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A Wilderness of Mirrors: Modernist Mimesis in Joyce’s Portrait and Beckett’s Murphy

by JOHN M. MENAGHAN

These with a thousand small deliberations
Protract the profit of their chilled delirium,
Excite the membrane, when the sense has cooled,
With pungent sauces, multiply variety
In a wilderness of mirrors.

T. S. Eliot, “Gerontion”

James Joyce’s A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man and Samuel Beckett’s Murphy have each received a fair share of critical attention, but the possibility of any revealing relation between them seems to have remained till now largely unaddressed. Even Barbara Reich Gluck, in Beckett and Joyce, tends to stress the influence of Joyce’s later works, Ulysses and Finnegans Wake, on his sometime apprentice, amanuensis, and friend. Yet the first novels of the two major Irish prose stylists of the twentieth century, Portrait and Murphy, may well provide a more intriguing basis for comparison.

How similar, for instance, were the situations each writer found himself in as he confronted the “great tradition” of the nineteenth-century novel? How similar, and how different, were the solutions at which they arrived that allowed each in turn to transcend that tradition and write that modern redundancy, a “new” sort of novel? How did each reconcile the competing claims of realism and symbolism in his treatment of wholly or partly autobiographical material? And how, finally, did each simultaneously acknowledge and move beyond the tradition he had inherited?

As I shall demonstrate, Joyce and Beckett solved the problem of what form their “new” novels should take in distinct but related ways. But in both cases the solution involved a highly self-conscious use of form itself, of ironic structure, to achieve their own versions of what we might call “Modernist mimesis”: a fidelity to the complexities not only of the outer but the inner worlds of their title characters. They held not “a mirror up to nature” but “a wilderness of mirrors,” in order that their work might reflect not only nature as such but human nature and the nature of fiction itself.

1. Gluck does call Murphy the most “Joycean” of Beckett’s novels but suggests that it combines the “realism” of Ulysses with the “surrealism” of Finnegans Wake (71-86).
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IN THE EPISODE that begins *Ulysses*, Stephen Dedalus looks into Buck Mulligan's shaving mirror, stolen from a servant girl, and declares: "It is a symbol of Irish art. The cracked lookingglass of a servant" (6). The implication of this remark, that Irish art has heretofore provided only an imperfect rendering of its own cultural conditions, suggests that Stephen himself vaguely intends, at this stage of his life, to labor towards providing instead a perfect reflection of the "state" of Ireland, in every sense of that word. What Stephen's words may not at first suggest, but what Joyce himself had presumably already discovered, is that a "cracked lookingglass" is, ironically enough, the perfect device for reflecting the nature of things, not only in Ireland but in general. More particularly, this remark offers us, as I shall demonstrate, a crucial clue to interpreting the structural and verbal patterns of Joyce's first novel, a novel designed to serve as the artifact of his own early experiences in his native land, his *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*.

Stephen has been gazing at his own reflection immediately before he speaks, a fact suggesting that he himself may be a reflection, however imperfect, of the then current state of Ireland. It also suggests that he is, or is perhaps fearful of becoming, its reluctant servant. The mirror provides Stephen with an ostensibly "objective" view of himself: "as he and others see me." But this supposedly "objective" reality is presented as part of his interior monologue. Here we find the method of the *Portrait* in miniature: Stephen, reflecting on himself as others see him, provides us with a view of himself that is in some sense objective in that it takes note of his image as it appears to these "others," yet simultaneously provides us with an intimate knowledge of his own, often contrasting sense of self.

We know from *Stephen Hero* that Stephen, and by extension Joyce, read Skeat's *Etymological Dictionary* by the hour (26). Referring to Skeat for an etymology of "mirror," we discover that the word can be traced through the Middle English *mirour* back through the Old French *miroir*, from the verb *mirer* ("to look at") to, finally, the Latin *mirari* ("to wonder at") and *mirus* ("wonderful"). Skeat goes on to tell us that "mirror" and "miracle" derive from the same source, and acquaints us as well with the meaning of mirror as "an optical illusion by which very distant objects appear close at hand."

Here we discover a hint concerning Joyce's basic problem in the *Portrait*: events which were for him becoming ever more distant were to be rendered with an immediacy that recreated a sense of their reality "close at hand." That to do so successfully would bear some resemblance to a miracle must have been as clear to Joyce at some point as that it must all be done with mirrors. That he did attempt, in his own distinctive manner, to achieve such a "miracle"—not merely with "mirrors" but with "cracked" ones—becomes increasingly evident the closer one looks at the structural and verbal patterns in the *Portrait*.

A close examination of the structure of the *Portrait* reveals it as a collection of incomplete and imperfect reflections. The most obvious mirroring occurs between the first and fifth chapters, but mirroring devices of all sorts abound in the structure of individual chapters and sections, as well as between chapters and
parts of chapters. A brief survey of some of the more striking patterns will reveal
the principle in operation, though it will hardly exhaust the possibility of finding
examples to illustrate the pervasiveness of Joyce's technique.

In the first and fifth chapters, structural parallels and reversals abound. Each
chapter contains four sections. But while Chapter One begins with a short
section, proceeds to a somewhat longer one, has a third section of medium length,
and ends with a fourth section slightly longer than the second, Chapter Five
reverses the pattern: long, shorter, medium, shortest. Pursuit of the method
suggested by this discovery reveals some remarkable patterns of reflection and
reversal. Given the complexity of tracing such patterns, a diagram of sorts seems
in order.

CHAPTER ONE

Section One:
Short section of interior monologue
in third person; child naively reflect-
ing perceived world: Father as "arti-
ficer": "moocow" story; Mother rep-
resents "nice" world with which
Stephen identifies

Section Two:
Clongowes—initiation and illness;
begins with boys swarming, ball fly-
ing; ends with death of Parnell and
Stephen's identification with him

Section Three:
Christmas dinner scene; begins with
festive air; ends with Stephen in tears
and confusion; he loses control in
adult surroundings

Section Four:
Clongowes—wet ditch, "cracked"
glasses; Stephen's confrontation with
adult authority of Dolan and the Rec-
tor; emergence as hero among school-
mates; begins with boys talking; ends
with the memory of water dripping

CHAPTER FIVE

Section Four:
Short section of diary; self-conscious
recording of reactions to world; move-
ment away from immersion in world
to recording of it; Father replaced by
Daedalus, "old artificer"; Mother re-
placed by muse figure of bird girl

Section Three:
University—withdrawal and self-dis-
covery; begins with birds swarming,
girl as bird; ends with Stephen's im-
plied identification with Lucifer

Section Two:
Villanelle composed; begins with soul
and morning dewy wet; ends with
Stephen's rapturous fulfillment in
verse; he asserts control in his chosen
arena of art

Section One:
Stephen's confrontation with the
Dean of Studies and explanation of
his aesthetic theories against opposi-
tion of schoolmates; begins with
memory of wet ditch at Clongowes;
ends with fellows talking
A close examination of the patterns revealed by this diagram suggests that certain of the reflections are more exact than others, and that certain of the comparisons reveal parallels or echoes while others present us with a clear reversal of a previous pattern. Thus in section two of Chapter One there is a movement from swarming athletes to the death of Parnell and Stephen's identification with him; this movement is clearly paralleled by section three of Chapter Five, in which the movement is from birds swarming to Stephen's identification with Lucifer. But in the case of section three of Chapter One there is a movement from composure and festivity to tears and confusion, a pattern clearly reversed in section two of Chapter Five, in which a beginning in dewy, formless potential and the rising up from sleep yields to a rapturous fulfillment in verse composition, from a bath of inspiration to the celebration and assertion of achieved expression. In one case, then, there is a parallel or echo, in the other, a reversal of the earlier pattern.

Such a mixture, of parallels in some cases and reversals of the pattern in others, can be located throughout the Portrait. Even within the accompanying diagram, further examples of each are evident. Given this apparent inconsistency, one's first tendency might be to suggest that it simply proved too difficult for Joyce to fashion a work in a consistently intricate pattern either of straight structural parallels or exact reversals of pattern. From this perspective, such inconsistencies would seem to reveal his failure to achieve perfect structural equivalence among the matchable parts. But there is more than a little reason to suggest otherwise.

Perhaps the clearest indication that Joyce did not aim at and then fail to achieve a perfectly symmetrical structure is the fact that he divides the novel as a whole into nineteen sections, places three in the middle, places four each in the first and fifth chapters, but then takes the remaining eight sections and divides them unequally between Chapters Two and Four. Here we find convincing evidence that Joyce, even while teasing the reader with the very evident possibilities of symmetry involved in the division of the book into nineteen sections and five chapters, was consciously choosing to employ an asymmetrical structure.

In Chapter Three, the tripartite structure works out rather neatly. In the first section, Stephen moves from his sinful period and the indulgence of physical appetites toward the period of retreat. Section two begins with a quotation from Ecclesiastes and ends with a prayer. Section three begins with Stephen's newfound dedication to serve God as Father and ends with the ciborium coming to him to feed his new spiritual, as opposed to carnal, appetite. He craves food at the start of the first section, spiritual nourishment at the end of the third. In the meantime, he finds a new Father in God, the Artificer of the Universe, at the exact midpoint between his first consciousness of Simon Dedalus as father/artificer in the opening lines of the novel and his invocation of Daedalus the wing-maker as "old father, old artificer" in its final lines. Stephen also, at almost the exact middle of the book, embraces Mary as spiritual mother. The mother to muse reversal enacted near the end is thus, like the father to Daedalus reversal,
provided with a kind of hinge, a turning point from which one can look in both directions at once. It is this double hinge, of God the Father and Mary, upon which the facing mirrors of the novel might be said to turn.

A recognition of these basic reflective patterns, with the book looking out in both directions from a center which reflects and in some sense contains both beginning and end, leads one to the conclusion that Joyce could with a minimum of effort have preserved the symmetry by making Chapters Two and Four mirror images of one another, yet chose not to. Why should Joyce choose five sections for Chapter Two and only three for Chapter Four, when a four/four break and the kind of mirroring evident in the first and last chapters is clearly within his capacity as artificer? It is precisely the lure of such a neat pattern which makes Joyce’s refusal so perplexing initially but so clearly in keeping with his overall purposes in the final analysis. A closer look at these “problem” chapters allows us to see their own structural logic and their relation to the larger structure of the novel.

The striking thing about Chapter Two, in this connection, is that while it serves to disrupt the symmetry of the novel as a whole, it manages at the same time to do two very interesting things: it exhibits its own internal symmetries and structural reversals, and it functions as a microcosm, with its five sections, of the five-chapter structure of the novel itself.

Section one of Chapter Two begins with the vague stirrings of Stephen’s senses, interests, and ambitions beyond early childhood. It also finds Stephen in the company of Uncle Charles and fantasizing about one Mercedes. Section five, its mirroring counterpart, begins with Stephen in the company of his family claiming his reward for winning the essay prize and ends with his surrender to sensual pleasures in the arms of a prostitute. Section two begins with the arrival of a moving van to repossess the furniture of the declining Dedalus family and ends with the lighthearted treatment by Mr. Dedalus of Stephen’s confrontation with Father Dolan and the Rector, an incident that leaves Stephen isolated from his father. Section four begins with Stephen accompanying his father on a trip to Cork, the sight of Mr. Dedalus’ youthful glory, and ends with Stephen feeling isolated from and more mature than the adults, his father included, who are lost in the childish “glories” of their pasts. Section three, after the manner of the third section in Chapter Three, combines elements of the other sections in the unifying context of the school play and its surrounding activities by portraying Stephen as a young man struggling with the competing demands of self and world. Clearly, Joyce is as it were teasing the reader, within a chapter that itself disturbs the symmetry of the whole, by fashioning within it a five-part structure which both echoes the larger structure and is in itself highly symmetrical and reflective.

Even a cursory examination of Chapter Four reveals that its three parts are themselves reasonably symmetrical. At the same time, although it has only three sections to the second chapter’s five, it clearly serves as a reflective counterpart to the second chapter. Section one begins with Stephen’s attempt to mortify his senses and to resist the stirrings of re-emergent doubt. Stephen is humbling himself before the mysteries of religion. By section three, we find Stephen
escaping from religion into art, moving from self-doubt to self-confidence, and embracing the mysteries of art and of the bird girl. In the middle section, the claims of the spiritual world and self-fulfillment in lofty priesthood are set against the demands of family and immersion in the squalor of the mundane world. In some sense, Stephen’s movement in this chapter is also a reverse image of the movement from the world of artifice and family life into spirituality in the first half of the novel, since it traces by contrast his movement from an immersion in religion toward an embrace first of the old secular world of his childhood and then of the world of artifice. In other words, Stephen moves from his father’s storytelling to religious fervor in the first half of the novel, and from such fervor toward a vision of himself as artificer within the microcosmic mirror of Chapter Four.

Viewing Chapter Four as the mirror reversal of the first half of the novel suggests the possibility that Chapter Two might bear a similarly reflective relation to the second half. This second half begins in surrender to God and ends with the vague stirrings of artistic promise, as yet unfilled; Chapter Two begins with the vague stirrings of procreative desire and sexual ambition and ends in a surrender to sensual fulfillment. Chapter Two begins with a stirring of the senses, while the fourth chapter begins with their mortification. Chapter Two ends with an enraptured surrender to a prostitute, while Chapter Four ends with an equally rapturous surrender to the sufficiency of the “bird girl” as remote symbol of art and inspiration. The middle section of each chapter examines the claims of self vs. world.

The middle chapter of the first half of the novel, then, is a reflecting microcosm of the entire second half, and the middle chapter of the second half holds up a mirror to the first half. At the same time, then, that these two chapters violate the symmetry of the whole, each contains its own internal symmetry and each mirrors in miniature the overall movement in one half of the book.

If the structure has the quality of a cracked mirror or mirrors, *Portrait* also exhibits on a verbal level the linguistic equivalent of such mirroring in the form of the favorite rhetorical device (and variations on that device) of the Jesuits, and of Joyce himself in his undergraduate essays, namely chiasmus. Although the text fairly teems with examples of such verbal mirroring, a few scattered instances will, I hope, suffice to make the point.

The first line of the novel itself involves a studiedly imperfect chiasmus:

Once upon a time and a very good time it was.... (7)

One has only to add the missing, or rather understood, “It was” to the beginning to reveal the partly hidden structure:

It was once upon a time and a very good time it was....

On the second page, following several paragraphs in which there seems to be at least one echo of nearly every prominent word, a kind of double chiasmus occurs to end the first section, arrayed on the page as if on the edge of a reflecting pool:
Pull out his eyes,
Apologise,
Apologise,
Pull out his eyes.

Apologise,
Pull out his eyes.
Pull out his eyes,
Apologise.

(8)

And two pages later, Stephen’s parents manage what is in effect another form of verbal/visual mirror.

—Goodbye, Stephen, goodbye!
—Goodbye, Stephen, goodbye!

(10)

Such mirrors are everywhere in the novel, though the final section of Chapter Three constitutes a place where they are particularly abundant. The recurrence of these mirroring devices, both reflecting and reversing verbal patterns, suggests their connection to the larger mirroring structure, while the irregular intervals at which they occur, and the often imperfect reflections they embody, serve to reinforce the impression of asymmetrical structure. One gets the feeling that one could go on and on finding mirroring of all sorts and still not discover a firm principle of order or an exact balance of parts and phrases.

In Joyce’s first novel, then, we find an approach to but final refusal of absolute symmetry as the proper form for expressing a sense of the actual in art. The essence which is the Portrait and not Stephen Hero or the earlier essay is not a completely “managed” reality. It must somehow incorporate the asymmetrical quality of actual experience if it hopes to duplicate not only the search for significant pattern but also the refusal of the rendered life to become a completely ordered version of the actual.

Samuel Beckett’s first novel is, of course, called Murphy. On an initial encounter, this is not nearly so curious as the fact that it is called a novel, beginning as it does with a sly joke at the expense of the genre itself: “The sun shone, having no alternative, on the nothing new” (1). As numerous critics have noted, Murphy is at one and the same time a departure from novelistic convention and a work that owes its own shape to an intimate acquaintance with the traditional (i.e., “realistic”) novel. What I wish to suggest is that Beckett’s effort to write a novel-of sorts in the wake of Joyce’s effective demolition of novelistic conventions is itself mirrored in multiple ways by the ironically similar, and similarly ironic, attempt of Murphy to escape the limitations of his own “inherited form.” Like Joyce before him, Beckett deliberately seeks to ironize

2. For a related discussion of chiasmic elements in Portrait, see Hans W. Gabler, “The Seven Lost Years of A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man,” 49-51.
3. John Fletcher, for instance, calls Murphy a “parody of the traditional novel” (41).
novelistic conventions in order to have his own work "fail" as a novel in the traditional sense and thereby "succeed" on its, or his, own terms. This deliberate "failure" ironically reflects—and resolves—his own artistic dilemma at the time of the novel's composition by allowing him to construct a novel that is on the one hand utterly ironic and on the other both affecting and effective. As Murphy fails and yet succeeds, so also does Beckett, because both involve us in the attempt rather than the result. Each manages to interest us in the shape his struggle takes, and the record of that struggle is *Murphy*.

*Murphy* is, of course, suffused with verbal echoes—of itself, of other literature, of "realistic speech," of philosophical formulations—which constitute, in linguistic terms, examples of "echoic mention," a reference to or repetition of formulaic phrases with calculated alteration of their intention and effect. Here a metaphor may serve, however imperfectly, to convey the nature of what has been called the "Use-Mention Distinction." I hand you a check made out in your name for a million dollars. You are suspicious under the circumstances, which this gesture does not seem to fit, but there is your name and there is the amount. Your eyes begin to widen in delight. Then you notice that I have "neglected" to endorse the check. You realize that I have not meant to give you the money but merely to seem for a moment to be doing so. In other words, I have made the gesture, but I have not backed it up with my personal version of Full Faith and Credit, my signature.

In *Murphy*, such ironic "mention" begins with the previously quoted opening sentence: "The sun shone, having no alternative, on the nothing new." Then, in its second sentence, the title character is simultaneously introduced and undermined: "Murphy sat out of it, as though he were free" (1). "The nothing new" of the first sentence is, presumably, the world, but in the second "it" might refer either to the sun or to the nothing new. From the start, then, we find a startling combination: the situating of a character in a defined physical setting so common to realistic fiction and a simultaneous suggestion that this character, Murphy, is out of this world—and deluded besides in sitting "as though he were free."

Upon reflection, we realize that the world in question is, of course, a fictional one, the world of the novel in which Murphy moves—or, in this case, in which he is bound to a rocking chair. Reading further, we find that Murphy is not merely bound but "naked in his rocking chair of undressed teak" (1). When the phone rings, he panics because he cannot at first free his hand to answer it, fearing that his landlady or some other tenant will barge through his unlockable door. He fears, in short, "that he [will] be discovered" in all of his nakedness and caught in the act of being "out of it."

Murphy, of course, thinks himself not only free but alone, yet the narrator is at that moment exposing to the reader not only Murphy's private parts but his private thoughts. The irony of Murphy fearing discovery even as he is displayed to the reader in his birthday suit underlines the narrator's apparent superiority to

4. For a fuller explanation, see Dan Sperber and Deirdre Wilson, "Irony and the Use-Mention Distinction."
Murphy, yet at the same time it "exposes" the fictional convention which permits such an invasion of what might be called Murphy’s “personal space.” We cannot believe that Murphy is “real” and also believe that we are perceiving him at a completely private (not to mention naked) moment. We are, as it were, forced to confront the absurdity of the convention and simultaneously asked to sustain our interest in the character and his situation—in both the immediate and more general sense. This is precisely what Beckett means, and needs, us to do—to recognize the absurdity of a device which he can invoke but not endorse—a check he can inscribe but cannot sign—and accept it anyway.

Within the work as a whole, words, phrases, sentences, and even paragraphs are repeated or echoed with slight variations. The novel abounds, in fact, in such instances of “echoic mention,” but it also contains many repetitions and variations of action and event. In the most notable instance, we find the nearly exact repetition of language and action at the close of Chapters 1 and 11: the double vision (note also the doubling of the numeral itself) of Murphy naked in his rocking chair, “born” into the world of the novel at the beginning and “borne” out of it at, or near, the end—obsessed as he is in between with the question of his birth, most notably in his dependence on a horoscope obtained for him by a “whore with a heart of gold” but a nettlesome wish that he seek gainful work.

I say near the end, of course, because there are actually two more chapters following Murphy’s demise. These chapters, which on the surface seem simply to function as an epilogue, ironically undermine any impression of formal symmetry, any sense of closure which the use of such parallel scenes as a framing device could otherwise provide. Instead of a novel neatly organized to begin and end with Murphy rocking, Beckett offers us four last scenes that imperfectly echo the first four, allowing him to ironize the very notion of narrative as “progress” and “evolution.” The first scene and the fourth-to-last both find Murphy alone in his rocking chair; the fourth and final scenes find Celia with her grandfather, Mr. Kelly. The second scene, a flashback, finds Murphy with Neary after having failed to learn from the latter the art of stopping his heart; the second-to-last finds Murphy, now reduced to a packet of ashes, in the care of Cooper, who eventually scatters Murphy’s “body, mind, and soul” over a barroom floor. The third scene finds Celia on the phone to Murphy and threatening to come by with his horoscope. The third-to-last finds all the main characters gathered at the Magdalen Mental Mercyseat Morgue to view Murphy’s charred remains—to confront, as it were, his fate, his ironically “successful” escape from the world of forms.

The apparent climax of the novel, Murphy’s late night chess match with Mr. Endon, is studiedly anti-climactic, with Murphy’s moment of insight amounting to seeing that he is not seen—a kind of ironic “epiphany” upon which will follow shortly Murphy’s death. Mr. Endon’s name is not only Greek for “within” but suggests both the irony that this studiedly inconclusive game of chess is, in fact, Murphy’s last (i.e., the one he will “end on”) and an anagram for “no end,” suggesting that his body, mind, and soul will live on among the barroom refuse. The novel itself ends not with Murphy, not even with his ashes, but with Celia,
having resumed her former life, departing the park as the wardens, who might well be commenting on the then current state of the novel, call “All Out.”

Is nothing in this book, then, to be taken at face value, as a straight, serious assertion, as “use” rather than “mention”? Those who would assert the book’s underlying seriousness often focus on Chapter Six to argue that here at least we find a serious analysis of Murphy’s mind, forcing us to take him seriously as a protagonist. But it is as hard to take Murphy’s mind seriously as it is to take the book as a whole in this way.

The narrator, taking foreshadowing and omniscience to absurd degrees, makes reference to Chapter Six (“as described in section six”) as early as the second page of the novel, ironically undermining the conventional effort to catch us up in the story itself. Chapter Six itself begins with an epigraph which, in imperfectly echoing a phrase from Spinoza, clearly involves ironic “mention”: Amor intellectualis quo Murphy se ipsum amat (“the intellectual love with which Murphy loves himself”) (107). In its substitution of Murphy for God it suggests the delusions Murphy entertains about his own mind and mental acuity. But by extension it mocks the narrator’s presumption of omniscience, and may even mock Spinoza for thinking he could formulate a phrase to explain the self-love of God. Each is attempting to set himself up as possessing godlike powers of insight, and each attempt is ironically undermined.5

As if this warning epigraph were not enough, the chapter begins and ends with undercutting remarks from the narrator. Here is how it starts:

It is most unfortunate, but the point of this story has been reached where a justification of the expression “Murphy’s mind” has to be attempted. Happily we need not concern ourselves with this apparatus as it really was—that would be an extravagance and an impertinence—but solely with what it felt and pictured itself to be. (107)

The narrator teases us here with the phrase “the point of this story has been reached.” Does he mean the “point” of the story or merely a point in its telling: is Murphy’s mind the point of the story? If so, why are we not given it directly? We find further an opposition between what Murphy’s mind “really was” and what it “felt and pictured itself to be.” Then there is the combination of philosophical discourse with inappropriate terms of comparison running through the account (“the kick in intellectu and the kick in re”), the repetition of terms suggestive of sexual and excretory functions (“intercourse,” “issue,” “privy”), and the priceless irony of a narrator who has been undermining the very possibility of expression throughout the book now proposing to attempt “a justification of the expression ‘Murphy’s mind.’” Clearly, then, Beckett makes it impossible to regard this excursion as different in substance and effect from our exposure to Murphy’s naked body at the very start. The irony of the account is driven home at the end of the chapter: “This painful duty having now been discharged, no further bulletins will be issued” (113).

5. J.E. Dearlove suggests that “Beckett expands the narrator’s self-conscious omniscience until it negates itself and contracts into impotence” (36).
Yet in a final irony, the very impossibility of using the novel to reflect experience, or should I say Beckett’s continual undermining of the conventions which would ostensibly permit the narrative to stand for actual experience, is itself ironically undercut by the triumph of affective experience over apparent narrative intent. We are affected by the narrative, by Murphy, and by Celia because the attempt to undermine such a response is itself ironically reflected in the quite similar attempts of Murphy to deny the acceptability of life in the body. Both Murphy and Beckett are engaged in an effort to deny their inherited form, to hollow out actuality. Thus the merciless parody of novelistic conventions preserves for those conventions a certain power—ironized to death they become, curiously enough, irony proof. For what else could be said or done to undermine them, and yet somehow Murphy matters even when reduced to mere matter, and Celia matters too, because she comes, as do we, to understand Murphy’s desire and his fate.

Richard Ellmann, tracing the genesis of Joyce’s first novel in its form as an essay bearing the same title, suggests that the Portrait was from the start a matter of mirrors:

At the age of twenty-one Joyce found he could become an artist, his life legitimizing his portrait by supplying the sitter, while the portrait vindicated the sitter by its evident admiration for him. (149)

Not only, we might add, did Joyce treat the process of composition as a self-reflective activity; he also found in himself the thing to be “admired” (another word, Skeat tells us, rooted in the Latin mirus). Had he been successful in managing to achieve in Stephen Hero a perfect balance between life and art, to make each the perfect reflection of the other, we might never have had the “cracked lookingglass” that is the Portrait. Instead, Joyce seems to have decided that the perfect reflection of life in art was in fact imperfect reflection: the cracked mirror reflecting the imperfect reality in which we move. Since that reality refuses to resolve itself into symmetry and order, Joyce, to be faithful to it, constructed the Portrait as a series of mirrors in which imperfect reflection emerges as the principle of proper form, the means to successful mimesis.

Samuel Beckett, in a rare moment of commentary on his own creative process, had this to say about the end of Murphy: he had, he said, endeavored “to keep the death subdued and go on as coolly and finish as briefly as possible . . . because it seemed to consist better with the treatment of Murphy throughout . . . with the sympathy going so far and no further (then losing patience) as in the short statement of his mind’s fantasy on itself. There seemed to me always the risk of taking him too seriously and separating him too sharply from the others . . . . A rapturous recapitulation of his experience following its ‘end’ would seem to be exactly the sort of promotion I want to avoid: and an ironical one I hope is

6. As Steven Connor observes: “In Murphy, not even the ‘erasing’ effect of repetitions is left wholly intact. For all its repetitions, Murphy is not just a grimly self-annulling anti-novel” (58). To which I would merely add, anything but.
This statement provides, if it were needed, a justification of the tempering of irony we notice at the end of the novel. We can see, too, that Beckett is concerned to provide a balance of sorts in our view of Murphy, one which the whole form of the novel is designed to achieve. To point out all of the ways in which Beckett achieves this balance of irony and assertion, or irony as assertion, would involve a close scrutiny of nearly every line in the book. But if such scrutiny is hardly possible, neither is it necessary. Beckett, in fact, has done it for us in the novel itself. For in Murphy, everything (including Murphy’s death as apparent climax) is undermined by what it itself seeks to undermine, and the result is a kind of infinite instability of form which is at the same time somehow stable in its infiniteness. It is, in true Beckettian fashion, the embodiment of failure as assertion.

Works Cited