

Murphy and Peace

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Formed by the war, by all the wars, I love and seek peace, which seems to me the ultimate good.

—Michel Serres

John Pilling's impression of Samuel Beckett's *Watt*, composed between 1941 and 1945, is of a novel that could only have emerged from the context of "a world gone mad, . . . against the background of an epoch given over to irrational barbarism posing as the saviour of civilization" (1994, 35–36). In what follows I want make the comparable case that Beckett's 1938 novel *Murphy* demands to be read in the context of the rise of European fascism and global militarism in the 1930s. *Murphy*, I propose, is a novel intimately concerned with the ethics of peace.

To propose as much is, however, immediately to invoke the critical problematic of how it is that an experimental modernist fiction such as *Murphy* might be ethically orientated toward peace. There is an attribution at work here, seeming to grant to Beckett and/or his novel a motivated quality of pacifism. Yet, as will be rehearsed in a little more detail later, it is notoriously problematic to pin political or ethical designs to Beckett and his work, just as the semantic slipperiness and formal indeterminacies of modernist experimentalism per se tend to problematize ideological critique. Something supplementary to this attribution is therefore implicit in conjoining *Murphy* and peace: the question of a literary-critical practice itself motivated by the pursuit of peace as, in the words of Michel Serres, the "ultimate good." This essay is also, therefore, a declaration of interest in the possibility of such a practice. It takes the form of reading *Murphy* through the "staging" of key moments in a process of critical reassessment of Beckett's novel over a period of time, each of which contributes to a testing-out of the strong yet vulnerable conviction that the novel may be viewed as a pacifistic literary utterance. The rationale for this highly self-conscious and

exploratory strategy is, I hope to suggest, that just such a level of reflexivity is implicit in a critical practice, informed both by posthumanistic theory and by an ethics of peace, which interrogates the concept of “critique” itself. As initial reference points for the shaping of an intellectual project through pacifism, I take the dialogically interrelated posthumanisms of Serres and Bruno Latour. The epigraph derives from a set of conversations between Serres and Latour first published in 1990. Born in 1930, Serres unequivocally at-tributes the “gun-shy” turn taken very early by his philosophical interests and methodologies to a first quarter-century enveloped in world war and violence, and then regrettably sustained in his early experience of academic life at the Ecole Normale Supérieure, at least between 1947 and 1960, where he claims to have found “one of the most terroristic societies ever created by the French intelligentsia” (1990, 5). While this gave rise to the unique hospitality of Serres’s work, as a historian and theorist of science, to the forms of literature and the humanities, his interlocutor Latour is dismayed to find that the dialogical principles of critical thought itself—discussion, disagreement, polemic—became for Serres equally tainted by their association with conflict, mirroring the banality of war in their “indefinite repetition of the same gestures and the same ideas.” The invention rather than the criticism of concepts, crucial to progress in philosophy and science, could only, Serres argued, operate instead through a model of intellectual isolation and serenity—“in solitude, independence, and freedom—indeed, in silence” (37).

The trajectory of pacifism in Latour’s work differs from that of Serres; rather than being evident at the outset, peace marks a decisive development in Latour’s later and continuing project. Silence and withdrawal could hardly be said to typify the collaborative and rhetorical strategies of that project at any stage, and an early, prominent role as champion of the social construction of scientific facts consigned Latour, as is well known, to a highly combative relationship with scientific orthodoxy. Nevertheless Latour was also resolutely to turn his face from war in a landmark essay of 2004, by identifying aggression primarily within a particular model of critique in the humanities and social sciences that had now notoriously “run out of steam.” Mirroring Serres in a disarming directness and simplicity, Latour’s statement of this position begins: “Wars. So many wars. Wars outside and wars inside. Cultural wars,

science wars, and wars against terrorism. Wars against poverty and wars against the poor. Wars against ignorance and wars out of ignorance. My question is simple: Should we be at war too, we, the scholars, the intellectuals?" (2004, 225).

Latour's primary manner of making peace in the subsequent essay is a coming-to-terms with the appropriation of his own critique of the concept of "fact" for unforeseen and unwished-for ideological positions such as climate change denial. It continues, from the outset, to be conducted in a highly charged mode of rhetorical self-questioning: "Was I foolishly mistaken? . . . Should we apologize for having been wrong all along? . . . What were we really after . . .?" and so on (227). Not that the mode is apologetic tout court; far from a retreat back to a prior conception of objectivity, Latour's essay works to re-approach fact from an enriched perspective embracing (matters of) concern and the pluralistic notion of a Thing as a gathering or society of entities: "the question was never to get away from facts but closer to them" (231). The guiding impulse or motivation, however, is that "the critic is not the one who debunks, but the one who assembles" (246), evolving into a manifesto of "compositionism"—"there are enough ruins and . . . everything has to be reassembled piece by piece"—as the only viable way of taking seriously "the political task" of establishing a new universalism or commonality that might just entail peace (2010, 475–76, 485). Considered from a literary-critical perspective, and at first glance, perhaps this proposal might evoke the reinvented Wordsworthianism of "we murder to dissect"—that is, a too often rehashed formula that posits Romanticism in binary opposition to the cold abstractions of Science (conceptually impoverishing both), and that can be mobilized all too easily against the application of literary-critical or theoretical rigor to the literary text. Yet Latour's concept of the common is underpinned by a very precise sense of the way in which any disavowal of "critique" should be understood. The term is used not, he insists, to denote "the rather ubiquitous skill of having a critical mind," but rather, in the sense attributed to Kant, as "a wholesale acceptation [sic] of the divide between human and nonhuman," entailing thereby a complete redefinition of "what it means to have a body, a mind and a world" (2010, 474, 488, 472). In Latour therefore, the intellectual pursuit of peace, necessarily embodied in a self-conscious confessional mode that might test the patience of professional criticism, is intimately tied to a

posthumanist philosophy that dethrones anthropocentrism and embeds human life forms within unthinkably complex networks of animate and inanimate relations connecting what Jane Bennett has called, in her theorizing of a “vital materialism,” the ontological diversity of actants (2010, xiv). As Bruce Clarke notes, where this applies for example to both Serres’s and Latour’s embrace of cybernetics as the interfacing of biological and technological systems, it generates in Latour “important polemics against philosophies that divide beings up and ‘purify’ nature and society one from the other” (2008, 44). At the heart of posthumanist ethics is a principle of complex coexistence that dismantles the hierarchical divisions of human and nonhuman, animate and inanimate, subject and object, mind and body. In Serres’s thinking, this provokes an extraordinary formulation, foreshadowing Latour in its implications for composition and critique, of the distinction between the “authentically” philosophical work in which such a principle might be able to operate, and the “social artefact” of the scholarly tome. While the latter typically groans under the weight of an apparatus designed to make it “invulnerable to criticism,” contends Serres, the former is “naked, defenseless, not lacking knowledge but saturated with secondary naïveté; not intent on being right but ardently reaching towards new intuitions” (1990, 22–23).

The staged reading of Murphy that follows is an attempt to demonstrate how a relatively “naive” and “defenseless” yet “ardent” process of interpretation might encounter and acknowledge itself; it confronts the unnerving prospect of revising, in the name of peace, the critical habits of a lifetime, and asks how far a posthumanistic philosophical approach might translate into a textual practice in which doing the right thing vies for attention with the business of being right.

Murphy and peace (1)

In its characterization of Murphy as a challenge to the English stereotype of the “stage Irishman,” Declan Kiberd’s account of Murphy as a novel exploring the alienation of emigrant life in [AQ: add “the”?] 1930s crystallizes the two main narrative strands of the novel’s strange and estranging fictional world (2005, 31). As stage Irishman, Murphy will go to elaborate lengths to avoid work.

However, as his fiancé Celia Kelly insists that their relationship and continuing cohabitation are dependent upon Murphy gaining paid employment, the clearest narrative strand of the novel would seem to be that of Murphy “on the jobpath” in London, culminating in his experience of finding work at the sanatorium, the Magdalen Mental Mercyseat, and his eventual demise there. The novel’s alternate trajectory works, however, to disavow the imperialist Irish caricature in and through its bewildering, if still clownish, narrative complexity. This other Murphy, from which Murphy himself is often absent, is a highly mannered parody of the quest narrative, hovering perpetually between philosophical meditation and cartoon caper. Murphy is the quarry whose elusive location will help resolve the romantic and philosophical rivalries between Neary and Wylie, Celia and Miss Counihan. “Murphy then is actually being needed by five people outside himself,” we are reminded, as if acknowledging in the succinct summary that follows the obscurity that of necessity clings to the motivations, means and ends of the chase (Beckett [1938] 1977, 113).¹ By this point, Celia’s pursuit is of Murphy “at any price, in whatsoever shape or form,” his lovability reduced simply to the definition of “present in person” (114). I will return to this hint of a posthuman Murphy—“whatsoever shape or form”—later.

My initial reading of Murphy’s relation to peace is located in the first narrative strand and, specifically, in the novel’s account of the Magdalen Mental Mercyseat. More specifically still, its origin is in the strong affective charge of the following: “the last at last seen of him / himself unseen by him / and of himself” (140). Murphy’s utterance of these words in the presence of his “tab” or special charge, Mr Endon, is a climactic moment in his brief period of employment at the MMM. The scene is one of great physical intimacy; kneeling by the bed, Murphy has taken Mr Endon’s head in his hands and draws so near that only a “narrow gulf of air” separates them, and they seem “all set . . . for a butterfly kiss, if that is still the correct expression”

(139–40). From this distance, to echo an opening phrase of the novel, Murphy has no alternative but to gaze into Mr Endon's eyes. If therefore the scene is one of intimacy, it is at the same time a parody of intimacy, and of leavetaking. Are we to understand that a kind of communion is taking place—are the eyes thus here the windows of the soul? Not, again, from this distance, which finds Murphy instead “inspecting” Mr Endon's eyes in what Garin Dowd characterizes as an exercise in “anamorphism” (2007, 96–101). An excess of detail serves only to present the eyes both as unvisualizable and as improbably sited on a human face. “One of Nature's jokes,” they are contradictorily both deepset and protuberant, virtually colorless and with an almost negligible iris, while all four lids are “everted in an ectropion of great expressiveness,” the element of tautology in this formulation somehow doubling the difficulty of locating in the lids a “great expressiveness” combining “cunning, depravity and rapt attention.” As if to confirm this difficulty, Murphy moves even closer to Mr Endon, only to present further obstacles; to wit, matter in its raw state—mucus, a weeping duct, veins, metaphor (“like the Lord's Prayer on a toenail”)—and his own reflection, “horribly reduced, obscured and distorted” (M, 139–40).

This impersonality or defamiliarization at the heart of intimacy is mirrored in Murphy's utterances. In a moment of Mallarméan poetics, it is as if language speaks, or demands that Murphy speak it. The words arrive as lines, like stray, untimely fragments from (surely) Beckett's later work. Bare resources are recycled; cadences and line-length funnel down towards the solipsism of “himself.” Three further utterances then present themselves to Murphy: the first two mimic prose paraphrase, in the manner of the officialese that we might imagine in MMM casenotes of the scene; the third, following a long rest, cuts through both poeticism and bureaucracy to summarily confirm that “Mr Murphy is a speck in Mr Endon's unseen” (140). Yet, whether intimacy or not, this remains a moving and compassionate encounter, embodying a spirit of peaceful if recalcitrant coexistence. The very fact of the failure of communication or expression guarantees Mr Endon's integrity: despite or in some measure because of the proximity, he cannot be known or objectified, penetrated or violated by Murphy's probing eyes. Murphy's proximity to the face of the other only succeeds in emphasizing its alterity, and the failure of Mr Endon's faciality to deliver the reassuring signs of human sentiment.² This is something

other than coldness: the hilarious linguistic excess of the prior physical description of Mr Endon is suffused with a reverence for his delicacy and beauty, even as it sustains the challenge to adequate visualization—the “perfection” of the tiny hairy body, the immense skull “crackling” with stiff black hair and its one tress of white, the dressing gown of “scarlet byssus” and the “neo-merovingian poulaines of deepest purple” (105). Precisely in this failure, confirmation is therefore found for the “love of the purest possible kind” that Murphy feels for Mr Endon—“they remained to one another, even when most profoundly one in spirit, as it seemed to Murphy, Mr Murphy and Mr Endon” (104).

The feeling of respect through distance and difference is also rehearsed in daily rituals of redundant togetherness: Murphy perpetually lights Mr Endon’s cigar, which yet remains always unfinished; and they play chess. The “very Fabian methods” used in this game of war ensure that no pieces are ever taken, and that check is never announced even if it is actually engaged (#?). It is a game of “affence,” whose accompanying, gleeful parody of chess notation invites the reader to enjoy a formalistic pleasure supplementary to the translation of the notes into action on the board: as note b) indicates, the “primary cause of all White’s subsequent difficulties” is that he moves a piece at all (137). As soon as Murphy retires from this particular match, with the image of Mr Endon’s “brilliant swallow tail . . . of arms and legs, purple, scarlet, black and glitter” gradually fading from his “captured” eyes, his senses discover the “unexpected pleasure” of being at peace: “Not the numb peace of their own suspension, but the positive peace that comes when the somethings give way, or simply add up, to the Nothing, than which in the guffaw of the Abderite nothing is more real” (138).

The achievement of this peace is part of the general “scandal” of Murphy’s time at the Mercyseat and underpins the scarcely covert political critique whose schematic outline runs as follows. Under the administration of the Clinch twins, MMM is a corrupt, nepotistic, and sadistic institution. Its requirements of Murphy are purely instrumentalistic [AQ: instrumentalist?]: he is “a creature without initiative,” “not paid to take an interest in the patients” but to fetch, carry and clean, “honour and obey the male sister,” and communicate nothing of his experiences there to the outside world (91). With such a code of practice and policy, along with the

instruction that Murphy “would never on any account be rough with a patient,” restraint and coercion being sometimes unavoidable but always to be “exerted with the utmost tenderness,” the MMM achieves an appearance of professional rigor and accountability; it is at night that its uncooperative patients are “liable to get hell” (133). The scandal, then, of Murphy’s practice, and aside from his general popularity with the patients, is to “persuade” them into responses and activities otherwise only arrived at through such coercion and restraint.

Murphy is thus the personification of the novel’s implicit critique of the politics of psychiatric care, and of the divisions between “us” and “them” which, as John Berger has put it, constitute the basis of all barbarism (2001). Skinner’s House is the theater of war, a “cockpit” in which “the battle raged . . . between the psychotic and psychiatric points of view” (95). Murphy, by contrast, recognizes a “kinship” with the patients, characterized by feelings of esteem, respect, and “unworthiness.” Instead of finding “monsters,” he identifies a “self-immersed indifference to the contingencies of the contingent world.” Murphy comes to “loathe” the “textbook attitude” or “complacent scientific conceptualism” which defines mental illness as a state of deprivation, recognizing instead a dialectic of enlightenment: it is precisely his “rational” experience to see the predicament of having to “wonder, love, hate, desire, rejoice and howl” in a “reasonable balanced” manner socially and ideologically acceptable to bourgeois society (Murphy’s mind does not run on “the correct cash- register lines”), and to see the patients not as “banished from a system of benefits” but as having achieved the sanctuary of escape from a “colossal fiasco” (101).

My suggestion is that it is equally clear what kind of “colossal fiasco” a European citizen of the 1930s might have wished to escape from. The MMM represents a fascist totalitarian regime not only in its authoritative structures and procedures but in its simplistic binary attributions of degeneracy and normality, “outer” and “inner” reality, psychosis and psychiatry. In this regime, prefiguring Orwellian dystopia as well as Latour’s commentaries on the abuses to which a critique of “fact” might be put, “there were no facts . . . except those sanctioned by the doctor. . . . No patient was dead till the doctor had seen him” (91–92). In his work there, by contrast, Murphy finds kinship, love, and peace, even if in the latter case this finally emerges as the ultimate peace of non-being.

Critique

The obverse of the foregoing reading of Murphy and peace, “strong” in its attribution of a bold ethical motivation to the writing of the novel, is its manifest critical vulnerability. It is surely equally the case, for example, that the intimate scene in the MMM is an act of exploitation of power and invasion of privacy on Murphy’s part, taking advantage of the amiability of Mr Endon, “the most biddable little gaga in the entire institution,” who can do little but submit to Murphy’s gaze (134). One commentator has alluded to the horror of Murphy’s realization that he is merely a speck in Mr Endon’s unseen, Murphy finding himself “horribly reduced, obscured and distorted” in Mr Endon’s eyes (Murphy 1994, 140). In this critic’s argument for Beckett’s Spinozist interests in Murphy, Murphy’s intimate moment with Mr Endon is seen to be the unfortunate antithesis of the relationship between Spinoza and a tutor, Francis van den Enden, as “a community of intellects, in which pupils can see eye to eye with their teacher” (228). Instead of an instance of peaceful co-existence, then, critics have been able to see the Murphy-Mr Endon relationship as something of a botched job—an “impasse,” for P. J. Murphy, and, for Pilling, a process of “tactical errors and desperate compromises” on Murphy’s part, encapsulated in his chess moves, and borne of the pursuit of his own “fixed goals” (1994, 79).

The clear evidence in favor of such readings resides in details that my own account thus far has parenthesized. Murphy’s interpretation of the MMM patients is, demonstrably (whatever else it might be) a sustained act of wish fulfilment. Beckett signals an eagerness on Murphy’s part to “substantiate” his first impressions, that the patients are “a race of people he long despaired of finding,” and correlatively to “distort” anything that might belie those impressions. “It was strenuous work, but very pleasant,” in that there is little apparent resistance from Murphy’s conscience: “Nothing remained but to see what he wanted to see” (M, 97, 100). Crude antitheses, “lovingly simplified and perverted,” are as much his creatures as those of the MMM: the issue “lay between nothing less fundamental than the big world and the little world” (101). This issue, however, remained “unresolved, only in fact”; Murphy “saved his facts” through an elaborate misrecognition of the patients’ manifest sufferings, “either disregarded or muted to mean what he wanted”: he insists on “supposing” and “presupposing” that they are

all having “a glorious time” (102). Finally, then, it “seemed” (repeatedly) to Murphy that he was bound to Mr Endon by the purest love, yet Mr Endon’s “limpid and imperturbable” schizophrenia acts as the “fountain” to Murphy’s Narcissus. Fittingly, therefore, even before the final scene of eye-to-eye intimacy, a moment of narrative omniscience intervenes to reveal the “sad truth” behind Murphy’s happy supposition that Mr Endon had felt Murphy’s friendly eye upon him. This was no “friend’s eye,” nor even “Murphy’s eye,” but rather “the chessy eye”; Murphy, deluded into thinking “against his better judgement” that Mr Endon reciprocates his friendship, has been unable to perceive that Murphy for Mr Endon “was no more than chess” (135). Hence, as the third version of his words to Mr Endon suggests, Murphy is disabused of his illusion, with “sorrow” (140).

Murphy and peace (2)

The sheep were a miserable-looking lot, dingy, close-cropped, undersized and misshapen. They were not cropping, they were not ruminating, they did not even seem to be taking their ease. They simply stood, in an attitude of profound dejection, their heads bowed, swaying slightly as though dazed. Murphy had never seen stranger sheep, they seemed one and all on the point of collapse.

(59)

I have staged the previous section as a moment of critical realization, arresting my prior enthusiasm for Murphy as a novel about peace. Overarching the critical counter-evidence against this initial reading, there are at least two broader senses in which the reading might be said to have been, as it were, too “good” to be true. First, it has implicitly attributed to the composition of Murphy a kind of ethicopolitical orientation which Beckett’s work has invariably seemed unfit to bear. As Laura Salisbury warns, in a fine study of Beckett’s comedy, the writer never wavered from “a deep-seated and long-standing” (Salisbury’s joke, from the “acathisia” of Murphy’s Cooper, of which more later) “aesthetic and ethical resistance to the production of an art that is neatly explicable,” that is to the presentation of anything like a “solution” or the “stability of an idea” (2012, 31). Jim Hansen surveys the recent attempts of Terry Eagleton, Alain Badiou, and Pascale Casanova to read Beckett as “inescapably political,” yet muses that we have still “yet to develop a scholarly language or critical vocabulary that catches the precise nuances and difficulties that Beckett presents for those interested in ideology critique” (2008, 661). To designate Murphy, then, simply as an antiwar novel might be as much a product of wishful and inattentive thinking as the friendship Murphy hopes he has received in return from Mr Endon. To suggest similarly that the novel stakes out its case for a peaceful human world, the “ultimate good” in Serres’s words, might be to sail too close to a kind of progressive political and ethical kitsch that is at odds with Beckett’s art. Too “good” may then, in a further sense, connote all-too-human(istic), insofar as the latter signifies the individual autonomy that goes with the exercise of ethical agency as such. Lee Oser identifies the critical reflex to humanize Beckett, and may even be said to embody this in a recuperative move concerning the “spiritual longing” defining Beckett’s pessimism, whereby the “assault” on a

normative or recognizable ethics becomes itself an expression of the centrality of the ethical per se (2007, 102, 105). Yet, Oser needs to remind us, Beckett is “an author who defies humanism” (117). Further, in outlining an approach to Beckett’s work from the perspective of the “anethical,” Shane Weller argues for the necessity of extricating the ethical question of that work from the kinds of binary pattern that have tended to characterize critical debates: nihilism or anti-nihilism; the ethical or the unethical; the humanistic or the antihumanistic. In support of this, Weller joins other recent critics, such as Oser and Salisbury, in retrieving an unbroadcast radio piece from 1946, “The Capital of the Ruins,” in which Beckett had reflected on the wartime experience of those who worked in the Irish Hospital at Saint-Lô in Northern France—and, in particular, on the possibility that they will have had “a vision and a sense of a time-honoured conception of humanity in ruins, and perhaps even an inkling of the terms in which our condition is to be thought again.” For Weller, the pursuit of this inkling comes in Beckett not from anything as availably reassuring as a “new ethics,” either of truth or of alterity, but from “the opening of the anethical as the experience of that particular nothing the filling of which can be justified only through an appeal to values that will always negate the very things they are there to save” (2006, 195).

These readings help to contextualize the direction a revised perspective might take once critical skepticism surrounding an overly humanistic account of Murphy and peace begins to be assimilated. I turn instead now to the preliminary sketching of a more posthumanistic sense in which the modernist experimentalism of Murphy inscribes peace at the level of form, in a way that parenthesizes (for the moment) those ethical motivations attaching to human agency—Beckett as antifascist author, Murphy as human(e) character and MMM orderly. The frantic, swarming agitation around the pursuit of Murphy in what I have identified as the second narrative strand of the novel might seem to be at odds with any normative understanding of the peaceful. “Peace” therefore needs briefly to be reapproached through a closer examination of Latour’s thinking on critique.

For Latour, the prevailing model of critique derives from that “modern” epistemological settlement characterized by the bifurcations of subject and object, nature and politics/culture. This has signally failed to conceptualize and sustain a life held in

common, because it is ultimately grounded in what, following A. N. Whitehead, Latour terms the “odd” and highly idealist invention of a concept of inanimate matter (2010, 482–84). Following Phillippe Descola, the paradox asserted here by Latour is that “inanimism” is “the most anthropocentric of all the modes of relation invented, across the world, to deal with associations between humans and nonhumans” —because it requires the concept of [AQ: add “a” or “the”?] material world simply unfolding, without agency, from unstatable first causes, in a way that continues to guarantee the “radical divide” between human and nonhuman (2010, 483). Instead, from the Actor-Network-Theory (ANT) of Reassembling the Social (2005) through to compositionism, Latour has pursued a conception and an ethics of relations which assumes agency to be [AQ: a?] condition of commonality. So, for example, the dismantling of the Durkheimian “social” as a reified abstraction that does violence to a multiform reality becomes, in compositionism, a retrieval of the Icelandic concept of the “thing” as a composite gathering of entities, and of the imperative to “detect how many participants are gathered in a thing to make it exist and maintain its existence” (2004, 246). Latour draws on a philosophical legacy whose emphasis is on the principles of productivity and pragmatics, obtaining outside of the hierarchies of subject-object relations or forms of organicism: Whitehead’s process philosophy and Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari’s machinism. His compositionist posthumanism connects with a body of “new” or radically reconceptualized materialisms, such as Steven Shaviro’s commentaries on those predecessors (2009), Bennett’s theories of vital materialism or “vibrant matter” (2010), or Brian Massumi’s “activist philosophy” (2011).

In Murphy it is clear that a certain assault on anthropomorphic humanist assumptions is made through an overt satire on the conventions of fictional realism and characterization: for example, the list of Celia’s (vital?) statistics at the outset of chapter 2, where age is as “unimportant” as instep and “mobile” features are set off by “white” complexion and “yellow” hair (M 10); or the metafictional excursus into the way in which Murphy’s mind pictured itself, in chapter 6 (63–66). In what follows, however, I want to suggest that a politics of peaceable compositionism is at work in ways that are more covertly inscribed in the novel’s texture. While Latour’s compositionism is

not elaborated as a literary textual practice, he indicates, often with reference to the fictions of Richard Powers, that the literary world is better placed than the social sciences to reconceptualize animism because of its “complex semiosis of human and nonhuman fictional characters” (2010, 481n25). Murphy’s aesthetic posthumanism is more complex than this suggests, even as it incorporates Latour’s emphasis in various ways, and it includes the presence, and the question, of the animal; the failure of humans to achieve autonomy or integrity, or to resemble themselves; the emphasis, instead, upon posture, positionality, vector, force, and velocity; and the performance within, and inhabiting of, space.

The Hyde Park sheep, an anchor point of my own reading of Murphy, have tended to surface in recent, timely reflections on the thinking of the animal and the human in Beckett’s work. Surveying contributions to the volume *Beckett and Animals*, Mary Bryden notes the prominence of “a recognition of Beckett’s disavowal of any thought system which bases its tenets on human primacy over other animals” (2013, 4). The “species consciousness” Bryden finds explored across an extensive Beckettian bestiary necessarily translates, for David Wheatley in the same volume, into “species anxiety—the dilemma of what it is to be human” (2013, 59). So, in a gleefully dismal tableau, as Murphy observes the animals awaiting the approach of the philanthropic Miss Dew and her lettuce, Beckett plays a kind of fugue around anthropomorphism, in which the act of writing the sheep seems inevitably also to be the writing of the human. The sheep’s steadfast refusal to eat Miss Dew’s lettuces marks a refusal to adhere to bucolic, pastoral stereotype—“undersized and misshapen,” no “cropping,” “ruminating” or taking of ease—and a subsequent oblique reference to Wordsworth puts Romantic discourse, and any connotations of nature worship or animating life force, similarly under erasure. Nevertheless, their resistance to interpretation—“simply stood”—modulates immediately into its opposite: if “in an attitude” can be believed, the sheep are profoundly dejected. The fragile balance between these two positions—sheer alterity on the one hand, human kinship in dejection on the other—is encapsulated in the animals’ precarious state, “swaying slightly,” possibly dazed, verging on collapse. Strange and misshapen, it seems there is life here, but

not as we know it. Undernourishment, if not starvation, still fail to constitute reasons to respond to Miss Dew's forced benevolence: like Murphy's perfectly balanced lunch, the condition of the sheep is, as it were, one "vitiating by no base thoughts of nutrition" (M 49).

It can seem a staple tenet of a posthumanistic ethics to refuse to anthropomorphize the animal. However, as Julie Campbell observes, Murphy in this scene appears to recognize the idea, "less acknowledged" in a general sense than the presence of the animal in the human, of "what could be human in the animal" (2013, 195). In her discussion of political ecologies that might fully acknowledge human and nonhuman "actants," Bennett has suggested that it might now be "less clear how fatal" anthropomorphism is. In her analysis of two "worm stories," related by Charles Darwin and Latour respectively, Bennett highlights the selective and strategic ability of anthropomorphism to locate likenesses or isomorphisms, and thereby posit a world no longer ruled by the subject-object relations of "ontologically distinct" categories (2010, 94–109).³ The laughter at Beckett's sheep (and, perhaps, at many animal jokes) is a release of the tension surrounding the apparent contradiction that they are like us (dejected) yet simultaneously inescapably other, even than themselves (misshapen and strange). Ensuring that we do not fix the sheep in their "attitude," Murphy later awakens to find them, anthropomorphically again, "on much better form," but simply—and less anthropomorphically—because of the determination of the time of day, like (Murphy muses) the "four caged owls in Battersea Park, whose joys and sorrows did not begin until dusk" (M 62). A hint of pure behaviorism emerges here to show that anthropomorphism is only held in place, and prevented from collapsing back into anthropocentrism, by the polar and countervailing presence of the kinds of material determinacy that we hold in common.

Humans, then, are far from free of such material determinacy, in a novel at whose outset Murphy behaves "as though he were free" by tying himself to his rocking chair and thus attempting to block out the approaching necessity of having soon to eat, drink, sleep, and dress somewhere else (5). Even conscious, voluntary ethical behavior, when glimpsed, turns out to be not quite what it should be: to the question, "Wylie, why are you so kind?," the

delicious response is that “I don’t seem to be able to control myself . . . in the presence of certain predicaments” (38). Murphy’s humans may on rare occasions resemble humanistic images of themselves, but seem much more prone—as prone as the sheep—to a strangeness and a determinacy that lies beyond them; as Dowd puts it, “what happens to the characters does not belong to them” (2007, 86). Central to the treatment of this errant materiality is the comedy of the struggle to control or subdue forces that, as we know in the novel’s well-established rehearsals of dualism, highlight the unstable and uncertain relationship between consciousness and matter.

As the oldest of the novel’s humans, Mr Willoughby Kelly is closest to that point at which mobility is experienced as dissolution, body parts threatening to “wander away and get lost if he did not keep a sharp look-out, he felt them fidgeting to be off” (M, 67). How, in such circumstances, to respond to the deceptively simple request to pay attention?:

“Stop!” said Mr Kelly. His attention could not be mobilized like that at a moment’s notice. His attention was dispersed. Part was with his caecum, which was wagging its tail again; part with his extremities, which were dragging anchor; part with his boyhood; and so on. All this would have to be called in. When he felt enough had been scraped together he said: “Go!” (15)

Cooper is a limit case of a different kind, able-bodied perhaps (to the extent that this in Murphy could ever mean what is[AQ: it?] says), and charged with a strenuous employment as shadow/investigator, but also limited, as both “acathisiac” (a fear of sitting which was “deep-seated and of long standing” [69]) and “analphabete” (dread of “verbal commitments” [115]). Compensating for the latter is a face of extraordinary mobility, capable of delivering (although “it did not seem to move a muscle”) in “a single grimace the finest shades of irresolution, revulsion, doglike devotion, catlike discretion, fatigue, hunger, thirst and reserves of strength.”

Bodies do not in fact “move,” but are sent, either as parts or wholes, on journeys. As Dowd has again argued, Murphy’s characteristic “modes,” or modes of characterization, are force

and positionality, velocity, and posture; it is “the body’s capacity for affecting and for being affected” that is at issue (82–87). Murphy’s people appear frequently to be taken up in movements, as if part of a swarming of matter which happens, for a certain time, to take the form of themselves, but only erratically and unpredictably so. Continuing to seek Mr Kelly’s attention, Celia must position herself so that he sees her “on his eyes’ way back to the eternities” (12); in the unfolding story of her first encounter with Murphy, she is seen by him only as “he dispatched his head on its upward journey,” just as Celia later “dispatched” her hands on a gesture of Neary’s and then drops them back into her original position. At a rare moment of speech, Cooper’s head “toppled forward” as his hands “toil up a little through the dark,” before the hands drop and the head is “forced” to look round at Wylie. Cooper’s manner of pursuit is always “frustrated,” not because he cannot keep up, but because he tends to go too fast. Nor is movement itself dependent upon locomotion as such; a face, such as Mr Willoughby Kelly’s, can “burst into a fine bulb of skull,” just as “all hope seemed lost” (11).

In these instances, the delight of Beckett’s comedy lies in the poignant human dilemma—a human condition?—of a shared material substrate which is conscious of its own determinacy and indeterminacy, predictability, and unpredictability, its constituent parts “always fidgeting to be off.” Generally alogical bodily movement is hardly surprising in a novel in which Miss Carridge’s way of entering an apartment was to “knock timidly on the outside some time after she had closed it behind her on the inside” (42). With its “irrational heart,” the Murphy body does not, we sense, adhere to a recognizable organic hierarchy, and is perhaps all the better (comically, philosophically) for that as an aid to the gentle excoriation of humanistic pieties (6); Murphy was “not tied by interest to a corpse-obedient matter,” his “best friends had always been among things” (108).

As Gabriel Hankins notes elsewhere in this issue, a compositionist ethics invites us to relocate both choice and virtue within a broader sense of the ethical “place or habitat,” somewhere we are rather than something we do. If we ask what it is that Murphy is able to do, or what it is that he does as an agent, ethical or otherwise, the evidence provided by the novel seems only to point toward unemployment, redundancy, and evasion; as

Deleuze has noted, the “I would prefer not to” of Melville’s *Bartleby* is a “Beckettian formula” (although we might remember that *Bartleby* is capable of prodigious work, if left to himself) (Deleuze 1998, 154). Murphy’s mind, however, “functioned not as an instrument but as a place” (101). A principle of situated performance of the everyday, inhabiting space or occupying place in the novel, and[AQ: change to “it”?] is captured by Celia’s perspective as from the window of her room she watches her beloved setting off for his first shift at the MMM. She observes in Murphy a display of immobility, “as though turned to stone in the middle of a hornpipe,” hissing, retracing of steps and, “at the most unexpected times,” the clutching and unclutching of the spikes of a railing (82–83). Murphy may appear to be going nowhere, but his temporary articulation with the railing spikes is then “multiplied” in the “burlesque” of a group of amused and derisive boys after he has gone. Even if, in Beckett, places, and Murphys within them, might remind us of what “B” in *Three Dialogues* terms an “incoercible absence of relations” in modern art, then this absence is, we might say, at least, the obverse of coercion and instrumentality (Beckett and Duthuit 1965, 125).

This posthumanistic analysis might then allow us tentatively to transform the “sorrow” attending Murphy’s final scene with Mr Endon, and his subsequent demise: “He could not get a picture in his mind of any creature he had met, animal or human. Scraps of bodies, of landscapes, hands, eyes, lines and colours evoking nothing, rose and climbed out of sight before him, as though reeled upward off a spool level with his throat” (M 141). Naked and lying in the wet grass, Murphy knows this is a crisis, of sorts, and must be arrested “before the deeper coils were reached”: nothing relates, and even the Oedipal relation is finally superseded (“never before had he failed with his father”). Later, surveying Murphy’s body in the mortuary are “the eyes of all, seventeen in all,” straying and mingling “among the remains” — “How various are the ways of looking away!” (148). The unavailability of coherent pictures of the creaturely, the scraps that make up their bodies, and the forces that pull them together and apart, might also be seen as ways of resisting the coercion and violence of the MMM, the latter enacted in the humanistic name of restoring its patients to the “real world” and to normative self-identity. Ethically, then, there are indeed various

ways of looking away. We can look away in order to turn a blind eye to barbarism, or we can look away in order to leave be, or to set free.

In his essay "Trying to Understand Endgame," Theodor Adorno reminds us, through his commentary on Georg Lukács's estimation of Beckett's modernism, that horrors of categorical judgment can be committed against Beckett's work in the name of the normatively humanistic. Lukács's complaint against Beckett's *Molloy*, for example, is that it presents us with "an idiot's vegetative existence" both as "an image of the utmost human degradation" and as the modern condition humaine, and that this typifies a process of "distortion" in modernist literature, in which the perverse, the idiotic, and the abnormal are "glorified" in an "undisguised anti-humanism" (1963, 31–32). A reading of *Murphy* from the standpoint of a posthumanistic ethics effectively inverts Lukács's position. When the novel's interest in the "microcosmopolitan" (134), the incarcerated and the certified, the idle and the socially dysfunctional, combines with a compositionalist emphasis on the agency of forces and vectors both human and nonhuman, we may find not simply principles of greater compassion and inclusivity but also a sense, deriving from contemporary disability theory as Hankins identifies it in this issue, that the fragmentation of the body is philosophically prior to the unity of the humanistic self. Through his reading of *Endgame*, Adorno finds in Beckett a critique of the concept of individual subjectivity, whose illusion of "substantiality and absoluteness" had lain at the "idealist core" of European existentialism, and finds this critique in the "zone of indifference" in which *Endgame* is staged (2005, 1123). More generally, as Bennett puts it, Adorno's concept of non-identity, or that which always resists incorporation into conceptuality, also signals a resistance to the "will to mastery," the "rage" against non-identity being the "driving force behind interhuman acts of cruelty and violence." However, Bennett adds, Adorno sought to prevent non-identity from entering too fully into a compositionist ethic of animated "thing-power"—"he does not want to play the fool for too long" (2010, 15).

Posthumanism, peace, and apologetics

Perhaps the notion of Adorno playing the fool at all will give us pause. In musing on her own methodology for theorizing encounters, as in Latour's compositionism, between such ontologically diverse actants as "a blackout, a meal, an imprisonment in chains" and "an experience of litter," Bennett also notes: "What seems to be needed is a certain willingness to appear naive or foolish, to affirm what Adorno calls his 'clownish traits'" (2010, xiii). As we have examined Beckett's posthumanist comedy in *Murphy*, so we are reminded here of the elements of the naive, self-consciously playful and even downright comedic that seem to inhere in recent advanced posthumanist theory itself. Latour, we have noted, has practiced a mode of writing which, in its refusal to sustain the illusion of critical distance, performs (perhaps paradoxically) a dethroning of the critical ego: conversational and confessional ("Do you see why I am worried?"); irreverent and at times exhibitionistic ("Do you see now why it feels so good to be a critical mind? . . . You are always right!"), but whose self-parodic and self-deprecating qualities might best be typified by the chapter, "On the Difficulty of Being an ANT," in which an exasperated postgraduate visits his tutor in office hours to complain about the seeming inapplicability of ANT to his research ("You may not like Bourdieu very much, but at least he was a real scientist") (Latour 2004, 227, 238–39; 2005, 155).

What these tendencies point to, I suggest, is a more general apologetics characterizing many posthumanistic attempts to theorize beyond the invulnerability of "critique," or beyond the common sense of subject/ object, human/nonhuman relations. The need to exhibit or declare the risk of the naive, the foolish, or the clownish is usually to be found in the folds of such attempts. In a fine study of Whitehead, Shaviro nevertheless ventures [AQ: an?] apology on behalf of the philosopher's "cheerful indifference" to a pervasive modern antifoundationalism. Whitehead's speculative metaphysics of material "feeling" and its relation to self-creation can, Shaviro worries (Latour also does a lot of rhetorical worrying), sound like "the sheerest romantic blather, the sort of naive protest of Life against Intellect, and

Feeling against Thought, that decades of modernist critical theory . . . have taught us to distrust” (2009, 64). “How can this be?,” asks Shaviro, familiarly self-questioning; “It’s not that Whitehead is naive, sheltered, or detached” (150).

What is at stake, or for that matter risked, in predicating a realignment toward a language of the postcritical, within which admissions of vulnerability and error might come to the fore? As Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick observes in limning the notion of a “reparative” critical practice that might lie beyond post-Freudian orthodoxy, “to theorize out of anything but a paranoid critical stance has come to seem naive, pious and complacent” (2003, 126). Yet vulnerability, error, and apology may constitute a more transparently realistic basis for the process of revision and reformulation that makes up any individual reading of complex (modernist, experimental) fiction such as *Murphy*—a reminder that any critical reading takes place in time and space. They may equally help acknowledge the extent to which any attribution of value or meaning is potentially under erasure at any moment. Further, they may help to define a critical practice in terms of the peaceable productivity and coexistence, sharing and comparison of interpretations—an assemblage underscoring the unfinished nature of any dialogue with a literary text.

My “second” reading of *Murphy* here, suggesting the affinities of Beckett’s novel with a posthumanistic model of peace, presents itself as a kind of corrective to the perceived critical naiveté of my “first”; professional paranoia fueled by a hermeneutic of suspicion could not allow me to leave the frailties of the first reading unchallenged. Yet the attention and detail I have conferred upon the first bespeaks a certain recalcitrance, or a reluctance to give up on the (surely too obvious to be true?) conviction that Beckett wrote *Murphy*’s experience in the MMM as a protest against fascism. At least two possibilities for the retrieval of this first reading would seem to be in play. First, the coincidence of *Murphy*’s egoistic projection with the genuinely benign effects he creates in the MMM reminds us of how subtly, internally compromised any version of peace might be, how subtly domination and violence might lie at the heart of peace or intimacy, and of the vigilance needed to monitor the ethics of any peaceful settlement. The fact that the novel might be too easily (mis)read as an antiwar statement of the 1930s thus doubles as a

warning about the complacency that might cling to peace. I am happy with this recuperation because it continues to locate peace in Murphy as an ambiguous internal effect of its aesthetic, allowing me to feel relatively safe from being wrong about the novel.

Alternatively, the first might continue to coexist with the second, allowing an overt humanism its place within an overall posthumanistic assemblage or composition, and acknowledging that its value might consist in the wager that, in this respect, some of the meaning of Murphy is to mean well. How wrong could this be, or how much would it matter if it were? We may continue to respect the refusal of Beckett's art to offer comforting sustenance in any way, without denying the potential effects of Murphy's comedy, and its critique of the MMM, in promoting a sense of mutual peace as the ultimate human good—rather as, in Sedgwick's words, as selves and communities we can succeed in "extracting sustenance from the objects of a culture, even of a culture whose avowed desire has often been not to sustain them" (2003, 150–51). Or we might simply remember in Beckett's work the rich and persistent ethical appeal of the apologetic climbdown: "B—(Remembering warmly) 'Yes, yes, I am mistaken, I am mistaken'" (Beckett and Duthuit 1965, 126).

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Notes

1. Murphy will be cited in the text as M.
2. For further details on faciality in Murphy, see Szafraniec 2007, 107–10, and Dowd on Deleuze and Guattari, 2007, 87–98.
2. For a comparable argument around anthropomorphism in D. H. Lawrence, see Wallace 2005, 119–51.

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Abstract [online only]

This article stages a process of self-conscious critical assessment and reassessment around the proposition that Samuel Beckett's 1938 *Murphy* is a novel intimately concerned with peace. Building on the pacifistic orientation of the posthumanist intellectual projects of Michel Serres and Bruno Latour, it uses *Murphy* as a means of inquiring into what a literary textual practice founded on a posthumanistic ethics of peace might look like. It locates in *Murphy* forms of agency and animism which dismantle the human-nonhuman divide and suggest affinities between modernist experimentalism and lines of thought in Latour's work that lead to "compositionism." It also finds in posthumanism a general apologetics around the dismantling of "critique" and anthropocentrism, opening up textual practice to the admission of vulnerability, naïveté, error, and playfulness, which allows various readings of *Murphy*'s peaceability to be assembled and assimilated together beyond a hermeneutic of suspicion.

Keywords: Samuel Beckett, modernism, peace, posthumanism, anthropocentrism, critique, compositionism