

SOME POSSIBLE INFLUENCES ON SAMUEL BECKETT AS THE AUTHOR OF *MURPHY*

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Samuel Beckett, an Anglo-Irishman and a twentieth-century philosophical poet, was never concerned with social, political or religious problems but was always interested in the position of man in the universe, the reason of his existence and the meaning of life. In other words, his interest lay in the metaphysical. Spurred on by this interest, Beckett studied the intellectual background to the twentieth century. He believed that Dante, Descartes and Proust, more than anyone else, were responsible for the way of thinking of western intellectuals, himself included.

Although Samuel Beckett once said at an interview that he never read philosophers and that he did not understand them, this does not mean that he was uninfluenced by them. It is true, he can never be classified as belonging to any one particular school of philosophy but it would be far from true to claim that his works show no trace of influence from various western philosophers. The views of several philosophers have had some bearing on some or other of his works, but it is the influence of Descartes which is most noticeable.

Among other things Descartes was deeply interested in the problem of the split between spirit and matter and hence between body and soul. The rigid distinction which Descartes draws between body, which is defined as purely mechanical and material, and mind, which is purely spiritual, is at the core of Beckett's *Murphy*, in which the protagonist tries to achieve the blissful life of the mind. However, Beckett and his much-admired Descartes differ on one point. Although Descartes introduced the idea of *cogito* and stressed duality, he still retained a wish to keep man's world and being in harmony, for in spite of his distinction between body and mind he could not offer any positive explanation for the action of mind on the body. Beckett, for his part, is not deeply interested in the interaction of body and mind and does not seek any explanation of this phenomenon.

In this connection Beckett may be considered a disciple of Descartes' now-forgotten follower, the Belgian philosopher Geulincx, who went further than his master and considered spirit and matter, hence body and soul, two parallel but completely unconnected systems. Geulincx claimed that it would be absurd to think that mind could act upon body since the two are totally different and that what may seem interaction is actually a coincidence of two separate actions, each determined by the will of God, who is the cause of all movement. To illustrate his point Geulincx used the analogy of

clocks, one representing matter, the other spirit, both wound and set by the master clock-maker to run perfectly synchronously.¹ When this is applied to human body it can be said that when the clock of mind points to the hour, the clock of matter strikes and there is a seeming link between the two but this is only an illusion. By analogy the self has no control over the outside universe but is only capable of controlling the microcosm.²

Beckett seems to be in complete agreement with Geulincx in his belief that we have no control over the universe, we know nothing about what goes on outside us or about the essence of things, except what is in our minds. That is why in *Murphy* the protagonist tries to escape the pain of physical existence by fleeing into the freedom of mental existence, which would enable him to love himself with an intellectual love. Since physical and mental existence are considered totally separate, there should be no reason why one can not achieve a flawless microcosmic life, but as *Murphy* proves this is nothing but an illusionary hope, because in relation to the outside world, the mind is worth nothing and it is completely impotent and therefore, as R.N. Coe says, "It is Nothing: a Nothing forever turned inward, enwrapt in contemplation of itself."³

On the other hand, Geulincx believes that mind can have a value within itself if it stands in some relation to God and if God is removed it is then that the mind is nothing. It is on this point that Beckett and Geulincx do not seem to be in agreement. Beckett replaces Geulincx's "divine determinism" by a supernatural or more specifically, by an astrological determinism, but with his usual irony he reverses the correspondence between man and his stars and says in *Murphy*:

They were *his* stars, his was the prior system. He had been projected, larval and dark, on the sky of that regrettable hour as on a screen, magnified, and clarified into his own meaning. But it was *his* meaning.⁴

Another point that Beckett does not follow in the Geulincxian philosophy is the ideas of birth and suicide. As opposed to Beckett's regret for being born, Geulincx believes in the necessity of birth because it is the beginning of things and therefore he says that man must not regret his being born. As a natural result of his views on birth Geulincx never forgives suicide, whereas Beckett's *Murphy* is constantly preoccupied with the idea of suicide.

Beckett's, hence *Murphy's* belief that man is born to suffer, and their cursing of the moment of birth seems to stem from Schopenhauer, who says that "man's conception is a crime, his birth a penalty, his life a labour, and death a necessity."⁵ At this point it is also worth remembering Heidegger and his concept of "Geworfenheit", that is, of man being thrust into the universe to suffer and experience isolation. This is the underlying theme that keeps coming up in *Murphy*. Since life is "a task to be done"⁶, there is "nothing in the world to which everyman has a more unassailable title than to his own life and person."⁷ Therefore, suicide is not a crime but is something commendable because it is similar to putting an end to a nightmare by waking up. Furthermore, suicide is an attempt to return to the blissful and happy darkness man leaves behind when he is "thrust" into the world from the mother's womb. This time it is a return to the womb of the mother earth.

Another important figure whose ideas seem to have permeated Beckett's *Murphy* is Proust. Beckett was very much interested in and impressed by the Proustian concept

of "that double-headed monster of damnation and salvation- Time."⁸ Beckett also appears to agree with Proust that "there is no escaping from the hours and the days"⁹ and habit and memory are two unbreakable ties that bind man to life which alternates between pain and boredom. The importance and effects of Time on human life and the self are among the dominating themes of *Murphy*.

For Beckett, life in the temporal world, "except when one's awareness of it is deadened by Habit, is largely painful."¹⁰ So life in time is "the perpetual exfoliation of personality."¹¹ In other words, one set of habits must die in order that a new set may replace it. Therefore life alternates between the boredom of habit and the pain of immediacy.¹² Quite likely the source of this idea is Arthur Schopenhauer and both Proust and Beckett were indebted to him just as many other Parisian intellectuals were at the time. It is a moot point whether Beckett was ever influenced by Schopenhauer directly or only indirectly through Proust. However, a close study of Proust, Beckett and Schopenhauer have more in common than do Beckett and Proust. Therefore it would not be too presumptuous to claim that Beckett was familiar with Schopenhauer directly and found an affinity between Proust and Schopenhauer as he proved in his essay on Proust.

Another theme that Beckett and Proust have in common is the "mutability of self" but Beckett's treatment of this theme is different from that of Proust's. Beckett tries to show that "we are imprisoned in this self, while, on the other hand, the prison itself is so fleeting and intangible that we can never lay hands on it."¹³ Therefore it is very difficult to know oneself completely, if it is at all possible, it can be achieved only at a particular moment and even then very briefly.

The themes of the futility of love and friendship, the failure of communication, "the belief that suffering is the one force powerful enough to establish even in the teeth of time, the identity of the self"¹⁴ appear both in Proust and Beckett, proving a mutual agreement on these points. In *Murphy*, Beckett like Proust, is in search of a solution to the question:

"How am I, an a-temporal being imprisoned in time and space, to escape from my imprisonment, when I know that outside space and time lies Nothing and that I, in the ultimate depths of my reality, am Nothing also?"¹⁵

That is why Beckett writes in revolt in *Proust*, "The mortal microcosm cannot forgive the relative immortality of the macrocosm"¹⁶ and drives his idea home with a metaphor: "The Whisky bears a grudge against the decanter."¹⁷

Dante is another important thinker who deserves mention in connection with Beckett's *Murphy*. Beckett had become familiar with Dante's *Divine Comedy* while still at Trinity College in Dublin, and his early works, including *Murphy* contain several comments on and references to this work.¹⁸ If not to the whole of it, at least to the *Purgatorio*.

Dante had presented a world in his *Divine Comedy*, which was the reflection of the medieval world view. To the medieval mind the world was orderly and comprehensible, a reflection of the order to be found in both the natural and supernatural elements of the universe. Of course, in this view Dante was not alone. He was following Thomas Aquinas, to whom every-thing in the universe had a hierarchic and fixed order, not to be

disturbed by any outside force, because it was designed by God, who was an all-merciful, all-seeing and all-comprehensive God. This order was not only applicable to man's daily life but also to his political life. So the concept of order and its ever-presence was to be found both in nature and in society, which was the expression of the concept of harmony, and hence of unity. Since man was a part of this orderly universe and occupied the middle position, he had to follow the law of universal order. This meant that there was harmony, therefore a unity between his body and soul and his existence depended upon the unity of the two. In Dante's universe the soul is in harmony with the body and the man is in harmony with the universe.

Beckett's world, on the other hand, is just the opposite. There is no universal order, no God. There is no harmony between man and the universe, between man and society or between man and his soul. Beckett's men are lost in an unintelligible universe, forever seeking a meaning to life, to their existence and trying to answer such questions as "Who am I?" "Where am I?" "Why?" "How?". So the Beckettian hero, a typical 20th-century man, has a strong desire and need to find a meaning to his existence and to see the order that existed in Dante's world. Another reason for this deeply felt idea of "Existence" may be found in Beckett's own origin. Being an Anglo-Irishman he realized that he belonged to neither world and he himself had to answer the important question, "Who am I?". After the first early short stories and prose pieces, *Murphy* is the first exploration of this question.

Besides the possible influence Beckett received from Dante on the concept of "Existence", certain Danteian characters have found their way into Beckett's works. For example, in the novel *Murphy*, there is reference to Belacqua.¹⁹ The name "Belacqua" appeared in the fourth canto of Dante's *Purgatorio*. In this canto, when Virgil and Dante arrived at a terrace, after a difficult climb, they found a group of listless spirits behind a rock. One of them was Belacqua, who had been condemned to stay in Purgatory and spend there the same amount of time he had wasted on earth without repentance. Belacqua was in a spiritually indolent condition and this condition of inertia is the kind Murphy would like to achieve so that he can come alive in his mind to have absolute freedom. Beckett calls this state "Belacqua bliss". However, it is impossible to remain in this condition long. One has either to go down to Hell, which to Beckett is society and the outside world, or else, ascend to Paradise, which, again according to Beckett, is the mind. So, to him, this Purgatorial state is the expression of life. As it is revealed in *Murphy*, both Purgatory and Paradise are illusory concepts and the only reality from which man cannot get away, is Hell, that is the macrocosm. Therefore, it can be said without hesitation that the condition of Beckett's man in Purgatory and his concept of Paradise and Hell are altogether different from those of Dante's man.

Furthermore, Beckett's preoccupation with the zodiac, with times and numbers in *Murphy* is explained by J. Fletcher as a "learned imitation of Dante".²⁰ This preoccupation may also be explained in terms of the medieval world view which had its influence on Beckett through Dante. According to the medieval concept, stars obeyed the divine law of Providence and by this obedience they affected the lives of men. This may be the reason for Beckett's interest in the celestial bodies, and for the constant reference to the position of these in *Murphy* every time there is a change in the lives of people.

John Fletcher sees another influence of Dante on Beckett's *Murphy* and that is in connection with the number of chapters the novel has. Fletcher believes that the thirteen-chapter division of the novel is an echo of the thirteen centuries that "elapsed bet-

ween the Nativity and the year of Dante's journey *outré-tomb*".²¹ However, the number of chapters in *Murphy* and Beckett's preoccupation, in most of his works, with the letter M, which is the thirteenth letter in the alphabet, may have its explanation in the Jewish calendar, which is a lunar calendar. Every three years there is a thirteenth month, consisting of the left over days from the previous years, and it is added between Adar (February-March) and Nisan (March-April). Moreover, according to the Greek calendar, because of an interworking of lunar and solar movements, the sun was considered to be going through thirteen monthly stages, "beginning at the winter solstice when the days lengthen again after their long autumnal decline".²² and then moving to Spring and Summer and then back to Autumn. The calendar, like life itself, follows a circular pattern and comes back to where it has started. This may be the reason why the book is divided into thirteen chapters. What is more, according to Greek Mythology, the extra day gained from the solar year by the earth's revolution around the sun was put between the first and the thirteenth months and this day was considered to be the most important day because on this day "the tribal Nymph chose the sacred king, usually the winner of a race, a wrestling match, or an archery contest."²³ This fact may be considered as a further interpretation for the existence of the thirteenth chapter, especially when it is remembered that this last chapter is devoted to Celia, Murphy's mistress.

Doubtless, the list of influences on Beckett can be extended infinitely and he can be linked with Spinoza, Leibniz, William James, Freud, Joyce, Dostoevsky, Kafka, Nabokov, Conrad, to name but a few, because he is a learned man and that is why George Devine²⁴ said, after he spent half an hour in Beckett's apartment in Paris:

In that half hour I felt I was in touch with all the great streams of European thought and literature from Dante onwards. I just knew about all that by contact with this extraordinary mind and poetic vision; at the same time so rich and so simple.²⁵

And this may be the reason why Beckett's novels, *Murphy* being the first one, are not only amalgams of different concepts of thinking and psychology but also biblical and mythological allusions. Therefore no encyclopedia, no collection of books, can provide enough information to interpret the riddle his works present. Everything he has read merged with his own experiences and got synthesized in the mind of this sensitive intellectual and found expression in the form of ideas at once familiar and unfamiliar. The following, an interview with Gabriel d'Avbared, illustrates this point neatly:

- ... one sometimes wonders if the preoccupation with the problem of Being posed by the existentialists might not be a key to your works...
- There is no key, there is no problem. If the subject of my novels could be expressed in philosophic terms, I'd have had no reason to write them.
- And what *was* your reason for writing them?
- I don't know anything about it. I am not an intellectual. I am only a sensibility.²⁶

Beckett says nothing definitely; his favourite word is "perhaps" and therefore his works are open to various interpretations. Therefore as one critic²⁷ said once, each critic attempting to write about Beckett's works is writing about himself, revealing his own mind, not Beckett's.

NOTES

- 1- Leibniz, by whom Beckett was also influenced, talks about the same set of clocks to express his idea of duality but gives no reference to Geulincx.
- 2- "Geulincx", *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy* ed. Paul Edwards (New York, Mac Millan and the Free Press, 1967), Vol. 3, pp. 323 - 325.
- 3- R.N. Coe. "Baroque Rationalism", *Beckett* (Edinburgh and London, Oliver and Boyd, 1968), p. 30.
- 4- Samuel Beckett, *Murphy*, (London, Calder and Boyars, 1969), p. 126.
- 5- Schopenhauer, "On Human Nature", *The Essential Schopenhauer* (London, Unwin Books, 1962), p. 118.
- 6- Schopenhauer, "On the Suffering of the World", *The Essential Schopenhauer*, p. 8.
- 7- Schopenhauer, "On Suicide", *The Essential Schopenhauer*, p. 95.
- 8- Samuel Beckett, *Froust and Three Dialogues with George Duthuit* (London, Calder and Boyars, 1970), p. 11.
- 9- *Ibid*, p. 13.
- 10- Eugene Webb, *Samuel Beckett: A Study of His Novels* (Seattle and London, University of Washington Press, 1970), p. 28.
- 11- Samuel Beckett, *Froust*, p. 13.
- 12- Webb, *op. cit.*, p. 29.
- 13- William Barret. "The Works of Beckett Hold Clues to an Intriguing Riddle", *Saturday Review of Literature*, 40 (June 8, 1957), p. 15.
- 14- R.N. Coe, "The Art of Failure", *Beckett*, p. 18.
- 15- *Ibid*, p. 18.
- 16- S. Beckett, *Froust*, p. 21.
- 17- *Ibid*, p. 21.
- 18- One of Beckett's short stories is called "Dante and the Lobster" and one of his early essays, "Dante... Bruno Vico... Joyce."
- 19- In real life he was a flute maker in Florence and was a friend of Dante's. Belacqua was well-known for his indolence and lethargy.
- 20- John Fletcher, *Samuel Beckett's Art*. (London, Chatto and Windus, 1967), p. 116.
- 21- *Ibid*.
- 22- R. Graves. *The Greek Mythology*. (Middlesex, England, Penguin Books Ltd., 1966), Vol. 1, p. 16.
- 23- *Ibid*.
- 24- English actor and producer.
- 25- "George Devine: Last Tribute." *Beckett at 60: A Festschrift*, ed. John Calder (London, Calder and Boyars, 1967), p. 99.
- 26- Quoted by J.D. O'Hara. ed. *Twentieth Century Interpretations of Molloy, Malone Dies, The Unnamable*, (Englewood, N.J., Prentice - Hall, 1970), p. 9.
- 27- Tom Driver.