
NARRATIONAL METHOD AGAINST NARRATIVE MATERIAL: SAMUEL BECKETT'S *MURPHY*

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ABSTRACT

This essay is a study of the enunciative process of Samuel Beckett's "first and only novel" (H. P. Abbot), *Murphy* (1938). In contrast to the critical view that explains this novel (away) by describing it as a text in which "style is at odds with the matter," this paper analyzes the rift between narrative voice and narrative material in *Murphy* both as a further elaboration of the theoretical problems raised by *More Pricks Than Kicks* (1934) and as an early prefiguration of the displacement of fiction by narration characteristic of *Watt* (1944) and of Beckett's later work.

As the second stage of the creative gesture that produced *More Pricks Than Kicks* (1934), the novel *Murphy* (1938) also attests to the structural and narrational tensions that permeate Beckett's early prose. Yet, as a more complex experiment than *More Pricks*, *Murphy* does provide a thoroughly new setting for the dualisms of the earlier text. Featuring an *énonciation* that not always adheres to its *énoncé*, *More Pricks* disrupts the stability of the relationship between fiction and narration, narrated material and narrative voice, by implicitly denying the necessity of a strict interdependence between these two elements. Thus, Beckett's short-story collection touches on one of the oldest and most debated issues of aesthetics and literary theory: the relationship between form and content, as reflected in the subservience of narration to fiction. The structure of the book's enunciation proposes a reconsideration of the traditional notion that claims the inseparability of these two elements, in that it incorporates, in its ambivalent texture, both the "crisis" of their relationship and a "critique" of it. *Murphy*, in turn, features as one of its major thematic components Descartes' theory of the opposition between body and mind – an "objective correlative" of the form/content polarity. Drawing and elaborating on the issue raised by *More Pricks*, *Murphy* carries it still further: in a more sophisticated way than the earlier text, *Murphy* presents once more a "critique" of

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the relationship in point and an enactment of its “crisis”, in that it confirms the impossibility of the separation of body and mind (form/content, theme/structure, narrative/narration) on the level of its *énoncé*, while flamboyantly asserting it through its *énonciation*.

As Beckett’s “first and only novel,” (1) and a text that, in contrast to its predecessor, displays a specific thematic core and a unified narrative line, *Murphy* plays in Beckett’s early work a role similar to that played by *Stephen Hero* in Joyce’s. In the same way that *Stephen Hero* constitutes an extended preparation for the interaction between the subject of the *énonciation* and the subject of the *énoncé* – which accounts for the “dramatic” mode of narration of “The Dead,” and the locutional interchange between them in the *Portrait - Murphy* serves as a prelude for the displacement of fiction by narration in *Watt*, a text which prefigures in many ways the narrative self-referentiality of the Trilogy (*Molloy*, *Malone Dies* and *The Unnamable*) and of Beckett’s later prose. The difference is that *Stephen Hero* was an abortive enterprise in relation to the 1905 version of *Dubliners*: instead of resolving the narrational dilemma of Joyce’s short story collection, that is, the tension between objective and subjective narration, *Stephen Hero* only compounded it. *Murphy*, in turn, deliberately exploits the unstable relation between fiction and narration played upon by the narrative voice of *More Pricks* and leads it to explode into a flamboyant, but extremely controlled display of ambiguity.

Most of Beckett’s critics tend to regard *Murphy* as a rather conventional piece, either when compared with *More Pricks* or viewed in the light of the writer’s later experiments (2). The book’s thematic concerns, along with its “novelistic” configuration are apparently at odds with the indiscipline of *More Pricks* and the narrative techniques characteristic of Beckett’s later prose. Nevertheless, examined more closely, *Murphy* displays certain features that make it a seminal moment in the process of fictional and locutional disintegration performed by Beckett’s *oeuvre*. Therefore, in spite of appearing more as a writer’s pact with tradition than his departure from it, *Murphy* does pave the way for the impasse of *Watt* and prefigures Beckett’s later work in its own peculiar way.

Murphy has been described both as a Moenippean satire and an extended fictional rendition of the Cartesian theory of the dualistic nature of the human self – the opposition between body and mind – as interpreted by the post-Cartesian occasionalists Geulincx and Malebranche (3). This thematic nucleus distinguishes *Murphy* from *More Pricks* and provides the text with an identity of its own. In fact, unifying the text’s narrative project, the thematic core of *Murphy* regulates the mechanics of its narrative process, ascribing to the narrative voice the task of converting a philosophical (or fictional) *énonçable* into an extended corpus of narrative discourse or *énoncé*. Consequently, the narrative voice in *Murphy*, in contrast to that in *More Pricks*, which seems to be playing with its narration, moves

along pre-established lines, so as to secure the novel's episodic progression and the development of its central character, the two elements that together set forth its basic theme. On the other hand, the dualistic conception of the human self that constitutes the basic thematic proposition of *Murphy* serves as a "pretext" for the text's ambivalent narrative discourse. *Murphy* progresses by contrasts of notions and/or realities that, in one way or another, reflect the fundamental antithesis of its theme – that of the opposition between body and mind. Throughout *Murphy*, the mental is pitted against the physical, the illusory against the real, the conceptual against the sensual, the self against the other and the microcosm – the world of the human psyche – against the macrocosm – the external or social world. Thus, the dualism inherent in the thematic substratum of the novel seems to dictate its techniques and to mold its overall configuration. Most critics tend to ascribe to this dualism the dichotomy they acknowledge as the basic feature of *Murphy*: the split between form and content (4).

In fact, *Murphy* is an excellent example of "style at odds with the matter" or of a novelistic project set forth in an anti-novelistic form (5). In this essay, however, the rift between form and content in *Murphy* will not be regarded as a result of the novel's theme or as a stylistic device intended to guarantee its coherence. Rather, it will be considered as a gesture intended to make the text of *Murphy* the locus of a complex narrational experiment. Therefore, instead of affirming that *Murphy* maintains a "deliberate split between form and content," in order to better advance its basic thematic proposition, I will affirm that, drawing on the "crisis" of the relationship form/content or narrative voice/narrative material advanced by *More Pricks*, the text of *Murphy* features a narrative voice that deviates itself, vicariously and surreptitiously, from the fiction it sets out to narrate. This narrative voice works both with and against the narrative project, simultaneously asserting and denying both its commitment to fiction and its independence as narration. Thus, it provides a highly original prefiguration of the mode of enunciation of Beckett's later texts.

Forces of disruption and integration similar to those permeating *More Pricks* are also present in *Murphy*. Here, however, the matrix of their *modus operandi* is foreshadowed by the thematic substratum of the novel. In *More Pricks* the clash of these two forces and of the drives they generate is located on the narrational superstratum of the text. In *Murphy*, this clash is preceded by a pre-textual paradigm, and permeates all the levels of the work. In *More Pricks*, disruptive and integrative drives manifest themselves alternately, as if there were two minds producing the text: one seeking the security of a conventional mode of narration and the other the challenge of a more experimental one. In *Murphy*, where, according to H. P. Aboot, "there is one single mind behind the prose: an incorrigibly witty mind that loves to play with words and mocks its subject, yet at the same time is more deeply involved in its task than the mind that produced *More Pricks*," disruption and integration are simultaneous drives (6). As such, they appear in the

text as complementing and counterbalancing each other, but also at odds with one another.

The simultaneity of disruption and integration in *Murphy* is reflected by the bidirectionality of its enunciative process, which reveals itself in the dynamics of the text's narrative voice. The first sign of this bidirectionality is the way the narrative voice handles the characterization of Murphy himself. Most of the novel's action revolves around Murphy's quest for a solipsistic nirvana, an exclusively psychic mode of existence. Yet, its episodic progression ends with his death. Throughout the text, the narrative voice sides with the protagonist, making his quest appear to the reader as more legitimate than those of the other characters in the book, including Celia's. At the end, it pushes the hero out of both his dream and the pages of the book, by making his quest's climax coincide with his death. The narrative voice's treatment of Murphy's solipsistic project thus reveals its general ambivalence towards, as well as its distrust of, its fiction. By leading Murphy to a mock-tragic death, as sudden and accidental as that of Belacqua, the "hero" of *More Pricks*, the narrative voice apparently negates the viability of the quest of the character it so sympathetically followed and of the solipsistic goal on which that quest was founded. Yet, with this gesture, the *énonciation* turns its own texture into the locus of a fiction which recuperates the one it dismissed on the level of the *énoncé*. As the conclusion of the novel's episodic progression, Murphy's death serves to prove the inviability of the dualistic theory he advocates and embraces; but as a structural and narrational device, it confirms the possibility of this theory, for it is a visible sign of an *énonciation* at odds with its *énoncé*, or of a narrative voice's betrayal and rejection of its own fiction. Therefore, in *Murphy*, the Cartesian theory of the dichotomy between body and mind is dismissed on the level of the text's thematic and narrative (discursive) substratum if only to be "sublated" on the level of its locutional and narrational (enunciative) superstratum, wherein a disruptive, anti-fictional narrative voice underscores and eventually thwarts the novelistic orientation of its integrative, fiction-oriented double. With this gesture, a new and more ambiguously complex relationship is established between *énoncé* and *énonciation*.

The characterization of Celia is another example of the simultaneity of the forces of disruption and integration that accounts for the twofold orientation of the narrative voice in *Murphy*. When she first appears in the book, in the beginning of chapter 2 (cf. p. 10), Celia is no more than a list of physical attributes and measurements. Her introduction is certainly a clever parody of the realistic mode of characterization. But it causes a negative impact: it leads the reader to perceive the novel's heroine in a caricatural and not in a sympathetic fashion, as though she were just another "puppet" in the novel. As the story progresses, however, a new, more positive light is gradually thrown upon Celia's character, and at least on two occasions, she comes across as a sympathetic and moving figure. The first is at the

end of chapter VIII, where the narrative voice succeeds in capturing the pathos of her condition through a precise “depiction of gesture” (7).

When it was quite clear that this was the whole extent of the message, Celia went on slowly up the stairs. Miss Carridge stood with a finger on the switch, watching. The turn of the stair took the body out of sight, but Miss Carridge could still see the hand on the banister, gripping, then sliding a little, gripping again, then sliding a little more. When the hand also disappeared, Miss Carridge switched off the light and stood in the dark that was so much less extravagant, not to mention richer in acoustic properties, listening. (Murphy, p. 154-155).

The second occurs at the end of chapter X, when Celia, abandoned by Murphy, receives support and consolation from Wylie, Neary and Miss Counihan. Here, by alternating flashbacks of Celia’s childhood with the babbling of the trio, the narrative voice emphasizes the heroine’s sense of isolation, and, at the same time, discloses a dimension of her character that raises Murphy’s beloved far above the types that surround her.

*“I cannot believe he has left you,” said Wylie.
“He will come again,” said Neary “We shall be here to receive him,”
said Miss Counihan.*

Her cot had a rail all way round. Mr. Willoughby Kelly came, smelling strongly of drink, knelt, grasped the bars and looked at her through them. Then she envied him, and he her. Sometimes he sang.

*“Neary and I upstairs,” said Neary. “I here with you,” said Miss Counihan “Call the woman,” said Neary. Sometimes he sang...
(Murphy, p. 235).*

In the middle of this same chapter, however, when Wylie, Neary and Miss Counihan arrive at Miss Carridge’s, the narrative voice draws Celia closer to them and into the circumscription of their disruptive motion. Celia’s utterance becomes a burlesque of polite speech punctuated with sarcasm, which entangles her in the same web of inauthenticity that marks the pseudo-existence of the puppet-like characters.

“Ah yes, you need,” said Celia, “omit no material circumstance, I implore you. I have been so busy, so busy, so absorbed, my swan crossword you know, Miss Carridge, seeking the rime, the panting syllable to rime with breath, that I have been dead to the voices of the street, dead and damned, Miss Carridge, the myriad voices.” (Murphy, p. 229).

Chapter VI also affords an excellent example of the ambivalence of the narrative voice in *Murphy*. Here, the narrative voice undertakes to present an extended “justification of the expression Murphy’s mind” (p. 107), for which reason this chapter is often referred to as a theoretical foundation of the novel’s episodic development and a metaphorical description of the triphasic progression of Beckett’s entire work (8). The first thing that strikes us in this chapter is the bidirectionality of the narrative voice. The ambivalence it displayed in the characterization of Murphy and Celia can now be detected in its enunciative method proper.

It is most unfortunate, but the point of this story has been reached where a justification of the expression “Murphy’s mind” has to be attempted. Happily we need not concern ourselves with this apparatus as it really was – that would be an extravagance and an impertinence – but solely with what it felt and pictured itself to be. Murphy’s mind is after all the gravamen of these informations. A short section to itself at this stage will relieve us from the necessity of apologizing for it further. (Murphy, p. 107).

In this paragraph, the narrative voice explains that it does not intend to describe Murphy’s mind as it really is, but just “as it felt and pictured itself to be,” since it is, after all, “the gravamen of these informations” (p. 107). However, the narrative practice that follows stands in clear opposition to the theory proposed in this metafictional overture. It consists of a detailed analysis of the three zones of Murphy’s mind. Throughout this analysis, the narrative voice secures its omniscient posture by means of a semi-philosophical, semi-didactic tonality. Instead of adopting the free indirect style, which would certainly allow it to overlap with the mechanics of Murphy’s mind, the narrative voice operates from an epic vantage point, filling the diegetic space with a third person mode of narration that only periodically gives way to an indirect quotation of the character’s mental dynamics. This peculiar compromise between objective and subjective narration, however, does not result in a synthesis of both in a new form. Rather, it attests to a narrative omniscience that is disparaged in theory and maintained in practice. Through the epic discourse of the narrative voice, Murphy’s mind is made substantially present in the chapter, but is formally excluded from it. Unable to keep up with its proposition of making the protagonist’s mind the “gravamen” of its own theories, or of letting it reveal itself in a formal and structural way, the narrative voice resorts to an ambivalent but still omniscient mode of narration. Furthermore, by the end of the chapter, it turns to the satirical meta-narrative commentary again. The potential seriousness of the description, along with its symbolic overtones, are thus undermined and made to appear as irrelevant resources of playful intent (9).

The bidirectionality that permeates the process of characterization and the general enunciative tonality of *Murphy* can also be detected on the micro-structural level of the text. The very first paragraph of the novel is clearly marked by the narrational tension that the double orientation of the narrative voice generates.

The sun shone, having no alternative, on the nothing new. Murphy sat out of it, as though he were free, in a mew in west Brompton. Here for what might have been six months, he had eaten, drunk, slept and put his clothes on and off, in a medium sized cage of north eastern aspect commanding as unbroken view of medium sized cages of southeastern aspect. Soon he would have to make other arrangements, for the mew had been condemned. Soon he would have to buckle to and start eating, drinking, sleeping and putting his clothes on and off in quite alien surroundings. (Murphy, p. 1).

Although there is just one narrative voice behind this opening utterance, it sounds twofold, at odds with itself. On the one hand, it works to confirm the bond between its *énonciation* and the *énonçable* it purports to transform into *énoncé* through utterances that establish the realism and verisimilitude of the fictional illusion (“the sun shone... on the nothing new.”; “Murphy sat out of it... in a mew in West Bromptom.”); on the other hand, it works to break this same bond, by interjecting, in the middle of the narration, ironic evaluative asides that blend themselves with the fictional continuum (“having no alternative,” “as though he were free,” “for what it might have been” etc.). The forces of disruption and integration and the drives they entail make themselves actively present within the same narrational gesture. The narrative voice moves in two opposite directions at the same time – that of fiction and that of narration proper. The result is an *énonciation* that performs both a constructive and a deconstructive gesture in relation to the fiction it enunciates, effecting both the presentation and the effacement of its material, its rendition and its critique.

Another evidence of the bidirectionality of the narrative voice in *Murphy* is the structure of its meta-fictional and meta-narrative asides. It should be noted that in this text, the narrative voice seems to take the task of constructing a fiction much too seriously to constantly permeate it with explicitly disruptive remarks. Therefore, its meta-fictional/narrative asides are much less obtrusive than those in *More Pricks*. Yet, they attest to a much higher degree of narrative awareness, although at first sight they may seem to constitute a much feebler departure of the narrative voice from either its fictional commitment or its narrative tonality. Most of the meta-fictional/narrative asides in *More Pricks*, belong to a rather intrusive meta-narrative voice, and consist of explicit critical references either to the fictional material or the narrative performance itself. In *Murphy*, they are blended with the narrative

discourse, and consist mainly of inversions of ready-made expressions or phrases and/or very subtle parodies of narrative conventions. Torn between the need to adhere to novelistic techniques and the willingness to break away from them, the narrative voice in *Murphy* takes the most rigid narrative formulae as the groundwork of its experiments. By twisting their semantic content without touching their syntactical arrangement, it erodes them from within and by revitalizing them, invalidates them forever (cf. pp. 61, 71 105, 114, 117-18, 208, 231). This process is a micro-structural version of the overall project of the text's enunciation. As the narrative voice in *Murphy* utilizes the dichotomy of body and mind inherent in the novel's theme to turn itself into an *énonciation* at odds with its *énoncé*, it dismantles a rigid theoretical principle – the inseparability of form and content – by seemingly adhering to it. As a result, it turns *Murphy* into a text that is both a novel and an anti-novelistic construct, a form that cancels its own matter, a voice that speaks against its own discourse. In the same way, by infusing new contents into certain ready-made expressions or techniques, it both revitalizes and annihilates them, for it breaks into their circumscription to transform them into parodies of themselves (10).

Some critics tend to secure the “readerliness” and intelligibility of *Murphy* by considering the disjunctions that permeate its textual fabric as mere reflections of its dualistic thematic proposition. In fact, if the duality *énoncé/énonciation* and all the others featured in *Murphy* are reabsorbed into the duality proposed by the novel's theme, the text's strangeness will be promptly legitimized and “explained away”. The structural and narrational clashes that secure the identity and originality of *Murphy* as a text and constitute much of its artistic innovation, will no longer be perceived as prefigurations of the dialectics that elicits the dialogisms of Beckett's mature work, but as mere stylistic devices which the narrative voice deliberately utilizes to better express a dualistic theory. From this perspective *Murphy* will have its novelistic status reasserted not in spite of but because of the “deliberate split” it maintains between style and matter, *énoncé* and *énonciation*. My view is that Beckett chose Descartes' dualistic theory of the human self to back up a narrative experiment, in the same way that Joyce utilized a young man's quest for his universe of discourse to lead his own narrative voice towards a mode of enunciation still more mature than the one it had attained in “The Dead.”

However, it should be emphasized that, whatever the sources of the dualities in *Murphy* may be, this text constitutes the moment in the evolution of Beckett's mode of enunciation in which his narrative voice deliberately dissociates itself from its material, not so much by means of intermittent, explicit intrusions into the narrative discourse, as by a pervasive anti-novelistic tonality. The *énonciation* may not stand on its own, and the rift elicited by this separation may appear as no more than a structural manifestation of a governing thematic principle. Yet, the fact is that the possibility of the disentanglement of narration from fiction, and

consequently of a non-committed, self-reliant narration, is clearly suggested by the overall configuration of the text. Furthermore, as it moves against and away from its own narrative project, the narrative voice in *Murphy* does propose a rift between narrative performance and narrative material, thereby contributing to the advancement of the process of “displacement” of fiction by narration that Beckett’s work illustrates. Therefore, *Murphy* imposes itself, in the context of Beckett’s early prose, as a preparation for the mode of enunciation in *Watt*. For whereas in *Murphy* the presence of a dualistic content allows the *énonciation* to set itself apart from its *énoncé*, in *Watt*, the presence of a non-narratable fiction – be it Mr. Knott’s world or *Watt*’s precarious version of it – leads the *énonciation* to displace and supplant its *énoncé* and give vent to its own narrationality. However, this is an entirely different matter.

RESUMO

Este ensaio é um estudo dos protocolos enunciativos do “primeiro e único romance” (H.P. Abbot) de Samuel Beckett, *Murphy* (1938). Opondo-se à visão crítica que descreve este livro como um texto em que “o estilo se opõe ao assunto”, este trabalho procura analisar a fissura entre a voz narrativa e seu material como uma reelaboração dos problemas teóricos levantados por *More Pricks than Kicks* (1934) e como uma prefiguração do deslocamento da ficção pela narração que caracteriza tanto *Watt* (1944) quanto os textos que compõem a obra madura de Beckett.

NOTES

- 1 - H. Porter Abbot, *The Fiction of Samuel Beckett: Form and Effect* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1973), p. 36.
- 2 - Raymond Federman, *Journey to Chaos: Samuel Beckett's Early Fiction* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1965), p. 67; J. E. Dearlove, *Accommodating the Chaos: Samuel Beckett's non-relational art* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1982), p. 26; Abbot, p. 36 ff.
- 3 - Robert Harrison, *Murphy: A Critical Excursion* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1968), passim; Federman, pp. 72-82, especially pp. 75-78; also in David Hesla, *The Shape of Chaos: An Interpretation of the Art of Samuel Beckett* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1971), passim.
- 4 - Federman, pp. 59, 67, Abbot, p. 45.
- 5 - W. Y. Tindall as quoted by Abbot, p. 45.
- 6 - Abbot, p. 40.
- 7 - Abbot, p. 43.
- 8 - Dearlove, p. 26, Federman, pp. 83-84, also Maurice Nadeau, “Samuel Beckett: Humor and the Void”, in *Samuel Beckett: A Collection of Critical Essays*, M. Esslin, ed. (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall, 1968), pp. 33-36.
- 9 - Ruby Cohn, *Back to Beckett* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980), p. 37.

- 10 - This was done with description in *More Pricks Than Kicks*, pp. 101, 105, 114, 115, 160, 191.

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