Murphy, the victim of the world, to become its persecutor. But in the same way as even God must tire of avenging himself on the world, this zone gives way to the second where "the pleasure was contemplation":

In both these zones of his private world Murphy felt sovereign and free, in the one to requite himself, in the other to move as he pleased from one unparalleled beatitude to another.

(p. 65)

But each requires effort, a kind of weak participation and for one exhausted in body, mental strain, however slight, takes its toll. The third degree is infinitely more alluring:

Here there was nothing but commotion and the pure forms of commotion. Here he was not free, but a mote in the dark of absolute freedom. He did not move, he was a point in the ceaseless unconditioned generation and passing away of line. Matrix of surds.

(p. 66)

Here the escape is seemingly final; not only from the body, but from the mind as well – the final retreat from the Cartesian world. If this retreat is important

to Murphy, it is also pertinent to the study of madness. Morris Berman's *Reenchantment of the World* and Foucault's *Madness and Civilisation* are odd bedfellows indeed, and yet both locate a significant change in social consciousness with the writings of Descartes. Descartes is, for them, a metaphor of a change under which we still toil. For Foucault (1965: 108), Descartes excludes the madman – both as body and as one who thinks – from the terrain of what can be thought. The madman becomes unthinkable and – madness having lost the validity of thought – only good enough to be locked away. Felman summarises the position:

A man can still be mad; but thought cannot. Thought is, by definition, the accomplishment of reason, an exercise of sovereignty of a subject capable of truth. I think, therefore I am not mad; I am not mad, therefore I am.

(1985: 39)

Implicit in this, is a division that is indicative of the Cartesian thesis, a division that Berman sees as central to thinking since the seventeenth century. In proposing a body and mind, Descartes holds

the assumption that mind and body, subject and object, were radically disparate entities. Thinking, it would seem, separates me from the world I confront. I perceive my body and its functions, but "I" am not my body.

(1981: 21)

Thus for Berman, Descartes's method (together with the work of Bacon and Newton) created a perception of ourselves as divided entities: divided from the world, from others and from ourselves. But as divided subjects we retain the desire to merge with our otherness. Hence Cartesian sanity is, according to Berman, a systematic fragmentation that is finally "nothing more than a collective madness" (1981: 124). Although Berman does not glorify the experience (see Cooper's *Language of Madness* (1980: 41–42)), madness is conversely a reconstitution of the unified self:

Madness is, in the end, a statement about logical categories, and its reversion to the structure of premodern thought represents a revolt against the reality principle that it sees as crushing the human spirit.

(1985: 125)

Phrased by the Cartesian voice, Murphy is, on one hand, a picture of sanity: he is one unable to think madness. He is excluded, by definition, from anything beyond sanity's realm. But on the other hand, Murphy is an example of one on the limits of sanity, where the consequence of being sane begins to breathe the air of madness. And his inability to reconcile the opposites of body and mind, together with his desire to do so, draw him towards madness and make of his sanity a kind of madness. Madness exists in Murphy as an index of his sanity. His scorn of the latter, however, does not guarantee his finding succour in the former. Madness does not accept volunteers. He is finally caught, for all his attempts at immolation of the double-headed self, in the frustration of dualism.

The mathematical basis upon which Descartes built his system, and which has become an unquestioned legacy to contemporary thought is, for Foucault,

the sign of a withdrawal from madness. For Berman it signifies the presence of madness. The consequence for Murphy at least, is the perpetual confinement in the "matrix of surds": as an irrational number existing within a mathesis that typifies its opposite. He is nothing less than an irrational number on either side of the mirror which divides sanity from insanity. His quest is perfectly reasonable under these impossible conditions: to reach negation, "a mote in the dark of absolute freedom". The brief reprieve of coitus, being held in the arms of his rocking chair, moments in which he is rendered insensible to the world and finally madness are, for him, tolerable steps towards "Christ's parthian shaft: It is finished" (p. 44). As Beckett, with great lyricism, claims in his translation of Chamfort's maxim:

Better on your arse than on your feet,  
Flat on your back than either, dead than the lot.

(1984: 159)

Like the darkening hues of refutation that make up the spectrum of Murphy's mind, there are degrees of bodily rest; brief reprieves from the exhaustion of movement. After having examined Murphy on his arse, it is high time to consider him on his back. If the rocking chair grants him a physical exit from the Cartesian paradigm, then equally the park is, for Murphy, an exit from the labours of the city. The park, within the topography of a city that is geared toward a mathesis of productivity, functions as a pocket of worthlessness. It is no coincidence that *Mercier and Camier* and *Watt* begin in a park, not by chance that Murphy proposes to Celia in one, and definitely not serendipity that speeds him to Lincoln's Inn Fields with the knowledge that "to sit down was no longer enough, he must insist now on lying down" (p. 48). And this position achieved, like the meditative tramp he is,

he slipped away, from the pensums and prizes, from Celia, chandlers, public highways, etc, from Celia, buses, public gardens, etc, to where there were no pensums and no prizes, but only Murphy himself, improved out of all knowledge.

(p. 62)

His slipping away is under the guise of indolence. The unemployable scandal that was the madman of the Classical period continues to exist in Murphy. In the domestication of madness, in the rationalisation of irrationality, madness remains a pathetic cipher on the periphery (in the city's parks) but nevertheless has not been entirely expunged. Madness exists, barely visible, out of the corner of the social eye. Murphy, perched precariously between sanity and its otherness, retains a freedom of movement (however painful) within the matrix of worth. While he maintains that freedom – which is little more than the freedom to starve – he can carry out his petty blasphemies against the social order. Here too he finds refreshment on his lonely journey, for although there is no possibility of his being "improved out of all knowledge", if he can cheat the waitress out of .83 of a cup of tea (p. 51) or Miss Dew out of threepence (p. 60) he achieves, in reality, a sovereignty over the order that is akin to the light zone of his imagination. To win but a round between those "endowed with the ruthless cunning of the sane" and himself "a seedy

solipsist" (p. 50) is victory indeed. A victory, in no other sense, than that of a child pulling faces as the enemy parades its supremacy through the conquered streets. It does however introduce Murphy's trivial attempts to subvert the order of things: it is a refusal to belong.

Seedy solipsist or not, there exists a world, social in nature, either to or from which Murphy cannot escape. What of the bevy of lesser characters that commute feverishly around Dublin and between Dublin and London? Their role as lesser entities is a given, for as the narrator tells in one of the numerous asides, "all the puppets in this book whinge sooner or later, except Murphy, who is not a puppet" (p. 71). What makes them puppets is partly a narrative ploy whereby they assume an almost farcical status at the hands of the puppeteer (author, God). As with much farce, they are motivated by the stringency of love: physical, romantic, ideal. It is over love that Neary – Murphy's prospective mentor – and Murphy part:

"The love that lifts up its eyes," said Neary, "being in torment; that craves for the tip of her little finger, dipped in lacquer, to cool its tongue – is foreign to you, Murphy, I take it."

"Greek," said Murphy.

(p. 7)

They are puppets not because they are unaware of the Cartesian mess, but because they refuse to learn its object lessons – Neary's desire for Miss Dwyer, Miss Counihan and Celia; Wylie's yearning for Miss Counihan and Celia; Miss Counihan's affection for Murphy, Wylie and Neary. And beyond this cacophony of voices, loving and loved, there is another strident choir involving Neary, Flight Lieutenant Elliman, Miss Farrell, Father Fitt. . . . (p. 7). Beyond that, no doubt, there lies another mathematical constellation of love's hopelessness. However far it extends, at its epicentre is Murphy.

Literally, they are bound to him, for it is Murphy whom they seek: he is the rational answer to their problems, the one who can give credence to their collective waiting, travelling, kissing, double-crossing, pursuing and drinking. He is the logic that, once gained, will organise their lives into syllogistic bliss:

- Murphy loves not Miss Counihan
- Neary/Wylie loves Miss Counihan
- Miss Counihan loves Neary
  
- Miss Counihan loves Wylie.

If Murphy is the *ergo sum* of their immediate existences, he is also Descartes's "evil demon" (Descartes 1968: 100) who instils doubt rather than certainty. This is obvious for one who, in his amorous dealings, is still trapped within the old antitheses: "[t]he part of him he hated craved for Celia, the part that he loved shrivelled up at the thought of her" (p. 8). Love for Murphy is yet another version of the same disease. This is most perceptively realised by Celia and, to a lesser extent, by Neary.

Neary for all his need for an object to love grows weary, in the course of the novel, of the game in which he participates. He is like Murphy, but for one

major difference: "he seems doomed to hope unending" (p. 113). Thus betrayed by Miss Counihan and Wylie he begins "yearning for Murphy as though he had never yearned for anything or anyone before" (p. 113). "As though": the original premise of the game; the premise that forces continuance. Murphy is no longer a means to an end but an end in himself: the game continues, the sides are changed. This is exactly what Murphy desires to escape, this infernal closed system where causes become effects, means become ends, subjects become objects. As even Wylie has the perspicuity to note:

For every symptom that is eased, another is made worse. The horse leech's daughter is a closed system. The quantum of her wantum cannot vary.

(p. 36)

Both David Hesla (1978: 43–45) and Hugh Kenner (1961: 79–115) perceive the immense difficulty of one embroiled in this rational/irrational universe. So Neary, although contaminated by Murphy, fails to learn Murphy's lesson: if desire is to be found anywhere, it must lie in the desire to make of oneself an end and an end to desire.

The contamination of Neary may be partial, but Murphy's need for the cessation of need entirely rubs off on Celia. When left to her own devices (while Murphy is out searching for unemployment) she assumes his former position in the rocking chair. Moreover, she does not merely content herself with sitting:

She could not sit long in the chair without the impulse stirring, tremulously, as for an exquisite depravity, to be naked and bound. . . always the moment came when no effort of thought could prevail against the sensation of being imbedded in a jelly of light, or calm the trembling of her body to be made fast.

(p. 42)

This sado-masochism within the self has sexual overtones simply because the relief gained is of the same ilk. Celia has found a place where victim and persecutor meet within the oldest of rhythms, or as Yeats would have it, "O body swayed to music, O brightening glance,/ How can you know the dancer from the dance?" ("Among School Children" (p. 130)). As a consequence, she also shares with Murphy a growing weariness in the face of "life and death and other tuppenny aches" (1984: 157). With the death of the butler, she reaches a realisation not only of the imminence of her death, but the deaths of Murphy and Mr Kelly as well. From this point on she turns "away from so much dark flesh and word to the sky, under which she had nothing to lose" (p. 129). She is on her own way to Murphy's end, she who was Murphy's "last exile" (p. 131).

Having left his last exile Murphy takes shelter in the house of madness, a house whose metaphor is played out geographically, "on the boundary of two counties" (p. 90). The hints as to the solution offered by madness have come not only by way of his intimate proximity to oddity, but also through the prognostication offered by the dubious shaman Suk (p. 22) and by the narrator: "To those in fear of losing it, reason stuck like a bur. And to those

in hope. . .?" (p. 56). And so Murphy's approach to the Magdalen Mental Mercyseat involves a sense of coming home:

Murphy, whose experience as a physical and rational being obliged him to call sanctuary what the psychiatrists called exile and to think of the patients not as banished from a system of benefits but as escaped from a colossal fiasco.

(p. 101)

Those words again: "physical and rational being", madness as escape and the world as "colossal fiasco". For Murphy there is only one solution. The sane world has, at its core, unreasonable assumptions, whereas madness, for all its stink of "paraldehyde and truant sphincters" (p. 96) should have, at its quiet centre, all that Murphy has hitherto been denied: companionship (albeit it of a catatonic variety), a role-model in the hairy guise of Mr Endon (p. 105), a padded cell (p. 103) especially built for Murphy's merger with non-Murphy and the possibility, in the end, of madness itself. That he can "communicate" with those under his care is extremely alluring:

It meant that they felt in him what they had been and he in them what he would be. It meant that nothing less than a slap-up psychosis could consummate his life's strike.

(p. 104)

As the park is to the city, the asylum to the sane world, his chair to the room, Murphy has finally found "the little world" (p. 101) to which he can permanently belong. He has made of the periphery a centre and after only a short residency has the "aspect, even to Ticklepenny's inexperienced eye, of a real alienation" (p. 109).

Thus prepared, he begins his night rounds and enters, in a manner similar to that of St. John of the Cross, the dark night of the soul.<sup>2</sup> Delivered from the prying eyes of the clinically sane, Murphy is alone in the night with his madmen. The apotheosis comes when Mr Endon, sensing Murphy's eye behind the judas (a sequence ripe for Lacanian analysis: the deception of Murphy's eye by Mr Endon's gaze (see Lacan 1977: 135)) sets up the chess game – a game of initiation that is typical of all rites of passage. In keeping with the supposedly neat inversion of terms, Mr Endon's chess board bears the same relation to insanity as Murphy's chair bears to sanity. Chess is governed by rigorous rules, implies an outcome and is played upon a surface that is the personification of the matrix in which the self engages the otherness of the world. It is a game that represents – in its very order – logic and rationality: in short, all the limbs of the sane construct.

Within the game of sanity, Murphy is still too good a player. He attempts desperately to engage Mr Endon on one hand, and to emulate Mr Endon's refusal to be engaged on the other. For all his attempts to reach into insanity, he makes the mistake of postulating the old antinomy: Mr Endon refuses to become his other, either as friend or foe. As Bair points out, Murphy could have achieved a re-cognition of Murphy by Mr Endon in one more move (1978: 195) but Murphy retreats before insanity's gaze: "there was nothing but he, the unintelligible gulf and they. That was all, All, ALL" (p. 134). Why

is Murphy bound to the "ALL" of sanity (its worthlessness and its plenitude) and why can he not cross over into the "ALL" of madness with its wealth of Nothingness? The answer lies in the sad fact that Murphy is the curator of madmen and, whether he likes it or not, upholds the order he despises. To believe that insanity can be reached merely by inverting the terms is to repeat Neary's mistake. But as we have noted, Murphy is cut off from Neary because of the latter's unending hopefulness. He is also excluded from Mr Endon's vision as absolute negation:

"the last at last seen of him  
himself unseen by him  
and of himself"

A rest.

"The last Mr Murphy saw of Mr Endon was Mr  
Murphy unseen by Mr Endon. This was also the last Murphy saw of Murphy."

A rest.

"The relation between Mr Murphy and Mr Endon could not have been better summed up by the former's sorrow at seeing himself in the latter's immunity from seeing anything but himself."

A long rest.

"Mr Murphy is a speck in Mr Endon's unseen".

(p. 140)

This convoluted epiphany sees madness as the Otherness which is oblivious of its being other. Murphy cannot cross over into madness, but neither can he retreat to sanity. He has reached a point where he is excluded from both: to use the language of geometry, he becomes a vertex extending out of a linear plane. And this vertical ascendance or descendance places him in "the unintelligible gulf".

As one unintelligible to himself and to others, as one lost in the gulf where the madness in sanity meets the sanity of madness, Murphy designates the end of one kind of Beckett protagonist (including Belacqua, Celia and Neary) and the birth of a new melodious breed: Watt, Molloy, Malone, Unnamable. . . Although the potentiality of Murphy has not been exhausted, Murphy is. His laboured walk back to his quarters, his slow shedding of clothes, his blank collapse on his back, the fragmentation of his past in

Scraps of bodies, of landscapes, hands, eyes, lines, and colours evoking nothing, rose and climbed out of sight before him

(p. 141)

his dim intentions, his final pushing off and his being pushed off into the "superfine chaos" (p. 142): like Christ's weary toil to Golgotha (after his own glimpse of madness in Gethsemane), Murphy must die so that his spirit may rise in Watt. In Murphy we have the simultaneous birth and death of madness. We glimpse it in Murphy's game with Mr Endon and watch as it dies away or, more properly, is suffused into the texts that follow. On the level of character, those that follow Murphy bear the stigmata of Murphy's epiphany – damned to suffer, perennially, from Murphy's wounds. Madness is now an unforgettable part of them and an unobtainable dead end. They are cursed to

move on, in search of other forms of congress with “the accidentless One-and-Only, conveniently called Nothing” (p. 138). Whereas Beckett will invariably deny it to those who follow, he grants Murphy the great Beckettian wish and allows him the final reconciliation with the other, the merger of self quite literally with the world:

By closing time the body, mind and soul of Murphy were freely distributed over the floor of the saloon; and before another dayspring greyned the earth had been swept away with the sand, the beer, the butts, the glass, the matches, the spits, the vomit.

(p. 154)

Beckett writes Murphy off.

## Notes

1. This phrase is taken from one of the narrator’s more acerbic conclusions as to the nature of consciousness:  
 a feeble idea may be obtained of what awaits him too smart not to know better, better than to leave his black cell and that harmless lunacy, faint flicker every age or so, the consciousness of being, of having been.  
 (Beckett 1970: 82)
2. Mysticism and the mystic quest is the theme of Helene Baldwin’s *Samuel Beckett’s Real Silence*. In an already somewhat contrived reading of Beckett’s Trilogy, she mysteriously ignores the “plenitude of mystical reference” in *Murphy* by arguing that his early work cannot be “subsumed under the rubric of mysticism and metaphysical quest I am attempting to outline. . .” (p. 10). This is odd, for surely Murphy’s quest could be seen as assuming the process indicated by St John of the Cross in “Forgotten among the lilies”:

I abandoned and forgot myself,  
 Laying my face on my Beloved;  
 All things ceased; I went out for myself,  
 Leaving my cares.

(*The collected works of St John of the Cross* 1947: 296)

## References

- Bair, Deirdre  
 1978 *Samuel Beckett*. London: Picador.
- Baldwin, Helene  
 1981 *Samuel Beckett’s Real Silence*. University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press.
- Barthes, Roland  
 1976 *Sadel Fourier/ Loyola*, translated by Richard Miller. New York: Hill & Wang.
- Beckett, Samuel  
 1938 *Murphy*. London: John Calder.  
 1958 *Endgame*. London: Faber & Faber.  
 1959 *The Beckett Trilogy*. London: Picador.

- 1970 *Mercier and Camier*. London: Picador.
- 1983 *Disjecta*. Ruby Cohn (ed.). London: John Calder.
- 1984 *Collected Poems: 1930–1978*. London: John Calder.
- Berman, Morris  
1981 *The Reenchantment of the World*. Toronto: Bantam.
- Cooper, David  
1980 *The Language of Madness*. Harmondsworth: Pelican.
- Descartes, Rene  
1968 *Discourse on Method and The Meditations*, translated by F.E. Sutcliffe. Harmondsworth: Penguin.
- Felman, Shoshana  
1985 *Writing and Madness*, translated by M.N. Evans, S. Felman & B. Mussumi. New York: Cornell University Press.
- Foucault, Michel  
1965 *Madness and Civilization*, translated by Richard Howard. London: Tavistock.
- Hesla, D.  
1978 *The Shape of Chaos*. Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press.
- Kenner, Hugh  
1961 *Samuel Beckett*. London: John Calder.
- Kermode, Frank  
1979 *The Genesis of Secrecy: On the Interpretation of Narratives*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Lacan, Jacques.  
1977 *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-Analysis*, translated by Alan Sheridan. Harmondsworth: Penguin.
- St. John of the Cross.  
1947 *The Complete Works, Part One*, translated by E. Allison Peers. London: Burns, Oates & Washbourne.
- Yeats, W.B.  
1983 *Collected Poems*. London: Papermac.