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DEATHLY CONSTRUCTIONS/ BECKETT'S THANATOGRAPHIES

Garin Dowd

Keynote address to the conference 'Beckett and Death, Dying and all that other unfinished business' held at University of Northampton, December 3rd 2006

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This paper examines the significance of what I propose to give the name 'deathly constructions' in Beckett's oeuvre. This facet of his work may also be thought of as 'thanatographic', deathly writing. Speculating that there may be a thanatographic 'system' which can be discerned in operation to varying extents throughout his work, it is, however, the specific ambition of the intervention to

locate this deathly network within two related conceptual frameworks. The first is provided by the theme of construction itself, the second by the investment Beckett's work abundantly displays in a thinking of the ruin (and of various modes of fragmentation, devastation and corruption) and in particular in its synecdochal form, the stone, or stones. Beckett's thanatographic compositional imagination is part of a larger engagement with questions of topography on the one hand and architecture on the other. [From this it is possible to map Beckett's deathly constructions on to geopolitical concerns which may impinge on the way in which his work can be and has been inscribed often either in an Irish cultural or a continental European avant-garde context. It is suggested that an attention to Beckett's thanatographic imaginary renders the work less susceptible to being 'arrested' within either context.] While far from clearing the way for a return to the narrative of the work as testifying to the human condition in its finitude, or to a contemporary legacy – albeit much skewed – of such a conception in Badiou's 'courage', Beckett's deathly constructions, and the memorial edifices, compositions, and structures which are so frequent in his corpus, are indicative of what I propose to call an 'atopian threshold' which is neither purgatorial, nihilistic nor signposted the *via negativa* in a mystical effigy of redemption. Through an attention to the role of the contour, the surface and the 'interface' (textual and architectural threshold) of subject and construction (or abode, shell, niche, grave), it is suggested that the continuum between 'inert' matter and the human life form is an *abiding* one in Beckett's work, such that it is possible to make an

assertion about a specific mode of thanatography operative in his writing. The public buildings described or evoked in *Murphy* are well-known: among them the General Post Office in Dublin, the National Gallery in London and the Abbey Theatre. Arguably there is a contrast to be made between the determinedly accurate account of the topography of London (as Chris Ackerley has attested by pursuing the ghost of Murphy up the Caledonian Road - 'the Cally' to local residents - even as far as Brewery Road), and the somewhat vaguer depictions of Ireland, such as Cork's Grand Parade, and the Moore's melody-esque register which gives us The Groves of Blarney, or expanding and or contracting reveries such as the mortuary lists of Neary (internalised) and Miss Counihan (articulated in exaggerated mode by Miss Counihan). *More Pricks than Kicks* had already given such a version of Belacqua's Dublin. Ireland is, in the universe of *Murphy*, like Murphy's birthmark, indelible. One might put it another way: the birthmark is Ireland. Like Murphy's name - the most typically Irish name yes; his mark is his name; in the end he will be identifiable only by means of his birthmark. In Beckett this substitution is at work. It is a form of *antonomasia*, as outlined in Peter Fenves 1990 essay on Leibniz and the baroque. A rage to name.

Two Irish heroes one might also be tempted to say: Cuchulainn in the GPO and Murphy, or his mark, in the mortuary: each would confer on their respective buildings, the buildings in which they would die a symbolic death (although as Patrick Bixby argued yesterday these sites - the Abbey and the GPO - do vibrate across Dublin to the

distinct but related pulses of agitation for independence) a shrine-like quality. But Murphy does not, as we know, succeed in having his last wish granted. He does not in fact go down the toilet without ceremony. What ceremony there is surrounding his demise is confined to his being the subject of a literary *pieta*; an autopsy which remarks his loss of recognisability save for his endurance as a mark, a stain, *porto maison*, a port-winer, within the space of the mortuary, within the asylum, the *asile* (the shelter or refuge).

Cuchulainn in death of course has a deathless rump; Murphy too in death is entirely concentrated into his buttocks. What chance would a rump have in the GPO? Not as much chance as it would appear to have at the Magdalen Mental Mercyseat.

In this year of many Beckett conferences and for many of us many conference papers, it has been inevitable that some are prone to present their own retrospectives of their own year in Beckett Scholarship. After all it's only human. I am no exception. At the start of the Beckett centenary year I spoke about *Murphy* in relation to its system of faces. Now, appropriately, and adopting the novel's own incomparable word for this, it is time for a *voltefesses*, and time then to inspect with Celia the Murphy posterior, the *aposteriori* and posthumous posterior or rear-end.

But what of Murphy's end, the one which is not his goal, but nonetheless his end?

By closing time [important also to T.S. Eliot in *The Wasteland* of

course] the body, mind and soul of Murphy were freely distributed over the floor of the saloon; and before another dayspring greyned the earth had been swept away with the sand, the beer, the butts, the glass, the matches, the pits, the vomit. (154)

The universe post-Murphy is more moribund, more deathly than it was when he was tethered to life, but in a manner which suggests an enduring mark or Leibnizian hue. Death for Leibniz is nothing but the contraction of the animal. Well okay maybe the hue is Spinozan for its concern with velocity, or Geulinxian ... Actually it is none of these if the Murphy mind – along with body and soul – really is gone for good. Or maybe all these ghosts remain present to colour the encroaching end, the mass exeunt of Hyde Park. Another chair-bound moribund, Mr Kelly, finds himself eventually distilled into the synecdochal form of the mechanism of his wheelchair. “The levers were the tired heart”. The kenotic suggestiveness of ‘All out’ is undeniable. Is this then nothing less than the emptying out of the canvas or stage? *Exeunt* Murphy, and, along with him, form? Well exit the Greek word for form at any rate. The body, mind and soul of Murphy have gone. Exit the mark of form, its marker, its place-marker, its remarkable effigy. Suddenly the contours do not hold, post-mortem; corporeal frontiers begin to burgeon and blend; “the skull gushed from under the cap...the ravaged face was a cramp of bones, throttled sounds jostled in the throat” (158). The combination of anamorphosis and synaesthesia here is suggestive of a post-*Morphe* universe. Its stratifications are in abeyance. Yet in this dying light, this purging, and purgatorial space with its

refrain of All out, form is extinguished, switched off, being as if liquidated by the opening of a valve, there is something vital.

It is the last of these which most holds my interest as far as the paper is concerned. The deathly construction is a specific form of thanatography, which serves to give some weight to the argument that the other national and personal monuments in Beckett’s oeuvre are part of the same logic. They may be stones, they may be stone, but if they are there in Beckett’s work they are constructions, they are stones in the sense of the ‘Le Monde et le pantalon’ essay: under pressure, a thousandth of a second before disintegration. The work of art holds them as cipher of what Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari call a bloc of becoming, not a passage on to national or international history. It might be objected that it is just a matter of emphasis. I speculate however that in *Murphy*, by placing his characters under the sign of this ruin, Beckett locates the work as much in a philosophical tradition which is a continental European one, as it is an Irish one. It is a way I suppose of historicizing Beckett but in a commerce with shadows and shades, geophilosophically and not as much geopolitically as some recent studies have, many convincingly, nonetheless argued.

We know from the French translation which Beckett did with Alfred Péron that one of Murphy’s abodes had been in a garret in the splendid building once owned by Leibniz himself [SLIDE] (a *mansarde* the perfection of which succeeds—according to the French translation of the novel—in being

doubled in Murphy's later monadic garret).¹



The reference to Leibniz is explicit only in the French edition of *Murphy*: “Murphy avait occupé à Hanovre, assez longtemps pour faire l’expérience de tous ces avantages, une mansarde dans la belle maison renaissance de la Schmiedestrasse où avait vécu, mais surtout où était mort, Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz” (1953, 119). In amplifying the reference to Leibniz in the French translation Beckett produces a kind of memorial to replace the building, itself destroyed in the war which intervened between the publication of the original and the translation. One cannot help wondering if Beckett knew (from sources such as Latta, 1898) that Leibniz died an isolated and neglected figure (as far as the Court was concerned),

¹ Peter Fenves has written a remarkable text addressing the question of memorial in Leibniz (Fenves 1990). There are copious illustrations and photographs of the house in both its intact and ruined states in Meckseper (1983) and Krüger (1985), while the façade of the destroyed building has since been replicated in a different location on a modern block of university accommodation. On the issue of pre-established harmony see for example Fletcher (1971, 136).

defamed as Lövenix (“believer in nothing”), or indeed that the philosopher, who suffered from gout, used wooden splints and leather binding to ease his discomfort while seated (the better, then, like Murphy, to “come alive in his mind”). Incidentally Leibniz’s real name Leibnitz means ‘body-use’, another Murphean retrospective resonance. Beckett certainly visited the house in 1937 while it still stood.



DEATHLY COMPOSITION

As the remains of Murphy lie on the mortuary slab, his physical and mental marks endure, as does his original landscape (“indelible Dublin” as the coroner puts it), encapsulated in the various lists which those on attendance respond with.

Neary saw Clonmachnois on the slab,
the castle of the O’Melaghins,
meadow, eskers, thatch on white,
something red, the wide bright water,
Connaught. (150; French translation:
191)

Miss Counihan, following her departure from the mortuary, conjures her own list of the homeland: “Oh hand in hand let us return to the dear land of our birth, the bays, the bogs, the moors, the glens, the lakes, the rivers, the streams, the brooks, the mists, the – er – fens, the – er – glens, by tonight’s mail-train”.

If Murphy wants to have his remains returned home, like those of Yeats ultimately were, it is, by contrast to the latter, to have been dispersed into the *unheimlich*, bypassing the *heimlich* by virtue of that very return (the Abbey Theatre of course is a preoccupation suggestive among other things of Beckett’s relationship to the Irish Literary revival [see the work of Emilie Morin] he wants them to cause those remains to be dislocated even in that very return). Their dispersal will interrupt a performance and will be otherwise unremarked.

The Abbey Theatre is in some respects an architectural monument to the great Irish dramatists of the first half of the twentieth century, while Leibniz’s house became a museum devoted to the philosopher before it was destroyed in WWII.

The living Murphy resided in the latter, while the defunct version was to have been transported in a dissolved form through the sanitary system of the former.

On one level this may speak to a tension which emerges in Beckett’s writing in the 1930s between an Irish framework – abundantly evoked of course in *Murphy* – and a European intellectual heritage. The decision to emphasise and expand

the reference to Leibniz in the French translation may serve to support this claim. This is not my main concern however, intriguing as the possibility is that Beckett’s visit to Leibniz’s house, which took place in 1936, intervened between the writing of the English draft and the outbreak of the war which would see the Leibniz building along with so many others destroyed in bombing raids.



I don’t think it has been noted in connection with Beckett’s decision to have a chair-bound Murphy, that there may well be a Leibnizian echo to supplement the intensified resonance in the French translation.



According to biographical accounts, Leibniz suffered from gout. In order to ease his discomfort while working (and he worked very long hours) he would, using wooden splints, have his extremities bound to his chair (represented here somewhat indistinctly it must be said), the better perhaps like Murphy to come alive in his mind.



Between two deathly constructions – the statue of Cuchulainn in the General Post Office in Dublin and the remains of Murphy in a literary *pieta* in an asylum in a London suburb – the novel *Murphy* establishes a contagious and corrosive exchange.



An aside:

If one needed prompts to permit the contents of *Murphy* to leak from the frame of literature to the visual arts, the novel itself is hardly short of them. There is indeed a veritable corpus of such incentives. Some are obvious, the reference to the silent cinema of D. W. Griffith in the depiction of the reclining Ticklepenny being one, the painting hanging in Trafalgar Square another. Sculpture of course is invoked in the depiction of Celia. Literary form is infringed and impinged upon by the other arts. However insofar as my theme of thanatography is concerned, it is with the tradition in the arts very generally of recording death that I am concerned.

The identifiable dead are in each case partly in absentia (the death of Cuchulainn is not a statue made to honour the red branch hero, but rather those who died at the GPO in particular and those who died later by firing squad at Kilmainham jail). A nervous breakdown prompts the assault on the marble buttocks, such as they are, at the GPO while Murphy manages to expire in an explosion. In the GPO the pedagogical figure of the hoary hero (echoes of Joyce undeniable) is subject to a performative subversion, while in the MMM Murphy's corpse gives rise to a reverse formulation. Summoned are, inter alia, Clonmachnois and a stylised, in some respects *Dubliners* landscape in the shape of both Miss Counihan's and Neary's responses (it is not true, or at least not true in one sense only, that the only thing to be said about Murphy is that he is or was a Dubliner). The erasure of Murphy, his becoming-defunct, reactivates the link to his 'origins' in the pedagogical sense, in Bhabha's terms. This curious

countenancing of buttocks, or at least of one set to one cheek thereof, across the Irish sea, between Dublin and Ireland, from GPO to MMM, between a post-office built by a British imperial mail system and an asylum employing an indelibly Dublin exile renders problematic or at least causes a hesitation, for me at least, just as Miss Counihan stumbles into “er fen and er glen”, the reading of Beckett’s engagement with the rhetoric and/or legacy of the twilighters and the clamorous and contending voices of Irish nationalism in the 1930s. The façade of one deathly construction (edifice, occupants both *in absentia* and *in presentia*) reverberates with the other. Neary, or Neary’s skull is the link between both deadly constructions; the same head he dashes against the dying hero’s buttocks conjures Clonmachnois from the mortuary slab. (Or Leibniz’s skull, or its representative the splendid garret (Monas Monadum), could equally be thought of as the sounding chamber for these impossible worlds).



In the same year as *Murphy* was first published in French translation another novel appeared with an irreverent rendering of the 1916 Rising. In 1947 Raymond Queneau (incidentally, an author disparaged by Beckett) published under the pseudonym Sally Mara the novel entitled *On est toujours trop bon avec les femmes* with Éditions Gallimard, in some ways the publishing house facing Beckett’s own later publisher Editions de Minuit.

The republican insurgents are prepared for execution:

Le peloton d’exécution se forma.

-- Je tiens à ajouter que, contrairement à ce que vous croyez, vous ne méritez pas de figurer dignement dans le chapitre de l’Histoire Universelle consacrée aux héros. Vous vous êtes déshonorés par

le geste immonde que ma fiancée, malgré sa légitime pudeur, a bien été obligée de décrire. N'avez-vous pas honte d'avoir voulu soulever la robe d'une jeune fille pour admirer ses chevilles? Lubriques personnages, vous mourrez comme des chiens, la conscience ternie et pleine de désespoir. (Queneau, 1962, 344)

In his follow-up novel *Journal Intime* the Dublin francophone resident Sally Mara finds herself seeking consolation in the only thing that has the ability to elevate her soul (immortal): art:

Me trouvai-je devant la National Art Gallery (sic), West Merrion Square. Ce n'était pas la première fois que je foutais les pieds, mais ce jour-là une émotion toute particulière étreignait mon âme (immortelle)...Celle qui m'attira tout d'abord, après une tournée générale, fut l'Apollon discobole. Comme tous les autres dieux il portait un caleçon (court mais caleçon tout de même). Il paraît que dans la réalité les dieux n'en ont point, du moins leurs statues. Pourquoi le conserver du musée leur en offre-t-il? C'est un mystère. Il doit se cacher quelque chose là-dedans.

Une petite bande de gazon me séparait de l'oeuvre d'art. Après avoir regardé autour de moi, mais non, personne, je la franchis, cette bande, et me trouvai le nez contre les mollets du divin athlète. J'entrepris de les lécher. (36-7)



When deathly constructions of literature blend with historical modes of inscribing or erecting tributes to the dead of history or myth, it is important to remember, as does Beckett, that the Gods don't wear underpants, Cuchulainn and Murphy included.

I am afraid that I may have met a bad end. That's a *malacoda*, a bad joke to echo Chris Ackerley, a bad ending as Shane Weller reminded us in one session yesterday. So here's a better ending in another thanatographic work from towards the end of the curriculum vitae – the flow of life – of Samuel Beckett. In *Ill Seen Ill Said* the figure is said to occupy the imagined centre of a formless place – a barren place of diminishing agricultural returns. The stones are spreading in a contagious colonisation of the pasture. Boundaries are fluid and nominal, but, as the text reports, configurations such as an occupant in a

landscape, edifice or country, as well as the establishment of contours for the occupant and its environs, are a matter of convenience only, serving the purpose of the narrative, enabling there to be something to say. For company. She is dead and as if dead. No she is more, she fecund with possibility: dead, as if dead and living on in a landscape which has shifting and obscured contours (and occluded cardinal points: the north is lost [77]), imagined sounds of snowflakes (reminiscent of Robbe-Grillet) and blurs and blotches for figures against ground. All life is figure and ground. But in *Ill Seen Ill Said* the horizontal plane (and plain) flips axis and becomes a clock, a dial with a shadowy 12, which quickly switches functionality and mutates into a compass (with north still occluded). How convenient, for my purposes. It's handy to have an image, to gather the proliferating, mutating, boundless, boundariless abode and abiding into an image. But Gilles Deleuze is right: for Beckett the image is precisely dissipative. The image is a daub, of uncertain contour: blotch, birthmark, deathmark. The tomb in the pasture is eroded by nature or by hand, graffiti upon graffiti effacing its epitaph. The terminus, however, is seat of all, scene of all as *Worstward Ho* reports. If this is the skull as shell, casing, house, sepulchre made of echo's bones there is something stirring. "So dead. In the madhouse of the still" (67) but also, for convenience, "That profusion. Or with closed eyes sees the tomb" (79).

