

Extracted from *Ireland: Space, Text, Time*, edited by
& © Liam Harte, Yvonne Whelan and Patrick Crotty, 2005.
Reproduced with the kind permission of The Liffey Press,
Ashbrook House, 10 Main Street, Raheny, Dublin 5, Ireland.
Tel: (+353 1) 8511458; E-mail: info@theliffeypress.com
www.theliffeypress.com

This Chapter © Charles Travis, all rights reserved.

12

Beyond the Cartesian Imagination: Placing Beckett

Charles Travis

Samuel Beckett's (1906-89) first novel *Murphy* (1938) provides an idiosyncratic examination of the human mind and its perception of the experience of social alienation inhabiting the architecture of Cartesian space. The novel also provides a map with which to plot the intersection between geography and the psychoanalytical development of the early Beckett style. Influenced by the literary explorations of Beckett's contemporary James Joyce, *Murphy* charts the peripatetic mental wanderings of an Irish emigrant living in London. Despite his love for a prostitute named Celia, the protagonist longs for the detachment suggested

by postmodern theorists Deleuze and Guattari who, in their critique of the Cartesian framing of space, enigmatically claim that “the schizophrenic voyage is the only kind there is” (Deleuze and Guattari, 1983: 223). However, Murphy discovers through his work as a medical orderly in a lunatic asylum the ultimate spuriousness of Deleuze and Guattari’s claim. Accordingly, it can be said that Beckett wrote from a nebulous space located beyond the debate between Enlightenment discourses of rationality and the postmodernist response.

Murphy was written in the early 1930s at a time when Beckett was undergoing psychoanalysis in London, a treatment which was then illegal in the strongly Catholic milieu of the Irish Free State. The publication of the novel illustrated that he was actively engaged in the trope of his own devising and would endeavour from then on to “write as an inmate in the asylum of the *solus ipse*, rather than as an Irishman in his native tradition” (Kearney, 1988: 59). This native tradition comprised the Irish Literary Revival, which contributed to the gestation of an independent Irish state during Beckett’s formative years. He was raised as an upper-class Dublin Protestant who boarded in private schools before reading modern languages at Trinity College Dublin. Estranged from the ethos of the Free State as a result, he was acerbically critical of its polity. He regarded nationalistic tropes as “faeces”, wryly noting in his later fiction that “wherever nauseated time has dropped a nice fat turd you will find our patriots, sniffing it up, on all fours, their faces on fire” (Beckett, 1974: 30-31). He was particularly scathing of the 1929 Censorship Act, accusing the government of promoting “sterilisation of the mind” (Beckett, 1983: 87). However, in rejecting the mythologies of Irish cultural nationalism, which subordinated the individual to the collective ideological tropes of an idealised heritage, Beckett was not repudiating Irishness *per se*, as most of the characters in his oeuvre have names and personalities which are idiosyncratically Irish. Further, by setting *Murphy* in London with a cast of Irish emigrants he not only undermines the nationalist construction of Irish identity in cultural *bas-relief*, but also questions the very premises underlying the per-

ception and representation of experience and space as they have emerged in Platonic and Cartesian perspectives.

The Mind, the Street and the Asylum

In his early work *Proust* (1931) Beckett considered the perception and representation of experience drawn from the faculties of memory and habit, derived from the perspective of the Cartesian narrator. He observed that voluntary memory “is of no value as an instrument of evocation, and provides an image as far removed from the real as the myth of our imagination or the caricature furnished by direct perception”, adding that “Habit is a compromise effected between the individual and his environment” (Beckett, 1965: 14, 18). He also contended that there are individuals who seek a demythologised experience of life and, as one critic has it, “are willing to undergo the agony of insecurity for perceptions of things as they are and an experience of time as it is, unmanacled from Memory and Habit” (Abbott, 1973: 3). Thus, what is experienced will resist rational examination, having more to do with what Proust termed “the imposition of our own familiar soul on the terrifying soul of our surroundings” (Beckett, 1965: 40-41). Both Beckett’s experience of psychoanalysis and his writing of *Murphy* echo this observation of Proust in a number of significant ways which I propose to examine in this paper.

Beckett sought psychoanalysis after the death of his father in 1933 and presented his analyst W.R. Bion with symptoms that included “a bursting, apparently arrhythmic heart, night sweats, shudders, panic, breathlessness and, at its most severe, total paralysis” (Knowlson, 1996: 176). Bion’s treatment, named “reductive analysis”, had an immediate impact. Beckett noted:

I certainly came up with some extraordinary memories of being in the womb. Intrauterine memories. I remember feeling trapped, of being imprisoned and unable to escape, of crying to be let out but no one could hear, no one was listening. I remember being in pain but being unable to do anything about it. (quoted in Knowlson, 1996: 177)

Reliving his intrauterine memories, the writer intuited a caesura in the Cartesian logic of dualism with its "suggestion that reasoning, and moral judgement, and the suffering that comes from physical pain or emotional upheaval might exist separately from the body" (Damasio, 1994: 249-50). During the course of his psychoanalysis he attended one of a series of lectures given by C. G. Jung, in which Jung commented that "you can read a writer's mind when you study the characters he creates" (Wakeling, 1984: 8). Through the character of Murphy, we are allowed a gaze into the *solus ipse* of Beckett's mind and it can be seen that Bion's therapeutic course "probably helped Beckett to see how his solipsistic attitudes could be mined fruitfully in his writing" (Knowlson, 1996: 181).

In *Murphy* Beckett is preoccupied with questioning the rational Cartesian framing of space and experience, along with its construction of identity as "a self-contained thinking subject (or *Cogito*)" which posits a mind-body split (Kearney, 1988: 66). Accordingly, there is a distinct contrast between the geographical settings of the novel, which are firmly situated in Cartesian space, and Beckett's representation of Murphy's perceptions as he moves through the sphere of his mind, the streets of London and the wards of a lunatic asylum. This contrast is underscored by an exchange at the outset of the novel: "'Murphy, all life is figure and ground.' 'But a wandering to find home,' said Murphy" (Beckett, 1993: 6). As an aspiring *Cogito*, Murphy's mind "pictured itself as a large hollow sphere, hermetically closed to the universe without", so that he "felt himself split in two, a body and a mind" (Beckett, 1993: 63-64). To aid his quest for self-sustained detachment, he would often tie himself to a rocking chair and "as he lapsed in body he felt himself coming alive in mind, set free to move among its treasures" (Beckett, 1993: 65). In such a state he would picture his mind as a place comprised of "three zones, light, half light, dark, each with its speciality" (Beckett, 1993: 65). Moving into the dark zone Murphy can intimate the "tumult of non-Newtonian motion" and the solipsistic experience of "willlessness, a mote in its absolute freedom" (Beckett, 1993: 66).

Accordingly, Murphy's wanderings occur not only within his mind, but across a geography of London that is plotted with a cartographer's precision. During the course of his therapy Beckett himself took long and frequent walks in the city. His biographer James Knowlson tells us that he "got to know the area down by the Embankment in West Brompton and Chelsea where he lived particularly well and used to cross the Thames by Battersea Bridge or the Albert Bridge to circle nearby Battersea Park [...]. But he could cover as much as twenty miles in a day and knew the more distant Hyde Park and Kensington Gardens like the back of his hand" (Knowlson, 1996: 204).¹ This familiarity with place finds its way into the construction of the novel, as characters traverse a highly particularised landscape:

She [Celia] walked to a point about halfway between the Battersea and Albert Bridges and sat down in a bench between a Chelsea pensioner and an Eldorado holey-pokey man, who had dismounted from his cruel machine and was enjoying a short interlude in paradise. Artists of every kind, writers, underwriters, devils, ghosts, columnists, musicians, lyricists, organists, painters and decorators, sculptors and statuaries, critics and reviewers, major and minor, drunk and sober, laughing and crying, in schools and singly, passed up and down. (Beckett, 1993: 12-13)

Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of the chronotope, a spatial/temporal motif expressed artistically in literature, can plot the confluence of Beckett's interests as they echo through the non-linear narrative of the novel, which is constructed in flashbacks and jump-cuts, to reflect the peripatetic nature of Murphy's mind. Within the chronotope "time as it were, thickens, takes on flesh, becomes artistically visible; [and] likewise, space becomes charged and responsive to the movements of time, plot and his-

¹ It should also be noted that Beckett's knowledge of his surroundings and its demographics coincided with his interest in astrology, which peaked when he discovered that Jung advised his patients to have their horoscopes cast as part of their therapy.

tory" (Bakhtin, 1984: 84). Accordingly, dates and places, often aligned with the signs of the zodiac, anchor the idiosyncratic narrative of *Murphy*. For example, within the chronotope of the road, in which "people who are normally kept separate by social and spatial difference can accidentally meet [and] the most varied fates may collide and interweave with one another" (Bakhtin, 1984: 244), Beckett creates a space where Celia first spies Murphy under the star sign of Cancer: "It was on the street, the previous midsummer's night, the sun being in the Crab, that she met Murphy" (Beckett, 1993: 11).

As a result of the physical relationship which develops between them, Murphy's sense of identity, "split in body and mind", comes into conflict with itself. When Celia threatens to return to street-walking unless he finds gainful employment, Murphy leaves her to take a job in a lunatic asylum, a place that anchors Beckett's interrogation of the Cartesian perception of space.² His use of a lunatic asylum as a setting to evoke social alienation, as well as provide a critique of the positivist medical approach to mental illness, anticipates Michel Foucault's *The Birth of the Clinic* (1963), in which the term "institutional spatialisation" was coined to depict the construction of places in which a medical gaze maintained a "continuous supervision of social space" (Philo, 2000: 16). Murphy's impression of the asylum as a church — "the layout of the wards was that of the nave and transepts" (Beckett, 1993: 95-96) — is echoed in Foucault's observation that "the asylum is a religious domain without religion" (Foucault, 1991: 148). Within its wards individual patients display a variety of symptoms which are "hierachised into families, genera and species" (Philo, 2000: 12). Like Dante's Virgil in *The Inferno*, the novel lists the ailments and behaviours of the socially damned whom Murphy encounters in the wards:

² In 1935 Beckett's friend Geoffrey Thompson became house physician at the Bethlem Royal Hospital in Beckenham. Beckett paid several social calls to him and on a few occasions was given access to the wards, where he observed institutionalised patients. The Magdalen Mental Mercyseat, which "lay a little out of town, ideally situated in its own grounds on the boundary of two counties" (*Murphy*, p. 90), was based on his impression of the clinic.

Melancholics, motionless and brooding, holding their heads or bellies according to type. Paranoids, feverishly covering sheets of paper with complaints against their treatment or verbatim reports of their inner voices. A hebephrenic playing the piano intently. A hypomaniac teaching slosh to a Korsakow's syndrome. An emaciated schizoid, petrified in toppling attitude as though condemned to an eternal *tableau vivant*, his left hand rhetorically extended holding a cigarette half smoked and out, his right, quivering and rigid, pointing upward. (Beckett, 1993: 96)

Just as Foucault was critical of medical models in which "patients were seemingly looked upon more as objectified sources of data than as unwell individuals" (Philo, 2000: 17), Murphy resents the medical establishment's "textbook attitude towards them, the complacent scientific conceptualism that made contact with outer reality the index of well being" (Beckett, 1993: 101). Congruent with Foucault's underlying assertion that medieval religious pieties had been replaced by enlightenment rationalist practices, Beckett (perhaps anticipating the postmodernist perspective) observes through the eyes of Murphy: "The men, women and children of science would seem to have as many ways of kneeling to their facts as any other body of illuminati. The definition of outer reality, or of reality short and simple, varied according to the sensibility of the definer" (Beckett, 1993: 101).

Thus, Murphy compares his aspiration to dissociate his mind from his body to the detached mental state of the patients. Consequently, his "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" (Beckett, 1993: 101). Beckett later noted that his construction of the novel was reflected in the formulations of the philosopher Arnold Geulincx and the writer Andre Malraux:

I shall have to go to into TCD after Geulincx, as he does not exist in National Library. I suddenly see that *Murphy* is [a] break down between his *Ubi nihil valet [,] ibi [etiam] nihil valet* (position) [where you are worth nothing, you will wish for nothing] and Malraux's *Il est difficile a celui qui vit hors du monde de ne pas rechercher les siens* (negation). [It is hard for someone who lives outside society not to seek out his own]. (quoted in Knowlson, 1996: 219)

Murphy's denouement as an aspiring *Cogito* comes about as a result of a chess match he plays with Mr Endon, a "schizophrenic of the most amiable variety" who possessed a "psychosis so limpid and imperturbable that Murphy felt drawn to it as Narcissus to his fountain" (Beckett, 1993: 105). The match takes place during Murphy's night shift, in which his duties require of him to complete a round of the patients' cells, take a "panoptic" gaze through the Judas hole in the door, and press a light switch that electronically registers the visit in the head nurse's chamber, leaving a record of the rounds. Upon each visit to Endon's cell, he moves his chess pieces in response to the schizophrenic's, thinking that in some way he is communicating with an individual whom he believes has achieved the ultimate state of solipsism. However, "the sad truth was, that while Mr Endon for Murphy was no less than bliss, Murphy for Mr Endon was no more than chess" (Beckett, 1993: 135). Conceding the match, Murphy swoons. Endon leaves the cell and catatonically completes Murphy's rounds, pressing the light switches at the door of each cell "determined by a mental pattern as precise as any of those that governed his chess" (Beckett, 1993: 138). The impression gathered by the head nurse in his chamber the next day is that Murphy "went mad with his colours nailed to the mast" (Beckett, 1993: 139).

This conclusion, drawn from the empirical data recorded by the panoptical system in the lunatic asylum, is belied by Murphy's recognition of the viability his own sanity, after realising that Endon's schizophrenia provides him with "immunity from seeing anything but himself" (Beckett, 1993: 140). In contrast, Murphy "is aware of the exigencies of the body and of the social world, while professing

to hate them both" (Keatinge, 2004). During one of his visits to the Bethlem Royal Hospital, Beckett encountered a patient diagnosed with schizophrenia whom he compared to "'a hunk of meat. There was no one there. He was absent'" (quoted in Knowlson, 1996: 209). Murphy, after peering into Endon's eye and seeing his own reflection, registers a similar impression of the solipsistic dilemma:

'the last at last seen of him
Himself unseen by him
And of himself'. (Beckett, 1993: 140)

Murphy's last alienated words in the novel before he is killed in a gas explosion in his garret are: "Mr Murphy is a speck in Mr Endon's unseen" (Beckett, 1993: 140).

Conclusion

Murphy typifies the Beckettian hero in which "tramps, clowns, alcoholics, failures and misfits are, singularly and collectively, the tormented often demented Samuel Beckett" (Junker, 1995: 16). In this, his first novel, Beckett projects his own *solus ipse* onto the space of a lunatic asylum to provide a critique of the Enlightenment discourse of rationality, which is one foundation for the Cartesian framing of space that allots separate places for the social misfits who do not adhere to its premise. Instead of critiquing this discourse from a postmodernist notion of solipsistic relativity, however, Beckett draws on his experience of psychoanalysis and migration,³ grounding his critique within the contingencies of time and place. Consequently, he writes from the perspective of the alienated existentialist, tearing down the walls and opening the cages of the mental prisons devised by the self and society, in order to catch a glimpse of the quixotic "first landscape of freedom" (Beckett, 1993: 48). This Beckettian style places the idiosyncratic personality above the heritage of traditions enshrined in the

³ Knowlson tells us that Beckett "hated London and was infuriated by the patronising English habit of addressing him in the pubs and shops as 'Pat' or 'Paddy'" (*Damned to Fame*, p. 186).

“rational” performances of memory and habit. It is a notion that opts for an interrogation of the subject and the object, whether “current, historical, mythical or spook” (Beckett, 1983: 70), and relegates these fictive constructions of experience to the voluntary falsifications of the Cartesian imagination.