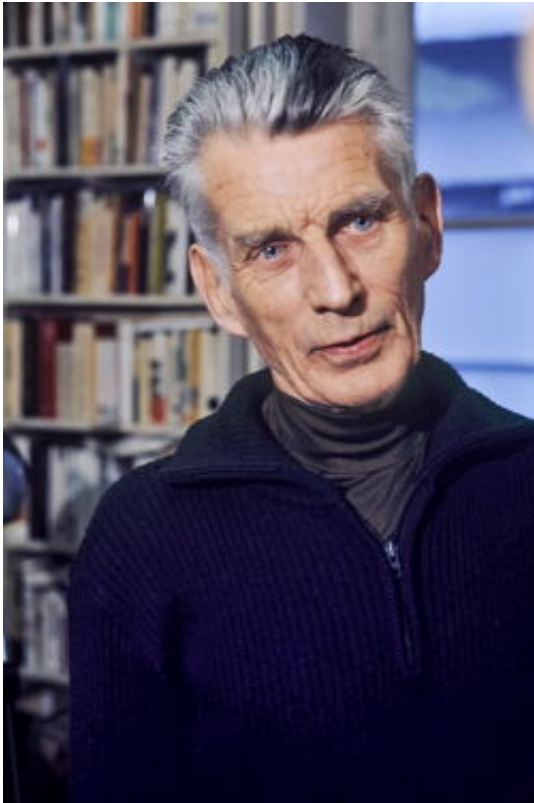


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Failing better. Beckett's game with chess in Murphy



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Samuel Beckett in 1977

by Dr. Bernd-Peter Lange

A game's trajectory

Beckett's lifelong obsession with chess has become a household word. From his childhood with its games in the family, through his participation in matches of the chess team of Trinity College Dublin, facing the Danish master Aaron Nimzowitsch in a simultaneous exhibition, losing many chess games to Marcel Duchamp in his French exile, games in the Vaucluse hideout in the second World War to many occasional friendly games against many partners well into old age, Beckett never lost his fascination with the game. (Knowlson, 1996) The chess books in his library had a focus on the contemporary chess scene, specializing on game collections of the World Champions of chess from Capablanca in the 1920s to Kasparov in the 1980s. (Van Hulle/Nixon, 2013, 261-287) The most concentrated literary reflection of Beckett's preoccupation with chess came early in his career with the writing and publication of *Murphy*. The novel is a rarity among thematically related fictions since it integrates the notation of a complete chess game and notes commenting on some of its moves.

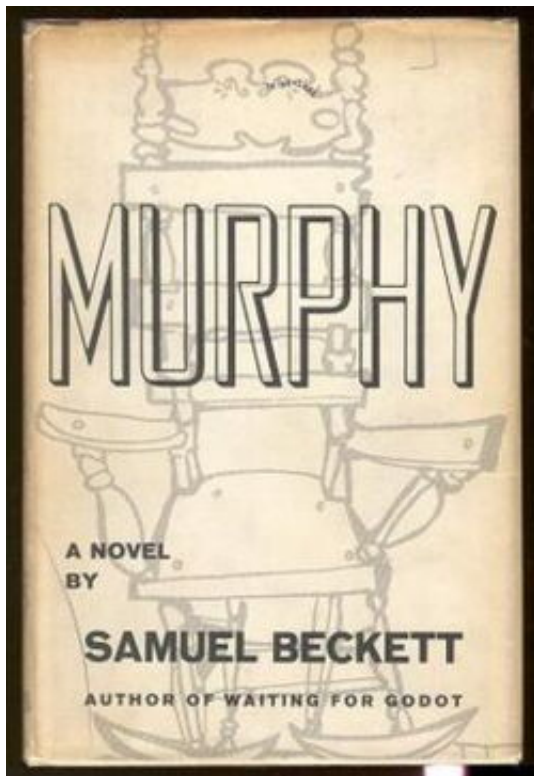
Criticism of Murphy cannot easily bypass the book's eleventh chapter with its climactic chess game. Beckett's early prose with its 'grafting technique' of multiple unacknowledged references provides barriers for dealing with an area that requires some specialist expertise. From early on, some critics have sought expert advice to circumvent this problem. Among the monographs devoted to Murphy, Robert Harrison gives a rather simple view of the chess content in the book (Harrison, 1968, 79), while Sighle Kennedy's review of Beckett's sources for the novel does not include one on chess. (Kennedy, 1971, 229-30) Similarly, Ruby Cohn's studies of Beckett discuss the closed systems prevalent in the novel, but leave out chess almost completely. (Cohn, 1962; 1973, 31) Among recent criticism, even Anthony Uhlmann's study on Beckett's intertexts omits chess, (Uhlmann, 103-13) and in Chris Ackerley's introduction to his annotations on Beckett's first novel there is no paragraph devoted to the game. (Ackerley, 2010, 10-25) However, Ackerley's annotations are indispensable for any close reading of Murphy, throwing light on many lines in the book's chess sections. Equally invaluable as compact readings of the chess theme in Murphy still are Angela Moorjani's analysis of the self-reflexive and mirroring strategies by the chess-players in the book (Moorjani, 1982, 68-82), Loughrey's and Taylor's dissection of symmetrical paradigms in its chess game (Loughrey and Taylor, 1989, 79-90), Edward Bizub's contextualization of the players' systematic deviations from the rules of chess (Bizub, 1998, 319-334), James Knowlson's dense reading in his massive biography of Beckett, and J. C. C. Mays' excellent new Faber edition of Murphy. (Beckett, 2009, vii-xix)

In many critical essays there is evidence of a lack of information on the chess background of Beckett's novel, but some of this has been due to unfamiliarity with recent additions to sources on its genesis and publishing history. Among these, the newly available manuscript notebooks and the edition of Beckett's letters are most helpful. They allow a look at Murphy and its chess game as a work in progress over a long period, a text with a life of its own. For John Calder's edition of Murphy in 1963, Beckett introduced a few changes. One of these has led astray many commentators until the publication of the third volume of Beckett's letters in 2014 and it still features in most available copies of the book, and also in the visualized YouTube versions on the internet. In a letter to Barbara Bray Beckett wrote: 'Checked Murphy's game of chess and made a small change. Mr. Endon's 42nd move: K-Q2 instead of K-K2. Pretty feeble joke the whole thing. Could do it a little better now but not much.' (Beckett 2014, 461) The joke concerns the whole game rather than just the illegal move inserted in 1962. The protagonists's chess game with Endon was declared crucial for the author's own view in an early review of Murphy by his friend Brian Coffey that Beckett rewarded with the gift of his manuscript. (Coffey, 2005, 98-102) Beckett defended the chess motif before the publication of the novel against any suggestions by potential publishers to purge or substitute less esoteric items for it and the closely linked astrology theme. (Beckett, 2009, 380) His initial idea of placing the chess game in an epilogue would only have stressed its thematic weight and its pivotal function in the novel. (Beckett, 2009, 350) In the process of writing and revising Murphy Beckett's letters testify to more than his habitual mode of detachment from his own work. A few pages from the end he arrives at a devastating final verdict on his work: 'It is really a most unsavoury & not very honest work.' (Beckett, 2009, 276) Finishing the writing, his dissatisfaction was intensified into a revulsion from his novel and words as the writer's basic material: "I am very tired, of it and words generally." (Beckett, 2009, 312)

Later, after sending three typescripts of the novel on a frustrating round of critical or unresponsive publishers, a letter to his agent George Reavey shows Beckett's great concern with details of the book's presentation. His abortive attempt to get his agent to send around one photograph of chess-playing chimpanzees from the series in the Daily Sketch foreshadows his later view of the chess game as a kind of joke. In the letter to Reavey there is an ambivalence whose tension can easily be overlooked since it depends on one word: 'The chimpanzees are more or less than a good joke.' (Beckett, 2009, 406) (my

emphasis) The contradictory split projected into the nature of the joke - it is more than one or less than one, but not just about one - points to the importance of the chess game in Murphy. It demanded great care even when Beckett was reading the proofs in hospital, complaining to his agent: 'The checking of the chess is what will delay me.' (Beckett, 2009, 587) The chess game was certainly a significant plank off 'the old ship-wreck' as which Beckett's first person narrator recalls the earlier novel in *Malone Dies*. It kept resurfacing in the life of the text during the author's literary career.

Positional Play



Samuel Beckett - *Murphy* - frontcover [Grove Press](#) edition 1957

The manuscript of *Murphy* allows a reconstruction of the chess game's evolution and its components. (Beckett, 1936) It records the first version of the game in the traditional descriptive notation. When Beckett replaced this by one for the printed edition, he greatly expanded and changed the meta-textual notes on the moves into a consistent parody of an expert chess analysis. In this shape the English text of *Murphy* has come down to us, except for the changes Beckett made to the original, put in his own French translation and authorized in the German one, usually treating his own French translation as the 'authorized interpretation'. (Tophoven, 1988, 319)

In the game notation deleted in the last of the six notebooks containing the novel's manuscript, there are two fragments of the game between *Murphy* and *Endon*. On one page there is a sequence of its first 28 moves, with a few notes; on a separate one there are another five final moves. Both differ from the text eventually published. *Murphy* opens with a tentative king's knight's move that had been revived in the hypermodern school of chess in the period of Beckett's active participation in competitive chess. It is the first move in one of Richard Réti's, the leading hypermodern master's favourite openings that has been added to the canonized opening repertoire under his name (Hooper/Whyld, 279), deferring the occupation on the board's centre. To this fashionable opening *Endon* responds with a knight's move to the margin, beyond any chess manual's advice. From then on until the end of the notation he keeps repeating his moves, merely using his knights and rooks, finally reaching the original symmetric position with only the

rooks and knights changing their places. From this strategy he only deviates in a few knight moves, countering the White king's unassisted advance to the centre. From his own third move, Murphy vaguely copies his opponent's game, though putting his knights into the more centralized fields in tune with a more conventional build-up.

An early offensive by the White pieces sees another symmetrical action by both players, Murphy's knights advancing to the sixth rank with two unenforced incorrect moves, seemingly threatening to occupy the black rooks' fields but retreating when the rooks vacate their initial positions. The two irregular moves by the white knights crossing over to the other side of the board add a chiasmic symmetry to the vertical and horizontal ones. Until move sixteen the white pieces have all regained their original positions, only the two white knights having changed places. Then follows the first pawn advance by just one step which allows the white king to venture out unaccompanied into the board's centre, being blocked from further advance by his opponent's knights, the only alternative being to capture one of them.

The separate deleted page of Beckett's manuscript note continues, after a gap of eleven moves, with another five moves. In these Black just keeps shuffling his knights between the first and third ranks. Murphy's moves, however, place his queen and the queen's bishop into forward positions but still fairly regular set up. The final position reached by Murphy is quite different from the chaos in its printed successor. The intervening moves in the deleted manuscript section must have created an opening of White's game that makes possible a scarcely conceivable last move just indicated by pawn to pawn followed by mate (in brackets). This is difficult to reconstruct by the necessary retro-analysis, though not entirely impossible. Compared to the game in the printed versions, the manuscript notation is much sparser and also nearer to its designation as a *Zweispringerspott*. In another one of his semantic overloads Beckett exploits the bilingual term for the game played: while Murphy draws on the offensive possibility of the German term *Zweispringerspiel*, Endon follows the English defensive variant of a Two Knights' Defense. The manuscript game keeps more closely to the basic symmetry of the pieces, at least to the point where it breaks off after move 28. Both the white and the black knights venture out in a single combination each: the white knights in a penetration of Black's third rank, the black knights in a central containment of Murphy's king's advance. Both progressions soon peter out in a retreat to the initial positions.

The inconclusive final moves highlight the incompatibility of the players' strategies, Endon sticking to his repetitive symmetries, while Murphy's limited advance does not produce any solution in terms of the conventional game. In this way the abandoned chess game in Beckett's sixth notebook for Murphy prepares some central characteristics of the game in the later version. What makes the published version more sophisticated is the subtle increase of Endon's objectives, preventing Murphy from copying his own moves. In a way, the fairly easy two-dimensional play with symmetries in the first manuscript version of the chess game is given another turn of the screw by Endon's secondary goals. This finally precipitates Murphy's descent into a positional chaos in which his imminent end in the gas accident is rehearsed.

In both versions of the game, Endon creates an autistic closed system with only minimal openings of his basic structure so as to allow his pieces a constant to and fro between the ranks of their half of the board. At the time of writing, this was by no means a completely new comic deviation from conventional competitive chess. A well-known anecdote about a game between the World Champion Emanuel Lasker and one of his rich admirers has the grandmaster shuffle his pieces in a very similar style to Endon's, when after twenty-odd moves, accompanied by his own mock-analytic comments, Lasker began to play in earnest and defeated his challenger quickly. (Hannak, 1952, 150) The onlooker who recorded this episode in his 1930s chess journalism and memorials was the Russian chess master Benjamin Blumenfeld, famous both for his decentral Blumenfeld gambit, quite in line with hypermodern ideas in chess in the 1920s, and also for his later contributions to endgame theory. This is just another item in a possible hidden special agenda in Beckett's game in Murphy, although a simpler analogy for Endon's strategy could also be seen in a beginner's manipulation of chess pieces to practice their regular movements.

The chess game already gives evidence of its function as an interior duplication of the novel in that it signals the futile attempt of its protagonist to enter into the mind of his “most biddable little gaga” (149), the schizophrenic. But it does endorse the abolition of rational coherence that is its central implication.

Language Games

The most obvious difference between the manuscript chess game and its printed successor lies in the notes with which the narrator comments on the players’ moves. The notes in the manuscript are much fewer in numbers, shorter and more subdued in style. They are devoid of the historical pastiche and sarcasm of the later version. Both meta-texts favour Black’s moves, but the critical bias against Murphy is much more muted in the few manuscript notes. It looks as if Beckett writing the first version of the chess game was much less certain of its symbolic role in the novel, its overdetermination both as a skit on failed communication and its foreshadowing of Murphy’s demise at the end of the chess chapter. What the sparse manuscript notes almost entirely lack is the simulated certainty of the meta-text in the printed text, the implied conviction in almost every note of Endon’s superiority and Murphy’s imminent defeat in a game that in its final position really admits of endless continuation (Menke, 1996, 63-92) - if it were not for institutional rules also parodied in the notes. Read by themselves, as the notes would often be by readers not conversant with the chess notations the notes are supposed to comment on, they formulate a miniature satire. In it the players perform preordained functions which condense Murphy’s certain defeat into a narrative of its own.

Historical references are a conspicuous detail of the analytic parody in the meta-textual notes in Murphy. There, Endon’s first king’s move onto his queen’s field as an innovation is placed into the context of those prime sites of the emergent bourgeois establishment of chess, the Paris Café de la Régence and Simpson’s Chess Divan in London. They were the *nuclei* of modern European chess, accompanying and moderately challenging the socially exclusive club system of the game. On a similar organizational level, the hint at the unspecified, probably fictive rule of a ‘rule 18’ of chess laws (not included in those of the World Federation of Chess FIDE set up in 1924) simulates the debates in the standardization phase of modern chess in the 19th century, largely associated with Howard Staunton, like Murphy’s near-namesake Morphy a visitor of the historical sites mentioned. (Lange, 1994, 201-229)

Documenting a chess game’s notation is a seemingly esoteric, and definitely rare, signifying device in fiction. Looking at Murphy’s translations into other languages, it can be regarded as another language game in a historical garb. Chess notation is genetically a kind of rudimentary mode of a narrative, most noticeably so in its descriptive shorthand. Classical British chess handbooks still describe the consequence of the descriptive notation for the chess-board as falling into ‘two completely overlapping frames of reference; one for White moves, the other for Black moves.’ (Abrahams, 1953, 36) The standard algebraic notation used universally now cannot reproduce the significance of the doubly-focused descriptive notation in Murphy’s chess game. It duplicates the irreconcilable perspectives of the players. The descriptive notation in Murphy faintly echoes some novels in which chess moves serve as fully verbalized signifiers. Formally the notation beckons towards the new digital media of mass communication. In Sophia le Fraga’s recent mix of algebraic and iconic codes in her W8ING 4, the numbers and emoticons translate Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot* into an anglicized electronic language called *leetspeak*. Similarly, the chess notation just conveys the physical movement of the pieces. Resembling dance choreography (Starte, 2014, 194), it sets a barrier to representing motivation, in spite of the meta-textual notes on the game that, in the humorous stereotypes of chess columns, simulate an awareness of Murphy’s mind.

Names are among the obvious features in the language games Beckett plays in Murphy. Some names of characters in the novel evoke fields of associations that relate to chess, not surprisingly since they are all

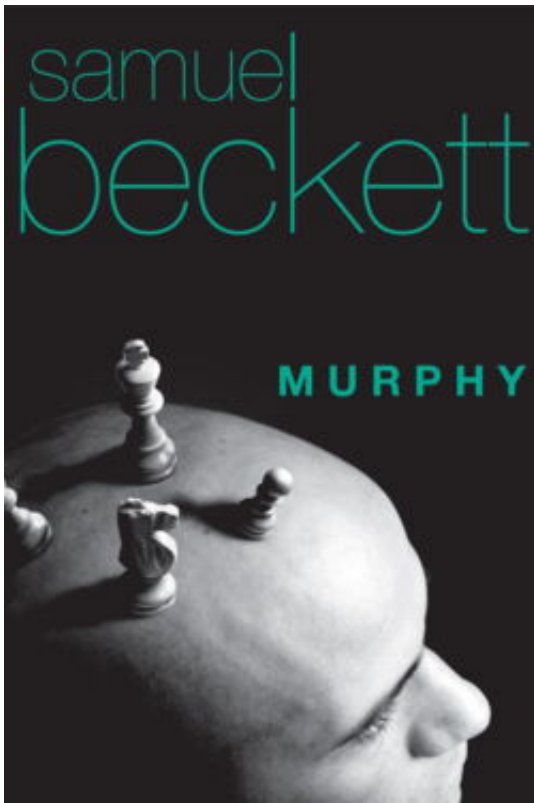
put in the category as puppets. 'All the characters in this book whinge sooner or later, except Murphy who is not a puppet.'(78) They are subject to the metaphor employed by Thackeray for the narrator in *Vanity Fair* as a puppeteer and by other sources Beckett was familiar with. (Ackerley, 2010,135) There were historical analogies among these, such as Racine, but also Beckett's partner at chess Marcel Duchamp who in the period they met in the 1930s came to look at himself as a 'puppeteer of his own past' (Tomkins, 1966, 10). In *Murphy* there is a link with the earlier employment of the puppet image when the poet Austin Ticklepenny is introduced: 'The merest pawn in the game between Murphy and his stars, he makes his little move, engages an issue and is swept from the board.' (55) Edward Fitzgerald's Victorian translation of Omar Khayyam's verse in the *Rubaiyat*, still a staple item in anthologies of chess poetry, (Waterman, 1981) projected it most memorably into chess terms in his famous description of destiny competing with mankind for 'pieces' when it 'Hither and thither moves, and mates, and slays, And one by one back in the closet lays', in imagery and even rhythm closely anticipating Beckett's sentence.

Among individual names Murphy's chess partner's in the lunatic asylum, Endon stands out through etymologically the derivation of his name from the classical Greek for 'within', quite in tune with his autistic style of play. More remote as one of the plethora of unacknowledged references in the novel is the link between Murphy's 'Dutch uncle' Quigley whose support he takes advantage of and the Dublin chess master Oscar Quigley. A figure of this name features in Beckett's 'Lightning Calculation', one of the unpublished quarries for *Murphy*. (Nixon, 2011, 251) When Beckett was ironically toying with an alternative title for his novel, he included Quigley in a scurrilous list next to '*Trompetenschleim* and Eliot'. A letter referring to the novel even mentions Quigley before Murphy (Beckett, 2009, 399). Additional thematic relevance can be seen in hypotheses, as in Ackerley's annotations, about a relationship between Murphy and the great American chess master Paul Morphy. (Ackerley, 2010, 192-93)

The naming of the chess game in chapter 11 of *Murphy* itself as an 'Endon's Affence' is obviously a hybrid formation. As its subtitle 'Zweispringerspott' it deviates mockingly from any received terms for chess openings. Ackerley's annotations find an etymological source for 'affence' in the Latin *affidatus* as an obscure chess term. (Ackerley, 2010, 193) The libraries Beckett used while writing *Murphy* all had copies of H. J. Murray's standard *History of Chess* (1913). The book quotes from a medieval chess problem which is the only source for the verb 'fidate' (to except from capture) listed by the Oxford English Dictionary. Apart from the word 'affence's close phonetic cognate in the German 'Affe'(ape), different English associations such as 'offence' and 'offensive' could be adduced, the latter of which the German translation opted for, with Beckett's consent. Beckett's knowledge of Köhler's *The Mentality of Apes* (1925) may have strengthened his regret at not being able to use one of the series of five photographs – two different ones of them being reproduced in Bair's and Knowlson's biographies - of chess-playing chimps in the *London Daily Sketch*. One of these he saw again in a glossy magazine on his tour of Germany and sent to his agent for the publication of *Murphy*. (Nixon, 2010, 251) Yet another pertinent crosslink is established by Murphy's last words to his opponent after the end of their game, summarized as an 'afflatulence', a construction whose first and last morphemes repeat the game's name. Here the narrator employs an ironic combination between the ingestion and the discharge of wind, a trace of this still being preserved in the German translation's equally quaint *Einblähungen*. (Beckett, 1987, 197).

The only term from the traditional register of chess, the reference to a 'fool's mate' in the meta-textual notes on Murphy's game, does not fit the move or action it refers to. It reflects Murphy's mental image of falling victim to a fool's mate on his resignation. Its surface meaning of a quick self-induced mate carries a strong affinity with the suicidal impulses in both players: in Endon's futile hope of committing suicide by holding his breath (*apnoea*), in Murphy as a mental suicide before the physical end of his life. This doubling of the word mate's discursive load might also have suggested the transition from the manuscript's sentence that Murphy lays down his king in defeat, to the later print version that substitutes Shah for the king, with its Persian derivation from *Shah mat*- the king is defeated or dead. The meaning of 'fool's mate'- unrelated to chess, as an equally failed personal closeness to the lunatic, adds to the phrase's network of associations.

Problem moves



[Grove Press](#)

Samuel Beckett - Murphy - frontcover [Grove Press](#) edition 2011

The widely accepted view of the chess game in *Murphy* differentiates between its entirely unconventional general pattern and the regularity of its individual moves. Yet from its first design crossed out in the manuscript, some of its details defy the game's standard order. In the published text, there is a range from one move declared by the notes as irregular to some that are debated in their admissibility and to those that transgress the game's rules blatantly. In the development of the game, the progression is one from mere questioning to a definite defiance of the laws of chess. This progression starts with the very first move *Murphy* makes. In the published game, his opening move is in tune with many passages in Beckett's work with Schopenhauerian associations of birth and death, beginnings and ends. Equally obvious is its closeness to what in the 1920s and 1930s was the phrase by the Hungarian master Gyula Breyer, endlessly quoted in chess publications, that with the conventional king's pawn's first move by White, his game was on its last legs. It is a phrase often identified with the hypermodern school in chess. The same opening move (King's pawn to King's 4) is mentioned in 'Assumption', the first short story Beckett published in 1932. There it is considered as posing few problems to an opponent, its alternative being a tentative move of pawn to rook's third that puts more pressure on him. In the deleted version of the notation, *Murphy*'s first move, the timid pawn to King's third, only occurs after sixteen moves and is only mildly criticized. In the published version, the critical note on *Murphy*'s initial move carries much more weight since it soon prevents him from successfully copying Endon's symmetry pattern.

The chess references called up here as in other passages of the novel cannot be regarded as demonstrable definite influences but, on a scale of probabilities, as a result of shared knowledge among chess cognoscenti to whom Beckett, as practitioner of the game, owner and reader of chess books and student of chess columns in the press, evidently belonged. Beckett's early English prose works reflect this lifelong preoccupation in a typically subdued or defeatist way. Among his central characters, Belacqua in *Dream of Fair to Middling Women* is beaten by a 'plump chess champion and petty financier' a.k.a. 'that fat dentist

of a chess-player', his rival among Smeraldina's admirers. His own uneasy sexual relationship with Smeraldina is seen as a 'forced move', as 'carnal frivolity'. (Beckett, 1992, 89-91) In the subsequent novel, Murphy comes to share the schizophrenic Endon's one frivolity in their sequence of chess games while avoiding an unnecessary continuation of their game as 'frivolous'. The eponymous central figure in Watt is reduced to replaying historical games he finds in Howard Staunton's chess handbooks. (Beckett, 1959, 29)

As has often been noticed, in spite of the crass unconventionality of the game between Murphy and Endon, the basic rules of chess are not transgressed in it, even though in one note the narrator seems to hint that they might be were it not for a special (fictional and unnecessary) law allowing Black to forego calling check on a move attacking the other party's king. However, even in the less eventful first game notation in the manuscript, there is a short sequence of two illegal, but symmetrical knight moves by Murphy not enforced by the subsequent positions which the knights might have reached in a regular way. In the Calder edition of Murphy with Beckett's ultimate corrections which includes the change of Endon's 42nd move into an illegal position of his king into check, repeats such deliberate deviation from the game's rules which already happens in the first version of the relevant chapter of Murphy. The implied objective in this illegal act can be construed as Endon's intention of not letting his opponent prevent him from reestablishing his original position, the only other way being the even more impossible action of capturing the black king.

Another deviation from the norms of chess in Murphy's game involves an enigmatic problem that has not been discussed in criticism in spite of its interpretive import. It concerns an action by Endon mentioned in the note on his 30th move: 'Mr. Endon ... turned his King and Queen's Rook upside down.' In criticism, this leads to a choice between two impossibilities. The first monograph on Murphy reads Endon's unusual action as the upturning of both his rooks, and thus as a symbolic gesture of queening them and indicating his victory. This conversion, absurdly using rooks instead of pawns, does not necessarily signify Endon's victory. Nor can it do this in Moorjani's Abysmal Games where Endon is seen as the other loser in the game. But then her interpretation reads the sentence describing Endon's strange action as referring to his King and his Queen's rook. This view rightly implies a physical impossibility.

The majority of critical views of the narrator's note on Endon's weird action agree with the two rooks' variant, like its opposite not taking into account Beckett's use of syntactic and semantic pluralities. In this passage English syntax allows an ambiguity which other languages do not. A look at those translations of Murphy that Beckett either coauthored or authorized strongly support the minority view in Anglophone criticism. (Freese/Moorjani, 1980/1, 40) Both Alfred Péron's and Beckett's own translation into French (1947) as well as Elmar Tophoven's later translation into German (1959) opt unreservedly for the absurd version of the topsy-turvy position of the black king. This position literally prepares the ground for the irregularity of Endon's only later move with his king in move 42 when he erects a barricade against the white queen's invasion into his ranks, which threatens to prevent him from the completed reconstruction of his own symmetry pattern. Beckett's next novel after Murphy, Watt, plays with inversions of the type the chess king is subjected to. Its protagonist inverts dress codes and, most radically, language (spelling, syntax, word order etc.), as the very material of communication. (Beckett, 2006, 57) Beckett's intensification of the more radical absurdity of Endon's behaviour in the process of textual translation or editing is not unusual in his relationship to his own work, particularly in his self-translations. Between the editions of Murphy in 1938, the French translation of 1947, the German one of 1959 and the revisions of 1963 there is a dynamic process.

An early endgame

Beckett's critical review of the chess game's construction in Murphy for the preparation of the 1963 new

edition was in tune with his skeptical attitude towards his early writing. It contrasted strongly with the care he had taken with the game's origins and its shape while proofreading the novel for its first publication in 1938. Even recovering from the knife attack in a Paris hospital in 1938 he had a friend bring his chess-set for a revision of the chess game, while Geoffrey Thompson, another friend, had been involved in its emergent state. The parodic non-logic of the chess in an otherwise fairly conventional modernist novel is mirrored in a critical endgame, in the chess-board's microcosm, not merely, as he later explained, as an end-of-the game, but as one relying on the details of his favourite life-long leisure pastime.

Murphy's role in the chess game as the novel's thematic climax largely bears out the description Beckett put into that riveting passage of his German diaries where he characterizes his hero as 'a simple materialisation of self-bondage, acceptance of which is the fundamental unheroic'. (qtd. Knowlson, 1996, 247) He points to his pleasant surprise, comparing his own work with contemporary German novels that use motif of a journey to convey the idea of finding oneself, to find in Murphy's apparent immobility in his chair 'the seed of motion'. This contradictory inversion reflects a quietist variant of a related one in melancholia seen as the blocking of the springs of action in individuals by the social context. The parody of a chess game in Murphy is a dark shadow of the game as one endorsing constant mobility and change. Like Walter Benjamin's ideas on the task of the translator, it combines the ambivalent connotations of *Aufgabe* as both task and resignation. (Van Hulle, 2006/7) The parallel with Benjamin is apt here in a real sense as well as the hermeneutic one. Losing at chess to Brecht is a theme in Benjamin's letter to Gretel Adorno in 1938, redolent of melancholy in a grey migrant context. (Lange, 2015, 95-102) In his Paris exile he might have seen Beckett losing to Duchamp in the cafés where he himself was playing other exiled intellectuals. For Beckett, the specific melancholy was not in playing the game he was obsessed with, but in the literary effort it took to integrate chess patterns in his writing in its various stages. His protagonists in the early novels up to *Watt* are losers at chess or passively replaying historical games; in the dialogue of later plays their dramatic successors are involved in endless loops of moves in chess imagery.

Reversing a chess game's chronological pattern, endgames were the thematic core of Beckett's interest in chess. The oldest chess book in his library was Henri Rinck's bilingual French-German publication of 150 *fin de partie* (150 *Endspielstudien*) published in Leipzig in 1909. (Rinck, 1909) He knew well the study of pawn endgames, and discussed with an Irish writer, in Marcel Duchamp's co-authored book *L'opposition et les cases conjuguées sont réconciliées* (1932). (Bair, 1978, 465). In this famous book Duchamp constructs a visualized narrative with chess diagrams. Beckett's awareness of Benjamin Blumenfeld's chess publications can perhaps be assumed, as also of Richard Réti's endgame studies. In Duchamp's occasional chess columns in the Paris daily paper *Ce Soir* which he followed as well as those of *Le Monde* later on, concentration on endgames were usually due to the genre's traditions and space limits. The chess game in *Murphy* does not literally reach the endgame stage. The word 'mate' bracketed after the last move of the White pieces in the deleted manuscript version is completely isolated from that game notation's context. It still points to a teleological impulse that led Beckett in a letter to insist on the specific chess associations of the word endgame.

On the metaphoric rather than the literal level, both Murphy's game with Endon and his life terminate in futility and in close sequence. However, Beckett regarded the critical debate about Murphy's demise as a possible suicide as meaningless, since the physical end of his life is preceded by his 'mental suicide'. (Beckett, 2011, 247) Its site is the chessboard. In Beckett's later *Endgame* what happens on it turns infinite and universal. In the figure of Hamm in the play, this translates to chess in Beckett's remark to an actor: 'Hamm is a king in this chess game lost from the start.' (qtd. Cohn, 1973, 152) Murphy's loss lacks such later radical impact, in spite of its symbolic load within the novel. Between Beckett's habitual self-deprecating attitude towards his early prose, and specific textual corrections he considered useful for the chess game in *Murphy*, there might have been a dissatisfaction with the limitations of its use as a medium duplicating and framing the novel's *dénouement*. It could well reinforce the distance from the 'shortcomings of literary convention' that Beckett deplored even before writing *Murphy*. (Nixon, 2011, 31) In his later plays, such distance is radicalized, covering language itself, not merely literary conventions or

those of the traditional board game. This underlines the qualified criticism Beckett made of his early construction of the pivotal chess game in *Murphy*. It merely left him with the chance of failing better with what by hindsight seemed a feeble joke.

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