

Murphy's Surrender to Symmetry

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Insofar as writers have employed chess in literature for its metaphorical significances it has largely operated as an expression of relationships. Chess is a game between two players and thirty-two manikins, and it therefore both literally and metaphorically involves human relationships. These vary according to the "dimension" conceived: those between the pieces may be collaborative or aggressive; those of players to pieces may be collaborative or aggressive; those of players to pieces may be protective or exploitative; those between player's aggressive or playful.¹ This article concerns one work, Samuel Beckett's novel *Murphy*,² which incorporates a complete game of chess, described in sufficient detail for the reader to play it out and analyze it.

The game in question is between the eponymous hero and Mr. Endon, one of the inmates of the Magdalen Mental Mercyseat. It represents Murphy's happiest hour, but on this his last night on earth he loses the game, surrendering to Mr. Endon after his forty-third move. The game is unusual not only in itself but in its function within the book, which is to concentrate on the symmetrical, logical and teleological properties of chess. These are used to define, not a relationship but a non-relationship, the non-relationship of the players not only to each other but to the whole of the physical world. Yet this game occurs at a climax of the novel's plot, and we shall argue that it is climactic because, against the odds, a kind of relationship is briefly established at the moment when one player surrenders to the other.

In Beckett's novels and plays there is always a tension between the mania for symmetry and mathematical permutation, which rejects organic processes, and a compulsion towards the asymmetry of living, which connives at the linear passage of time. Victor Sage describes Beckett's prose as lull of symmetrical patterns,³ but it is also necessary to remember how often his works refuse to end, frequently omitting any final punctuation mark. Eugene Webb thinks that "symmetry replaces meaning for Molloy as a goal of Thought"⁴ and Hans Joachim Schulz argues that "To get rid of meaning is Watt's magical aim, to lift what happens, or might have happened, onto a level of mathematical possibilities, reason it out and close the circle. What is perfect is right, what imperfect wrong"⁵ but this perfectionism is a goal, an aim, not an achievement and the purposive and purposeless are obliged to coexist uneasily.

Chess has properties which associate it with all the elements in this conflict. The chess board cleared of its pieces is symmetrical in terms of colour and pattern along a diagonal axis.

[diagram of chess board]

The initial distribution of pieces provides symmetry along a horizontal axis.

RNBQKBNR
RNBQKBNR

But the mirroring is only of the pieces' status and not of their colour. If a vertical axis is employed, the initial distribution provides a mirroring of the pieces' colour and of the status of all the pieces except the King and Queen.

RNBQ | KBNR
RNBQ | KBNR

Thus, of three conflicting axes, only one provides pure symmetry. The other two are almost but not really symmetrical. But they are nevertheless more likely to be seen as forms of symmetry than of asymmetry. The game of chess itself must be placed as a kind of mathematical-logical problem, but the action of the game is essentially asymmetrical, being purposive and directed towards the victory of one colour over the other. Even so, in the process of play, momentary, partial (or even, at least in theory, purely) symmetrical patterns may emerge.

It is Murphy's torment to belong to two worlds at once. One coupling is that of body and mind, but another is that of odd and even numbers. His Lucky Number is 4, and 1936 is his Lucky Year, but his lunch is always five biscuits. He ties himself to his rocking chair with seven scarves, and he dies in Chapter 11 on the 21st of the eleventh month of 1935.⁶ S. C. Steinberg has argued that Murphy's own name begins with a letter that can be regarded as being either twelfth or thirteenth in the alphabet.⁷ Such ambiguity is characteristic of the strain under which he lives. Suk recommends that he "avoid drugs and resort to Harmony" (p. 22), and it must seem that the Magdalen Mental Mercyseat represents such a state: after all, both the MMM's groundplan and the letters MMM are perfectly symmetrical on one axis.⁸

Murphy is drawn to the patients at the MMM out of admiration for their mentality, joy in their conditions and pleasure in their liking for himself.⁹ But his attitude to the possibilities of human relationships is ambiguous. Endon is his favourite because Murphy believes there to be a kind of mirror-symmetry between them-Endon's psychosis was "so limpid and imperturbable that Murphy felt drawn to it as Narcissus to his fountain" (p. 105). And one thing in particular which the two men have in common is a desire to investigate the possible permutations in any class of "moves." Murphy is engaged in a mental struggle to overcome his habit of eating the Ginger last out of his lunch of biscuits and, therefore, rendering the assortment "edible in a hundred and twenty ways" (p. 57). For his part, Endon displays his obsession with permutation immediately after his chess victory in Chapter 11.

For quite some little time Mr. Endon had been drifting about the corridors, pressing here a light-switch and there an indicator, in a way that seemed haphazard but was in fact determined by an a mental pattern as precise as any of those that governed his chess. Murphy found him in the south transept, gracefully stationed before the hypomaniac's pad, ringing the changes on the various ways in which the indicator could be pressed and the light turned on and off. Beginning with the light turned off to begin with he had: lit, Indicated, extinguished; lit, extinguished, indicated; indicated, lit, extinguished. Continuing then with the light turned on to begin with he had: extinguished, lit, indicated; extinguished,

Indicated, lit; indicated, extinguished and was seriously thinking of fighting when Murphy stayed his hand. (pp. 138-9).¹⁰

Between these examples of their shared interest in logical possibilities occurs the chess game.

White (MURPHY)

1. P-K4
2. Kt-KR3
3. R-KKt1
4. Kt-QB3
5. Kt-Q5
6. R-KRI
7. Kt-QB3
8. Kt-QKt1
9. Kt-KKt1
10. P-KKt3
11. Kt-K2
12. P-KKt4
13. Kt-KKt3
14. B-K2
15. P-Q3
16. Q-Q2
17. K-Q1
18. Kt-QB3
19. R-QKt1
20. Kt-QR4
21. P-QKt3
22. R-KKt1
23. B-QKt2
24. K-QB1
25. B-QB3
26. P-QKt4
27. Q-KR6
28. Q-KB6
29. B-K5
30. Kt-QB5
31. Kt-KR1
32. K-QKt2!!
33. K-QKt3
34. K-QR4
35. K-R5
36. B-KB4
37. Q-QB3
38. Kt-QR6
39. K-QKt5
40. K-QR5

Black (MR. ENDON)

1. Kt-KR3
2. R-KKt1
3. Kt-QB3
4. Kt-K4
5. R-KR1
6. Kt-OB3
7. Kt-KKt1
8. Kt-QKt1
9. P-K3
10. Kt-K2
11. Kt-KKt3
12. B-K2
13. P-Q3
14. Q-Q2
15. K-Q1
16. Q-K1
17. Kt-Q2
18. R-QKt1
19. Kt-QKt3
20. B-Q2
21. R-KKt1
22. K-QB1
23. Q-KB1
24. B-K1
25. Kt-KR1
26. B-Q1
27. Kt-QR1
28. Kt-KKt3
29. B-K2
30. K-Q1
31. B-Q2
32. R-KR1
33. B-QB1
34. Q-K1
35. Kt-QKt3
36. Kt-Q2
37. R-QR1
38. B-KB1
39. Kt-K2
40. Kt-QKt1

41. Q-QB6
42. K-QKt5
43. K-R5

41. Kt-KKt1
42. K-Q2
43. Q-Q1

And White surrenders.

(pp. 136-7)

The game can be broken down into phases. But there is more than one way of doing this. For example, a Pawn cannot go backwards; therefore, each first move of a Pawn has the significance that the distribution of the pieces on the board can never be the same again. Any other piece can be returned to its original square in the course of the game, but a Pawn can only return as a Queen, having reached the eighth rank. Murphy and Endon's game can, therefore, be analyzed in terms of the points at which "irrevocable" moves are made. These are W1, B9, W10, B13 and W15, at each of which a Pawn is advanced from the second rank.

The first irrevocable move is thus the first move of the game. Murphy plays White because Endon plays Black. Endon plays Black because he always played Black. If presented with White he would fade, without the least trace of annoyance, away into a light stupor (p. 137). Charles Peake considers that "Mr. Endon will initiate nothing,"¹¹ but initiative is to some extent in the eye of the beholder. B1 (Kt-KR3) has nothing to do with W1 (P-K4) and can be seen as reflecting just as much initiative as Murphy's conventional opening. At B9 Endon begins the game all over again, in a sense, since he has returned all his pieces to their original squares and now advances a Pawn to K3. Since Murphy chooses to imitate many of Endon's moves it is arguable whether Endon is thereby obliged to be the initiator or Murphy initiates the acts of imitation.

Beckett calls W1 "The primary cause of all White's subsequent difficulties"(p. 137). This is logically so. At the same time, as Peake remarks, "The initial move which is the origin of all his troubles on the chessboard symbolizes his sin, the sin of having been born-at least, of having been, born sane."¹² But his subsequent difficulties derive from his subsequent intentions, which come into conflict with the irrevocable nature of this move. He soon seems to adopt the principle of imitating Endon. This provides a way of analyzing the game into three phases. N White's perspective is adopted, W1 is a move motivated by convention, W2-W43 are motivated by a desire to attack Black.

In fact, however, Murphy is trying to imitate, not the Black pieces' moves, but the mind of Endon. At first he can only repeat Endon's moves slavishly. But W1 has made this impossible at W5, where Murphy wishes to move his Knight on to K4, but cannot because it is occupied by his own Pawn. Instead, he has to make do with Kt-Q5, there being nothing better" (p. 137). Then, at B7, the sequence is broken by a kind of chiasmus:

B7. Kt-KKt1
W8. Kt-QKt1
B8. Kt-QKt1
W9. Kt-KKt1

It is not that Endon begins to imitate Murphy at this point. Rather, Murphy momentarily glimpses the principle behind Endon's moves and begins to follow the principle instead of the moves which result from it.

It now becomes necessary to adopt Black's perspective. Endon is oblivious of Murphy's moves. As Hugh Kenner puts it, "White is irrelevant to Mr. Endon; White's moves have this one significance for him only, that they indicate his own turn to move again."¹³ From B15 onwards it becomes apparent that Endon is only interested in private games within his own pieces, the swopping over of his King and Queen, for example. During the Imitation Phase (W2-W25) Murphy has only partial success, immediate imitation only at W19, delayed imitation at W15, 16, 17, 22 and 24, more vague similarity at W18 and 20, and moves preparatory to delayed similarly at W21, 23 and 25.

What, then, is the nature of Endon's game? Kenner remarks that Endon "is working out with his black pieces a pretty little rite of symmetry."¹⁴ This is true, but Kenner gives a very limited account of it, and one which seems to neglect an important kind of symmetry peculiarly dear to Endon's heart.

The symmetry Kenner describes is a temporal one, in the sense that it attempts to reverse the sequence of moves and return Black's pieces to their original squares. In Kenner's own words, Endon is "deploying his pieces and then returning them to their original state, in majestic indifference to capture, to threat of being captured, indeed to any manoeuvre of White's at all."¹⁵ Seen in these terms, the game divides into two phases: Phase One ends at B8 (Kt-QKt1), when all of Endon's pieces have been returned to their original squares. Phase Two is one move short of completion at the point when White surrenders, for although Endon has two Pawns one square out of position (his two irrevocable moves at B9 and B13), he is just about to move his King back to K1, thereby returning fourteen pieces to their original squares.¹⁶

During the Imitation Phase Murphy is attempting (without realizing, until W8) the same kind of temporal symmetry within his own pieces. The effect, of course, is another, kind of symmetry, mirror-symmetry along the horizontal axis. Just as the temporal symmetry is imperfect even for Endon, because he does not follow the same order of moves in reverse when he begins to replace his pieces on their original squares, so this mirror-symmetry is imperfect because Murphy's Pawn is advanced and, furthermore, because this Pawn interferes with play. If Endon were to co-operate (!), perfect symmetry could be achieved. But Murphy is not a factor in Endon's play. The imperfect attempt at mirror-symmetry is thus an expression of the relationship between Black and White. It is also a comment on Endon and Murphy as Individuals: Endon is pursuing temporal symmetry for its own sake; Murphy is committed to the pursuit of temporal symmetry because Endon is pursuing it, and to mirror-symmetry because he is pursuing Endon.

There is another phase-system which can be recognised if Black's perspective is adopted, and it involves a third kind of symmetry. It is asymmetry along a vertical axis, but within Endon's pieces alone. Because of the distinction between a King and a Queen there is no real symmetry along a vertical axis in the initial distribution of the pieces on the board. But if the King and Queen be regarded as equivalents (royal pieces, perhaps) then, of course, the initial distribution is symmetrical. Endon seems to have two aims, one being the return of his pieces to their

original distribution. The other is the creation of symmetry within his own pieces. It might be called “endon-symmetry,” endon being the Greek for “within.” In addition, he seems to want to try out different examples of endon-symmetry, perhaps with the ultimate intention of exhausting all possible permutations.¹⁷

In terms of endon-symmetry the game can be broken down into the following phases:

- (i) Initial distribution
- (ii) B8 (a return to the initial distribution)
- (iii) B21: R KQ R
PPPBBPPP
N PP N
- (iv) B23: RK QR
PPPBBPPP
N PP N
- (v) B27: NRKBBQRN
PPP PPP
PP
- (vi) B39: R BKOB R
PPPNNPPP
PP
- (vii) B41: RNBKQBNR
PPP PPP
PP

During the Imitation Phase, Murphy is thus attempting (again without realizing, until W8) endon-symmetry within his own pieces, and the effect is once again mirror-symmetry between the two sets of pieces. At the end of the Attack Phase, Murphy surrenders (just as he will stay Mr. Endon’s hand when it is on the light-switch a few minutes later) immediately before B44, which would have created

RNBOKBNR
PPP PPP
PP.

It is not merely that Murphy now knows that Endon is not interested in winning, or even in relating to Murphy, but that he is obsessed with symmetry. At this point temporal symmetry and endon-symmetry coincide for the second time, but if we enter into Murphy’s mind it can only be at this point that he can recognize this fact. It must occur to Murphy that Endon is concerned with the finite (but huge) number of permutations of endon-symmetry allowed by the sixty-four

squares of the chess board.¹⁸ It is not inconceivable that, allowing for a Pawn's ability to come back down the board having Queened, Endon might be going ultimately for complete temporal symmetry too. Add to this the fact that Endon is prepared to repeat the distribution of his pieces (B8) and Murphy must see that the game could be extended infinitely.

By the time he surrenders, Murphy could hardly have abandoned more comprehensively the symmetry of his own play. Admittedly, six Pawns and both Rooks remain arranged symmetrically on a vertical axis, but this remnant of an earlier commitment to mirror-symmetry (the Initiation Phase) only serves to emphasize Murphy's engagement not with the movements of the in-animate chess pieces but with the movements of an animate mind, Endon's. Murphy is forced by the structure of chess to attack, but attack here is closely allied to vulnerability. As Black retreats White moves forward, tempting and challenging Black to respond, even to take one of White's pieces. For example, at W27 Murphy presents Endon with the opportunity of taking his Queen with a Pawn ("The ingenuity of despair," Beckett calls it, and then comments on Kt-OB5 "High praise is due to White for the pertinacity with which he struggles to lose a piece"[p. 137]). Murphy begins to move his King into the attack at W32, and at B34 Endon has the King in check but ignores the fact. Peake interprets Murphy's moves as an attempt to "make Mr. Endon acknowledge his presence by placing pieces where they may be taken. The attempt is vain; Mr. Endon's chess, like his mind, is entirely self-contained."¹⁹ Murphy's offensive (all his pieces except for four Pawns are out of position by the time he surrenders, and both his King and Queen are in Endon's half) leads to a distribution of pieces which Kenner calls "utter chaos."²⁰

Murphy is like other Beckett heroes in his contradictory, paradoxical nature. Work-shy, he finds happiness in work at the MMM. He hates his body but is Subject to its dictates. He felt increasingly that "his mind was a closed system, subject to no principle of change but its own"(p. 64), but after forty-three moves in the game of chess, he collapses over the board, defeated by Endon's mind (p. 138). The implications of these contradictions allow for various possibilities.

The first of these is that the novel is hubristic. Call it accident, or call it "supernatural determination" (p. 64), but Murphy dies the night his mind is shown up for being subject to Mr. Endon's, in need of it and inferior to it. Peake talks of Murphy's unfortunate opening move, "bitter disappointment," ultimate frustration, "'despair'—all arising from the 'mistake' of thinking that he could "enter the world of the mentally alienated."²¹

But it is also possible that Murphy surrenders after move 43 because he suddenly sees how Endon's mind works after all, and momentarily gains access to its freedom, purity and beauty. After the act of submission, Murphy's physical being is dazed, assaulted and weaded by sights and sounds and the accumulated physical and mental activity of that climactic night in the MMM. He drops his head on his arms in the midst of the chessmen, but then his senses find themselves at peace, "an unexpected pleasure.... the positive peace that comes when the somethings give way, or perhaps simply add up, to the Nothing, than which in the guffaw of the Abderite naught Is more real' (p.138). Irony here does not expel the possibility that we are meant to understand by this that Murphy has attained Nirvana.

Murphy feels himself to be subject to the Cartesian split (p.64), and in a sense Beckett's conception of being takes the form of the juxtaposition of irreconcilable facts. Whereas some of

his characters profess an intention of terminating the experience of life yet prove incapable of dying, Murphy professes a wish to escape the torment of the body but has a “deplorable susceptibility to Celia, ginger, and so on” (p. 102). It is appropriate that the outcome of the game of chess with Endon should be ambiguous, defeat in terms of the physical activity of Murphy and his pieces, but victory in terms of Murphy’s momentary (but unreciprocated?) access to Endon’s mind.

Beckett comments that Murphy surrenders with “fool’s mate in his soul” (p. 138). If this means that he has been made a fool of, then it is a moment of recognition: he is Endon’s mate, at one with his divine folly. “Fool’s mate” is mate in two moves. By W2 Murphy is caught up in the web of Endon’s symmetries and permutations, never to be mated. He surrenders at W43 because he is mated in the old senses of wearied, dumfounded, amazed-amazed, surely, as much by the beauty of Endon’s mind with which he is briefly in mystic communion as by his own Inability to emulate and relate to it.

NOTES

1. For a discussion of these and other relationships see Bryan Loughrey and Neil Taylor, “Ferdinand and Miranda at Chess,” *Shakespeare Survey* XXXV, 1982, and Neil Taylor and Bryan Loughrey, “Middleton’s Chess Strategies,” to appear in *Studies in English Literature*, XXIV, 1984.
2. London, 1938. Page references here are to the 1973 Picador edition, published by Pan Books Limited in association with Calder & Boyars.
3. Victor Sage, “Innovation and continuity,” in K. Worth, (ed.), *Beckett the Shape Changer* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1975), p. 91.
4. Eugene Webb, *Samuel Beckett, A Study of His Novels* (London: Peter Owen, 1970). p. 105.
5. Hans Joachim Schulz, *This Hell of Stories: A Hegalian Approach to the Novels of Samuel Beckett* (The Hague and Paris: Mouton, 1973), p. 40.
6. *Murphy*, pp. 23, 57, 5 and 142.
7. S.C. Steinberg, “The External and Internal in *Murphy*,” *Twentieth Century Literature* XVI 11, 2 (April 1972), pp. 93, 95.
8. *Murphy*, p. 96.
9. *Murphy*, p. 102.
10. Beckett prevents the sequence from being completed—Murphy frustrates Endon here just as he does in the chess game.

11. Charles Peake, "The Labours of poetical excavation"; in K. Worth (ed.), *Beckett the Shape Changer* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1975), p. 44.
12. *Ibid.*, p. 44.
13. Hugh Kenner, *A Reader's Guide to Samuel Beckett* (London: Thames and Hudson 1973), p. 68.
14. *Ibid.*, p. 68.
15. *Ibid.*, p. 68.
16. *Murphy*, p. 138, note (q), reads, "The termination of this solitaire is very beautifully played by Mr. Endon."
17. Most critics notice what we have called the temporal symmetry of Endon's game, but stick at that. For example, John Fletcher (*The Novels of Samuel Beckett*, London: Chatton Windus, 1964, p.52) writes that "he is concerned only with the aesthetic symmetry of his play, with returning to the position he has set out from." But only Robert Harrison (*Samuel Beckett's 'Murphy': A Critical Excursion*, University of Georgia Mono-Graphs no. 15, University of Georgia Press, Athens, 1968) seems to have noticed the "endon-symmetry." His discussion is valuable but incomplete and loosely expressed (he talks of Endon's achieving "absolute symmetry" and "Turning his king row inside out-with the exception of the troublesome rooks" (p.58). Harrison also notes that "At regular intervals throughout the book the possibility of exhausting a side is considered" (p. 25) but falls to relate this to the game of chess.
18. If Endon established every possible case of endon-symmetry with all his pieces (first with his King on the right of his Queen and then with their positions reversed) he would create $(32 \times 31 \times 30 \times 29 \times 28 \times 27 \times 26 \times 25)/24 \times 2$ permutations, i.e. 35,341, 488,000. It might even be that by "queening his rooks" at B30, Endon is not merely signalling his victory (Harrison, p. 59) (nor by discovering the only pair of pieces that will stand upside down foreshadowing Watt's mania for inverting everything, from his trousers to the letters within the words that he speaks) but attempting to double the number of permutations open to him by treating inverted Rooks as new pieces.
19. Peake, p. 44
20. Kenner, p. 69.
21. Peake, p. 44.
22. Harrison, p. 59: "...at the end of a particularly rewarding game,...Murphy begins to feel he is making real progress, having experienced the rare treat of Nothingness."