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The Influence of Music on Samuel Beckett's Art

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My first encounter with the Beckettian world was at La Sorbonne when we analyzed *En Attendant Godot* in French and watched Beckett's own directing of his play in the 1980s with Rufus in the role of Vladimir and Roman Polanski in the role of Lucky. Beckett's use of language with simplicity and profoundness and the musical quality of his texts attracted my attention. Later I learned that he was married to a French pianist named Susanne Deschevaux - Dumesnil and he himself played the piano all throughout his life time. My paper will deal with the influence of music on Beckett's artistic writing and analyze his early novel *Murphy* from the perspective and influence of Beckett's musical background. My research comprises three basic parts: first of all, the autobiographical search on Beckett's relation to music and playing the piano, the second part covers how Beckett uses musical references, terms and analogies in his literary texts, and the third part consists of the analysis of his first novel, *Murphy*.

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Music was the art form which came close to pure spirit for Samuel Beckett. For him playing the piano was not a schoolboy occupation later abandoned, but a lifelong enthusiasm. He was born on Friday the thirteenth and a Good Friday... and so aware of life as a painful Passion. He claimed to have clear prenatal memories of life within his mother's womb. The womb is commonly thought of as a sheltered haven, where the fetus is protected from harm. Yet the memories of the womb were more often associated with feelings of being trapped and inability to escape, imprisoned and in pain. The pain is associated not only with the single event of a difficult childbirth, but with the beginning of a long and painful odyssey (Knowlson 23- 4). Samuel Beckett came from a musical family. His grandfather's wife, Frances Beckett had at least one musical composition published, a sentimental ballade based upon Tennyson's poem. She passed her musical interests and her talent to two of her children, Gerald and Frances. Gerald studied medicine at Trinity College, Dublin. He was a talented pianist, who enjoyed playing piano duets with his young nephew Samuel. Gerald's son John, a pianist, the conductor of *Musica Reservata* remembered them playing together:

My father was a good sight- reader, but also the sort of person who could go to the cinema and hear a song and come back and play it. The piano was in the dining-room of our house and he and Sam would play for hours. (Knowlson 28)

Though, neither of his parents played instruments, as a young boy Samuel Beckett was given piano lessons, and practised on the piano at home. This musical activity continued all through his life time. He became quite a proficient pianist, favouring Beethoven and Haydn sonatas as well as works by Chopin and Schubert. He had a Schimmel piano in his flat in Paris and also another piano in his house at the countryside in France. He was known as a regular concert-goer, either alone or with his wife, Suzanne Dumesnil who was an excellent pianist and teacher.

Beckett's interest in word games and Irish rhythms and rhymes started quite early in his childhood. When Sam was born, his mother, May employed a young woman named Bridget Bray as Sam's nurse. She remained for twelve years before she left to marry a gardener. The boys called her Bibby, a name that figures several times in Beckett's writings: in Winnie's story about Milly and the Mouse in *Happy Days*. Yet Bibby had a great sense of fun: rainy days were made sunny as she taught Beckett to recite rhymes and catches. "Rain, rain, go to Spain" was one they chanted in unison. Bridget was a friendly, loquacious Catholic, rich in stories, folktales and homespun wisdom. From the age of five until he was nine, Beckett attended a small kindergarten school run by two German sisters, Misses Ida and Pauline Elsner. Miss Pauline also gave piano lessons at 21 Ely Place in Dublin. Whenever he referred to the Elsner family, Beckett took great pleasure in pointing out that Chopin's first great piano teacher in Poland had been also called Elsner (Knowlson 42-3). The boys played piano duets together. A surviving copy of Diabelli's Duet in D with the name Samuel Beckett written in a childish hand with the date of 15 Dec 1914 on top of the sheet music indicates the brothers's progress. All the children used to take turns practicing on the piano in the drawing room. "We used to queue up for this," said Sheila Page. "Sam used to sing madly with a quavering voice when he played. And we'll all be roaring with laughter out in the hall. But he was very musical" (qtd. in Knowlson 45).

There is no doubt that there exists a relation between music and mathematics as well as chess playing. In his childhood, Beckett became quite fond of his uncle Howard, who played a distinctive role in the development of his nephew's intellectual interests. Howard, an excellent chess player, acquired a high reputation in Dublin when he has beaten the famous chess grandmaster, José Raul Capablanca y Graupera, the world champion from 1921 to 1927. Chess was to play an important part in Beckett's life and appears several times in his writing. The journeys of the family at the sea coast had a strong impact upon Beckett with its rich atmosphere of colours and sounds. At Greystones, the entire family was able to relax and enjoy the freedom of a simpler way of life. May and Bill loved this little seaside village. At

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night, the children could hear the waves crashing against the rocks and through the windows, overlooking the harbour, see the light of the Bailey Lighthouse near Howth flashing across Dublin Bay. These sights and sounds, were to stay deeply etched in Beckett's memory. He would wander off alone the beach or stand motionless gazing out to the sea. It was on these occasions that he indulged in what he described as his "love" for certain stones. Later in life, he came to rationalize this concern as the manifestation of an early fascination with the mineral, with things dying and decaying, with petrification. He linked this interest with Sigmund Freud's view that human beings have a prebirth nostalgia to return to the mineral state. Early in his final year at Trinity College in Dublin, Beckett rented a piano, which stood in the sitting room. He played it only before close friends like Geoffrey Thompson. One of his enthusiasms at this time was French music. "He was quite a good pianist and he was particularly interested in the music of Debussy," said Thompson. "I remember he used to play Debussy preludes and other piano pieces. *La Fille aux cheveux de lin*' was one of his favourites." His roommate's "only memory of him was one night he came in after I had gone to bed and sat there playing, what he described as 'sad chords' in the dark" (qtd. in Knowlson 78). Music and musicians still played an important part in what remained a richly varied culture. When the concert pianist Andor Foldes was in Paris for a concert with his wife, Beckett used to spend time with them. Their friendship was based on mutual admiration which went back to 1967, when Beckett and Suzanne first heard the pianist play all of Beethoven's piano concertos on two evenings in Paris: "a great feast" was Beckett's comment. Beckett signed copies of his work for Foldes and Foldes sent several of his recordings, including Beethoven's "Emperor Concerto". Beckett's love of words and music coincided most in Schubert's settings of Heine's and Goethe's poetry. Beckett loved these songs and used to sing some of them to his own accompaniment in a most moving way. His correspondence with Thomas Greevy reveals that Beckett was also interested in atonal and serialist music of Schoenberg, Alban Berg and Anton Webern as early as 1949 (qtd. in Bryden 1998 1). That the experience of music was profoundly important

to Beckett was clear to those who knew him. The artist Avigdor Arikha spent many hours listening to music with Beckett and asserts that “Listening to music was essential to him”. He often listened to music with Avigdor and Anne Arikha’s apartment in the square du Port-Royal in Paris. Beckett, in spite of the growing difficulties upon the muscular contracture in his hand, still played Chopin waltzes and sonatas, Schubert’s “Impromptus”, Beethoven’s “Diabelli Variations for Piano”, and most surprisingly Bela Bartok’s “Microcosmos” and Erik Satie’s piano pieces like “Gymnopedie” and “Gnossiens”. The composer Feldman stated that Beckett wrote highly musical texts, that he repeatedly read his texts aloud and even sang them in order to discover and test the right rhythm and the “fundamental sounds”(qtd. in Van Slooten 49). Other composers like Marcel Mihalovici and Luciano Berio were also attracted to Beckett’s texts because of their musical nature. When rehearsing and directing his own plays, Beckett kept timing the rests and the duration of words, keeping the rhythm firmly under control, with the precision of a metronome. As a conductor of his own plays he wanted to ensure that the modulations, the transitions towards silence, and the shifts in sound colouring as laid down in his “scores” were accurately realized.

Beckett’s sensitivity to a broad range of music was part of a much wider attunement to the aural medium, to ambient sounds, and to silence. When he began to direct his own plays comparatively late in his life, Beckett started to fulfil the role of the conductor of his own music. The musicality of Beckett’s writing found its clearest manifestation within the dynamics of theatre and live reading of his poetry and prose by the actors who have reported feeling like musical instruments or channels of resonance when directed by Beckett. During the rehearsals of *Footfalls* Billie Whitelaw often has referred to herself as a musical instrument played by Beckett. Also Jonathan Kalb states that “The action in performing a Beckett play is making the instrument resonate,” and that “what works is finding what musicians have called ‘the right tone’ on stage”(224). In an interview with Antoni Libera, Irena Jun maintains the belief that “rehearsing and playing Beckett gives an actor the opportunity to master his own body and to

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turn it into a perfect instrument” as mentioned by Ben-Zvi in *Women in Becket* (qtd. in Ben-Zvi 48).

Music for Beckett is not restricted to orchestral notation but music for Beckett includes human sounds, cries and whispers or occasionally louder screams, perhaps approximating what George Steiner has called “the inchoate scream out of the blackened mouth in the Beckett parable”(Steiner 152). All of Beckett texts, whether they are prose, poetry or drama, are the product of one who, by his own account heard them in advance of writing them. Beckett remarked to André Bernold: “J’ai toujours écrit pour une voix.” (I’ve always written for a voice) (Bernold 107). Beckett’s texts abound with evocations of aural memories, sounds and their withdrawal, acoustic qualities, rhythms and melodies. Whether read aloud or silently, Beckett’s careful words resemble elements of a musical score, coordinated for the ear to sound and to resound. They are lean and muscular, never lush. They play a discrete and discreet part in the texture which they form. As they are endowed with an intense and immediate musicality, they frequently create and evoke sound scapes within the narrative itself. Beckett not only emphasizes the use of time, rhythm and tempo in his narrative but he also draws attention to the music’s repetitive and recursive character. In his later texts he seems to listen to the sounds it makes, independent of meaning and then to redistribute them in new combinations. He interlocks words in a complex system of echoes and variations most like Maiakowsky’s poetry as can be seen in *Rockaby*:

till in the end
the day came
in the end came
close of a long day (*Rockaby* 278)

Billie Whitelaw told in her autobiography how acting under Beckett’s direction in *Footfalls* seemed to impel her towards a spiralling process of evaporation in sound and rhythm. She described her experience, “As the play progressed, I began to feel more and more like a ‘thing’ of the

spirit, something that was vaporising as we went on” (qtd. in Bryden 1998 2-3). She stated: “Smoke has a tone and rhythm. Sometimes it whirls around, sometimes it almost disappears, only to start whirling again in a gush, before disappearing in a diminuendo of nothingness” (qtd. in Bryden 1998 3). Silence can be evaluated as a part of the continuum of sound. Human life in Beckett’s writing can be discerned as a brief flicker between two great silences, from cradle to grave, as described by Pozzo in *Waiting for Godot*: “They gave birth astride of a grave, the light gleams an instant, then it’s night once more”(89).

Van Slooten mentions that for Beckett music was always synonymous with emotion (50). Music or feeling mostly triumphs over words, the haughty intellect. Music is associated with love and passion(Van Slooten 50). Albright in his essay entitled “Beckett as Marsyas” refers to Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* in his description of Marsyas who was a satyr, very pleased with his skill at playing the *aulos* and who challenged Apollo to a music contest (Albright 25). Music for Apollo is an inquiry into systems of correspondences. But for Marsyas music is wind, breath, *pneuma*, *ruach* – animating spirit, feeling made sound; Marsyas reflects a satyr’s grossness, sexual panting in his music. The right response to Marsyas’ *aulos* is to convulse in a dance of orgy, or a spasm of pain. In Beckett’s work, the singing voice of Marsyas, which is coarse, coaxing, sometimes rising to a shriek, is often heard. In *Murphy*, sex is always described with the technical vocabulary of music:

The decaying Haydn, invited to give his opinion of cohabitation, replied:

“Parallel thirds.” (10)

He kissed her, in Lydian mode, went to the door.
(82)

Celia said that if he did not find work at once, she would do hers (prostitution). Murphy knew what that meant. No more music. (47)

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This confusion between sex and music is so great that the narrator tells of Murphy musing back on his old life with Celia, on his old affection for “his musical scores and instruments” (*Murphy* 131-2). In Beckett's early writing *Murphy* is a rich picking-ground for such testimonies of expertise, music often being associated here with sexual enjoyment. The description of Murphy's joyfully protracted nights with Celia as “serenade, nocturne and albadá” reflects such musical terms denoting music for evening, night and morning. The episode of Murphy kissing Celia is described as “in a Lydian mode” which represents the modern major scale and here denotes the robustness of the kiss in a humouristic mood. Miss Counihan's lingering kiss from Wylie is described “like a breve tied, ... over bars' times its equivalent in demi-semiquavers” (*Murphy* 69). Mary Bryden states that music serves occasionally in Beckett's early writing as a metaphor for sexual interaction and gratification (Bryden 1996 37). When Murphy is with Celia, “their nights” being “serenade, nocturne and ablada” (*Murphy* 46), the succession of musical terms denotes that this is no perfunctory liaison. Because serenade (evening music) gives way to nocturne (music suggesting the romantic beauty of night) and thence to albadá (morning music, often linked with the parting of lovers at dawn). Similarly, in *Dream of Fair to Middling Women*, Belacqua's erotic liaisons are experienced not as a grabbed snack but as a “banquet of music” (40). There is a moment in the novel *Murphy* when Celia listens to Murphy's puzzling speech and feels “spattered with words that went dead as soon as they sounded; each word obliterated, before it had time to make sense, by the word that came next... It was like difficult music heard for the first time” (*Murphy* 27).

Beckett liked to see his work compared to music, and rightly so, for he frequently employed vocal techniques and sound effects: the sound of vowels and consonants and the alternately winded, syncopated, and pounding rhythms shaped his texts. For musical quotations, Beckett uses fragments from Schubert's *Nacht und Traume*, Beethoven's Fifth Piano Trio, certain Irish songs and also some snatches of music, barrel organ tunes and street cries, as well as his own compositions, complete with score, such as the chorus

for soprano, alto, tenor, and bass. In *Watt* where a croaking choir of three frogs is heard with the musical score on the page (117-8, 223). The musical qualities reveal the unspeakable which is hiding behind the words. Beckett's text and music become closely interwoven in a synchronism of voices and moods. In addition he lets several voices sound simultaneously so that the heterophonic character of sentences is multiplied into a polyphonic composition. In *Embers*, Henry listens to the waves of the sea breaking upon the shingle, to the beating of the horses' hooves and to a piano lesson involving much yelling of the piano teacher, struggling of Henry's child, Addie with Chopin's Waltz in A flat Major (98). Later Henry listens to the voice of his deceased father aroused in his own head. The voices that Henry summoned into his consciousness begin to harangue him on behalf of himself and to feed back acoustically in the resonant cavities of his head. In Beckett's novels, characters yearn for silence, yet are unable to free themselves from the sound of their own obsessive voices. Van Slooten mentions that:

The head, the smallest possible acoustic space, is the location where most of Beckett's miniature dramas take place. Inside the skull, the inner ear attentively listens to the resonating words. In the head, where the voices literally come to life and the deepest stirrings of the soul are put into words, thoughts are transformed into sound material. At the moment of expression, they appear to make contact with the outside world, but in fact, they are merely ghosts around in the mind. (53)

Beckett's novel *Murphy* deals with the consciousness of its protagonist who goes from the state of cogito to the state of madness. *Murphy* as a novel is about Murphy's entropic quest to reach the point "where he could love himself" (*Murphy* 8) by annihilating that physical

part of himself "which he hated" (*Murphy* 8). True freedom exists only when the body is still and the mind free to move through its various zones (*Murphy* 65). The first zone of Murphy's mind, that is light, contains forms which imitate the external world. The second zone, that is half-light, contains forms which do not exist in any other mode. The pleasure is pure contemplation and peace – the Belacqua bliss. In the dark zone, the zone that Murphy prefers, there exists a perpetual flux of forms becoming, disintegrating, and becoming again without any intelligible principle of change. Murphy approaches inertia, as he is freed from his physical part. He becomes a "mote in the dark of absolute freedom, a point in the ceaseless unconditioned generation and passing away of line" (*Murphy* 66). He attains the intellectual irresponsibility of a mind made independent of body. The paradox of Murphy's quest is that it is impossible and doomed to failure. Murphy seeks in this spatial, temporal world an existence beyond space and time; he seeks himself in a realm where the self does not exist; he seeks an ultimate expansion of self that inevitably leads to the ultimate contraction. The universe which Murphy seeks for is a curious combination of Einstein's relativity and Heraclitus's unity and sameness. Where all is flux, the only principle of consistency is that all possibilities are possible. The ending of *Murphy* is appropriately ambiguous. We do not know whether Murphy's last rock with its surrealistic visions indicates Murphy's successful immersion of self into the dark zone or, on the contrary, a gesture of despair. The final image becomes an embodiment of the paradoxical flux and negation of the book rather than a key to its ultimate answers. In his later works Beckett deals with "the sounds the mind makes in actually grappling with words" (qtd. in Dearlove 29). The result is a sense of distance between the words and the panting voices that mutter them. The narrators can find no words weak enough to describe their positions. In *Murphy* the same effect is achieved by opposite means. Words contain a plethora of meanings as secondary and tertiary meanings, etymological implications, and even synonyms, antonyms and homonyms. Such a superabundance of meanings collapses into a sense of the real vacuity and meaninglessness of words. Beckett's insistence upon maintaining

all possible permutations of meanings leads to ambivalence and flux, to a language of paradox and negation. Beckett, like James Joyce, is a master of the janus- faced word. He attempts to introduce the concepts of permutation and paradox into the language through the use of word games. In *Murphy's Bed*, Sighle Kennedy gives an entertaining study of these “mantic meanings” in *Murphy*, tracing Murphy’s name from the Greek word for form (*morphe*) through Morpheus (qtd. in Dearlove 30). Beckett juxtaposes literal and figurative meanings. Words are permutable and ambivalent essences that begin to flow into their opposites whenever the mind tries to capture the physical world through them. The most striking devaluation of the effort to connect word to world, arises from Beckett’s use of negation and identified contrarities. He presents a statement with one hand, while the other hand subtly takes it away. In its expansion the language of *Murphy* falls into contraction in much the same way that Bosch’s unlimited fertility turns into a “surreal” nightmare. Words with multiple meanings collapse into meaninglessness and man is left exiled from his physical sphere. Gestures, phrases, and sentences challenge us as their ambivalence and permutability make us take a second look at them and what they stand for. The Apollonian qualities of the language plunge the prose of *Murphy* into “the dark zone” where all is “flux” (Murphy 65) and where “neither darkness nor light, neither bad nor good are different, but one and the same thing” (qtd in Dearlove 31).

In *Murphy* the reader is confronted with two forms of time: there is chronometric time, which is associated with the outer novel, and there is durational time, which is associated with the inner novel. Murphy’s chair, a sort of heated closet on rockers, becomes the locus of this durational time, one that finds no analogue in the real world and that obeys laws entirely of its own devising. Murphy’s most dramatic accession to durational time occurs after the chess game with Endon, when time spins off its Newtonian axis and Murphy glimpses his third zone. The reader is reminded that there is a typesetter – “ M.M.M. stood for music, Music, MUSIC, in brilliant, brevier and canon” (*Murphy* 132). Mr. Endon, a patient at the Mary Magdalen Mercyseat Hospital attracts Murphy’s attention. “Most profoundly one in spirit”

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(*Murphy* 104), Murphy sees in Endon a reflection of his own solipsistic intentions, a medium through which he can glimpse his third zone. He is consequently drawn to Endon as to a mirror image of himself "as Narcissus to his fountain" (*Murphy* 105). Their encounter comes to represent a confrontation between Murphy and – as *endon* translates from the Greek Murphy's own "within". The encounter between Murphy and Endon, between the cogito and madness, comes in three stages. The first involves the wonderfully comic chess game where Endon plays Black, wheels his pieces through a series of configurations, which alternately shape themselves into symmetry and disperse themselves into randomness. Endon never acknowledges the existence of another player. Murphy attempts, with increasing desperation, to engage him. Then comes the second stage in which Murphy hallucinates Endon as an aestheticised image of his own transcendence, a kind of bird- man in pre-Raphaelite plumage.

Following Mr. Endon's forty- third move Murphy gazed for a long time at the board before laying his Shah on his side, and again for a long time after that act of submission. But little by little his eyes were captured by the brilliant swallow- tail of Mr. Endon's arms and legs, purple, scarlet, black, and glitter, till they saw nothing else. (*Murphy* 138)

Murphy goes to encounter, his third zone, a place where the bounding line and the limiting form become conceptual impossibilities, where the distinction between figure and ground, subject and object, mind and body become as superfluous as Murphy's chess game was to Endon's:

Then this also faded and Murphy began to see nothing, that colourlessness which is such a rare postnatal treat, being the absence (to abuse

a nice distinction) not of *percipere* but of *percipi*.
(*Murphy* 138)

Murphy discovers when he gazes into Mr. Endon's eyes and sees "horribly reduced, obscured and distorted, his own image" (*Murphy* 140). As Murphy beholds the mirror image of himself, we are reminded of The Corinthians 13:12 in The Bible: "For now we see through a glass darkly; but face to face". The encounter with Endon represents a moment of self-reflective consciousness, although it simultaneously represents an attempt to transcend self-reflection and enter the third zone (Begam 54-5). Murphy's goal is momentarily glimpsed when he sees himself as a "speck in Mr. Endon's unseen" (*Murphy* 140) a clear echo of "a mote in the dark of absolute freedom" (*Murphy* 66). Concerning the relation between perception and being, visibility and existence, Moorjani states that:

In terms of deixis, the projection of the deictic center- the verbal *I*, the gazing eye – results in a to and fro between an *I* (or eye), a not *I* (he, she, it) and *I* / eye-lessness. In *Murphy* Beckett probes the consequences of the kinds of mirror doubles or couples of which Merleau-Ponty writes. The situation between Murphy and Mr. Endon is very like the relation of Narcissus with the ideal self in the mirror. Seeing himself unseen by Mr. Endon, Murphy experiences the rare and 'unexpected pleasure' of momentary release from the visibility or from Berkeley's *percipi* and *percipere*. In a profusion of direct and indirect allusions, the narrator associates this release from perceivedness with the Democritean Nothing, Schopenhauerian Nirvana, Freudian 'pleasure', and Otto Rank's 'pleasurable Nothing', 'the womb situation'. (2008: 42- 3)

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Concerning the child's experience, Winnicott states that "When he looks he is not seen, so he doesn't exist" (114). In a repeat of the to and fro between the visible and the invisible, Murphy in the manner of child's game with the mirror makes himself appear and disappear in Endon's eyes until he sees himself unseen. The repeated experience of seeing himself unseen is first the occasion for the 'pleasurable Nothing' and then this pleasure bringing on the fear of death, the desire to return to being seen. But too late, as Murphy is undone by the unseeing gaze of his other self in the mirror. We see him unravelling and rocking himself into unconsciousness before dissolving into the universal chaos or is it Nirvana? The womblike and cradlelike rocking into death is an obsessive image that will resurface years later in *Film* and *Rockaby*.

As a conclusion, Beckett interweaves music and philosophy in *Murphy* in such a light way. Beckett not only parodies the famous philosophers' ideas like Descartes, Geulincx and Leibniz, but he also uses the language in such a way that musical allusions in scenes of love and sex become quite meaningful and ironical in their humouristic appeal.

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