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Unreliable Narrative in *Murphy*

In some of Samuel Beckett's early works, the narrator's commentary is occasionally untrustworthy; in *Murphy* the unreliable narrative becomes an important structural device. Many of the narrator's seemingly plausible statements are in some way misleading or inconsistent. For example, he twice says that Murphy is a "strict non-reader"; but he also reveals that Murphy is familiar with works by Fletcher, Swift, Wordsworth, Dante, Campanella, and Bishop Bouvier, among others.¹ A possible way of resolving this problem is given in a passage where the narrator describes how Murphy was forced to sell some of his possessions:

He thought of the rocking-chair left behind in Brewery Road, that aid to life in his mind from which he had never before been parted. His books, his pictures, his postcards, his musical scores and instruments, all had been gradually disposed of in that order rather than the chair. (P. 189)

It may be, then, that Murphy gave up reading when he was forced to sell his books; but calling him a strict nonreader is nevertheless somewhat misleading. Moreover, if this explanation resolves one contradiction, it introduces another. Earlier the narrator has assured the reader that Murphy's rocking chair "never left him"; here the narrator includes a reminder that it has been "left behind in Brewery Road."²
Another problem involving the rocking chair arises in the opening pages of the novel. The narrator says that Murphy uses seven scarves to bind himself to the chair and then, enumerating them, mentions only six (p. 2). According to some critics (A. Alvarez, for example), this is an inadvertent error. But Beckett is careful about small details. If the error had been an oversight, it would probably have been eliminated when Beckett translated his novel into French. However, the inconsistent enumeration of scarves, the assurances that Murphy is a nonreader, and other misleading statements are retained in the French version. Moreover, many of Beckett's novels have inconsistencies of this sort; John Mood has discovered twenty-eight of them in a single work, Watt.

One of the ways Beckett uses unreliable material is illustrated in an exchange between Bim Clinch, the head male nurse at the Magdalen Mental Mercyseat, and Ticklepenny. Bim hires Ticklepenny as an attendant and promises him a salary of five pounds per month. After ten days among the lunatics, Ticklepenny has had enough; he persuades Murphy to take over his job, and asks Bim to pay him for the time he has worked. Bim, who has "a fancy for Ticklepenny not far short of love," agrees to this arrangement (pp. 156–57). But he adds a stipulation: "you will get your one-six-eight," he says, "as soon as your Murphy has given a month’s satisfaction and no sooner." Ticklepenny accepts this offer without realizing that after working ten days he is owed a third of five pounds, or one-thirteen-four (one-six-eight is a third of four pounds). The exact value of "Bim’s fancy . . . not far short of love" may be difficult to compute, but it is clearly less than six shillings eightpence.

There is another bit of legerdemain in this episode. When Ticklepenny offers Murphy the job, he says nothing about his relationship with Bim. Yet Murphy predicts that he will not be hired if Ticklepenny is involved in "a liaison with some high official, the head male nurse for example." How does Murphy manage to guess the truth so accurately? Either he has become uncharacteristically perceptive or—more likely—the narrator is sharing a joke with the reader. For, despite the premonition about the head male nurse, Murphy (who thinks that the liai-
son will hurt his chances for employment) still has managed to get things backward.

Many of the inconsistencies in the novel become apparent when one compares related details in widely separated passages. One example involves two appearances of the word "whinge" (to whine or whimper). According to the narrator, "All the puppets in this book whinge sooner or later, except Murphy, who is not a puppet" (p. 122). This suggests—or seems to—that whatever forms of expression will be elicited from Murphy, the whinge is not among them. But some pages earlier the narrator had described how Murphy "threw his voice into an infant's whinge" (p. 37). Nor can the narrator's statement be taken to mean that all the minor characters in the book whinge and are puppet-like, but that Murphy (who also whinges) is not puppet-like. There are other characters, notably Mr. Endon, who never whinge.7

Murphy's horoscope introduces a number of other inconsistencies. Some of Suk's predictions, like those about fits and quadrupeds, are accurate; many others are not.8 Suk indicates that Murphy possesses "great Magical Ability of the Eye, to which the lunatic would easy succumb" (p. 32). When Celia threatens to leave him unless he looks for work, Murphy fixes his gaze on her "with great magical ability"; the result is that Murphy is forced to seek employment (p. 39). Later on, the narrator notes that the M.M.M. is ideally suited for Murphy to take advantage of the "great magical ability of the eye to which the lunatic would easy succumb" (p. 183). Attempting to achieve rapport with Mr. Endon, he stares into his eyes; and again, Murphy is the one who is defeated.9 Murphy loves to talk, but Suk claims that silence is one of his highest attributes. Like the narrator, Suk has his playful moments: shortly after praising Murphy's silence, he says, "Avoid exhaustion by speech" (p. 32). Celia twice quotes this admonition back to Murphy after he engages in one of his long-winded monologues.10

According to the narrator, Suk was told the day and year of Murphy's birth, but not the time (p. 23). Yet the opening words of the horoscope are, "At time of Birth of this Native four de-
degrees of the GOAT was rising . . . " (p. 32). Suk could not have given the position of a zodiacal constellation this accurately without knowing the time of birth to within a few minutes.\textsuperscript{11} Again, a repeated word is used to call attention to the inconsistency. The narrator says that Suk would be able to prepare Murphy's horoscope without being told "the precise moment of vagitus" (birth cry); later, the word "vagitus" appears twice in a passage about Murphy's birth (pp. 23, 71). The narrator seems to know when Murphy was born—he describes what occurred in the delivery room; but this knowledge is never shared with the reader. Hence it is impossible to determine whether some of the details in the horoscope are reliable.

There is a way, however, of estimating roughly when Murphy was born, and this points to another inconsistency. The action of the novel takes place in 1935, and Murphy is called young (twice) and a young man (twice on the same page).\textsuperscript{12} Assuming that Murphy is at least sixteen but no more than fifty (to take the extreme cases), the year of his birth is between 1885 and 1919. Suk says that when Murphy was born, Neptune was in Taurus and Uranus was in Aquarius.\textsuperscript{13} Neptune was in Taurus from 1874 until 1889; Uranus was in Aquarius from 1912 to 1920. Hence one of Suk's statements could be true if Murphy were forty-six or over; the other one, if he were twenty-three or under; but both of the statements cannot be true. In fact there is no time in the nineteenth or twentieth centuries when Neptune and Uranus are in the designated positions simultaneously.\textsuperscript{14}

With characteristic evenhandedness, Beckett makes certain that the astronomy in Murphy is as unreliable as the astrology. If the comment about the moon promoting magical ability is misleading, so is the statement that is its counterpart, "The moon, by a striking coincidence full and at perigee, was 29,000 miles nearer the earth than it had been for four years" (p. 26). On the night in question (11 September 1935—the date can be calculated from details given in the novel), the moon was in fact full.\textsuperscript{15} Perigee, however, was not reached until the next evening; and since the moon is full and at perigee about once a year, the coincidence is not so very striking.\textsuperscript{16} On 12 September the
moon was well over 29,000 miles nearer to the earth than it had been only thirteen days earlier, when it was at apogee. Nor was it closer to the earth than it had been for four years: when it was at perigee on 20 April 1932, the lunar distance was less by ten miles. Indeed, unless someone tampers with its orbit, the moon never can be “29,000 miles nearer the earth than it had been for four years”; the difference between the average and minimum perigee distances is less than 5,000 miles. It is remarkable how much error the narrator has packed into a single sentence; yet his information is so plausible, his tone so self-assured, that it seems almost rude to check on the data.

Another error in astronomy is introduced when the narrator explains why Murphy can see no stars from the window of his garret:

When it was not too cold to open the skylight in the garret, the stars seemed always veiled by cloud or fog or mist. The sad truth was that the skylight commanded only that most dismal patch of night sky, the galactic coal-sack, which would naturally look like a dirty night to any observer in Murphy’s condition, cold, tired, angry, impatient and out of conceit with a system that seemed the superfluous cartoon of his own. (Pp. 188-89)

But if Murphy had wanted to see more than the coal-sack, he only needed to wait a bit and the area framed by the skylight would have changed: this is one of the many salutory effects of the earth’s diurnal motion. Moreover, if the coal-sack seems dark in contrast to nearby regions of the Milky Way, it can hardly be called dismal; and it does contain visible stars. A more likely explanation for Murphy’s inability to see the stars is given at the end of the quoted passage: he is “out of conceit” with the celestial system.

According to the narrator, Murphy starts out believing in two systems: that of the heavenly bodies (astrology) and that of his own mental processes (pp. 22-23, 75-76). But the narrator notes “a certain disharmony between the only two canons in which Murphy can feel the least confidence.” Murphy begins to think of his own system as the superior one: “The more his own system closed round him, the less he could tolerate its being
subordinated to any other” (pp. 182-83). He becomes more and more convinced that his mind is “a closed system, subject to no principle of change but its own . . .” (p. 109). The stars he had believed in as an influence on his life become the “stars he commanded” and “his stars”; finally Murphy thinks of astrology as “a system that seemed the superfluous cartoon of his own.”

Ironically, Murphy’s repudiation of astrology is predicted in the epigraph of his horoscope, which is a passage taken from Shakespeare’s Romeo and Juliet: “Then I defy you, Stars.” Murphy, like Romeo, can defy the stars; but neither hero can escape his destiny, which is to die a short time afterward. There is another quotation from Romeo and Juliet—again about stars—in Murphy: “Take him and cut him out in little stars” (p. 86). This passage is from a speech of Juliet’s in which the imminent death of Romeo is foreshadowed:

Come, gentle night, come, loving, black-brow’d night,
Give me my Romeo; and, when he shall die,
Take him and cut him out in little stars,
And he will make the face of heaven so fine
That all the world will be in love with night. . .

The remains of Romeo will be transformed into stars: this idea nicely offsets Murphy’s notion that the astral system can be subsumed into his own.

Murphy’s separation from the outside world is symbolized by his diminishing ability to see the stars. A related theme occurs in two works that were important influences on Murphy: The Divine Comedy and The World as Will and Idea. In The Divine Comedy, Dante loses sight of the stars when he descends into the underworld. Only when he emerges does he see them again; this is described in the last verse of the Inferno. There is also a reference to the stars in the last sentence of The World as Will and Idea. Describing the insubstantiality of the physical world, Schopenhauer says, “To those in whom the will has turned and has denied itself, this our world, which is so real, with all its suns and milky ways—is nothing.” The universe that we believe exists outside ourselves is actually projected
from within. In *Proust* Beckett refers to this idea: he says that the outer world is "a projection of the individual's consciousness (an objectivation of the individual's will, Schopenhauer would say)...."25 A similar concept is introduced when Murphy decides that his own system has taken precedence over the celestial system:

They were *his* stars, he was the prior system. He had been projected, larval and dark, on the sky of that regrettable hour as on a screen, magnified and clarified into his own meaning. But it was *his* meaning.26

The struggle for priority between the two systems leads to a new way of understanding the errors and inconsistencies in the novel. If Murphy's is the prior system, there is no need for the narrator's descriptions of celestial phenomena to be in accord with those of the almanac. Indeed, strict conformity to astronomical data would suggest that the system of the novel is subordinate to the system of the outer world. The narrator, however, indicates that the world of the novel is a closed system, and one with priority over other systems.

A related idea emerges in still another passage about the moon. According to the almanac, the moon was visible before dawn on 21 October 1935; and it set long after sunrise.27 But the narrator, using a balanced sentence, disagrees: "An hour previously the moon had been obliged to set, and the sun could not rise for an hour to come" (pp. 250–51). Symmetry is the controlling factor here, and not the almanac. Once Murphy has repudiated the other system, the narrator no longer feels compelled to follow it. He himself is perhaps the one who "obliged" the moon to set. Soon after this passage he describes the "starless" and "abandoned" sky; presumably it is starless because Murphy has abandoned it.

Other events in the novel do conform to the laws of the external world, but this is part of the narrator's strategy for credible mendacity. Most of the time, fallacious material is introduced sparingly, and is surrounded by easily verified facts. To gain the reader's confidence, the narrator even calls attention to possible errors: "The next day," he says at one point,
"was Saturday (if our reckoning is correct) . . . " (p. 149). As might be expected, in this instance the date has been calculated accurately.

When Ticklepenny claims that he once saw Murphy drunk, the narrator finds it necessary to set the record straight: "Now the sad truth was that Murphy never touched it" (p. 86). This, so far as one can tell, is in fact "the sad truth." But this phrase later resurfaces in a less reliable context: "The sad truth was that the skylight commanded only that most dismal patch of night sky, the galactic coal-sack . . . " (p. 188).

One factor that makes the errors hard to discover is that many of them are based on obscure facts. Not too many readers will know that Hippasos was drowned at sea and not (as Neary claims) in a puddle. Another subtle error is introduced in a passage about "Barbara, Baccardi . . . Baroko . . . Bramantip" (p. 16). These are medieval mnemonic terms that represent different types of syllogisms—all of them, that is, except for Baccardi, which has been substituted for a legitimate term, Bocardo. The device resembles an intelligence-test problem where one must discover the item that does not belong in a series. Baccardi also appears in the French version of Murphy. Beckett wittily uses the spurious term to allude to a beverage that might provide some respite from the rigors of medieval logic.

A similar sense of playfulness emerges in other unreliable passages where author and reader are involved in a battle of wits. The chess game hints at this idea: Murphy, naturally enough, takes it for granted that the game will be played in the conventional way; but Mr. Endon has introduced new rules. Beckett's readers will probably also begin by assuming that Beckett is following the conventional rules of novel-writing. Discovering that the rules have changed is part of the challenge; but it would be unsporting to introduce the new rules without any warning. Hence Beckett includes errors that are relatively easy to detect, like the faulty enumeration of scarves; these make it easier for readers to discover other unreliable passages.

Many of the recurring passages are similarly used to hint at the pattern of unreliability. The narrator reveals that he has
been taking liberties with the dialogue by saying three times that a character's remarks have been "expurgated, accelerated, improved and reduced" (pp. 12, 48, 119). Cleverly, Beckett reveals that the dialogue has not been transcribed verbatim by repeating the disclosure verbatim.

Repetition is often used to underscore ironical passages. Neary's letters to Wylie and Miss Counihan both begin with the same sentence: "I can never forget your loyalty" (p. 199). Neary means, of course, that he will long remember their treachery. The narrator refers four times in as many pages to Murphy's success in achieving rapport with the mental patients (pp. 180–83). This ironically foreshadows Murphy's failure with the only patient he really cares for, Mr. Endon.

Utilizing a technique he introduced in More Pricks Than Kicks, Beckett calls attention to unreliable statements by repeating them. The following are among the misleading ideas that are reiterated:

- that Murphy is a strict nonreader (pp. 162, 234);
- that silence is one of Murphy's highest attributes (pp. 32, 39, 164);
- that Murphy possesses great magical ability of the eye (pp. 32, 39, 157, 183);
- that it is a striking coincidence for the moon to be full and at perigee (pp. 26, 121).

Beckett's method involves using a formal device, repetition, to counter the errors in the subject matter. In this way, even when the content flirts with the truth, the style remains faithful to it.

Sometimes—the episode about Ticklepenny's wages is an example—the unreliable narrative contributes to the characterization: one discovers that Bim, in addition to his many other defects as a human being, is miserly and incapable of affection. Other unreliable passages, like those about astronomy and astrology, suggest that it is pointless to argue about which type of knowledge is superior to any other. Every system that attempts to give a faithful and comprehensive view of the outer world will eventually collapse under a weight of enigma or error. The various unreliable passages in the novel all hint at an
underlying theme: that the world is not what it seems to be, that it can never be what it seems to be. The unreliable narrative in *Murphy* is in an ultimate sense not at all unreliable; for it depicts, in a truthful way, the illusions and deceptions of the outer world.


2. On page 1 the narrator says of the chair, "it never left him"; on page 189 he refers to the chair as "that aid to life in his mind from which [Murphy] had never before been parted." Even so, the original statement is misleading.

3. A. Alvarez calls the passage about the scarves one of the two places he knows of in Beckett's works "where his arithmetic lets him down" (*Samuel Beckett* [New York: Viking Press, 1973], p. 9).

4. John Mood, "'The Personal System'—Samuel Beckett's *Watt*," *PMLA* 86 (March 1971): 255-65. Mood writes, "The mistakes were certainly planned. If there had been one or two, we could write it off as someone's error. Twenty-eight mistakes clearly indicate a deliberate strategy at work, particularly when linked to the many other mistakes pointed out by the text itself" (p. 263).

5. Ticklepenny says he was promised five pounds a month on page 89; he is offered one-six-eight on page 157. The irony in the phrase "a fancy not far short of love" emerges when it is repeated (pp. 156, 157). In the French version of *Murphy*, references to currency are usually converted from sterling to francs (e.g., Murphy's fourpenny lunch); here however, the currency remains unchanged, and the passage is translated with the same figure as in the English version. Beckett preserved the miscalculation, and wanted it to remain subtle: the difficulty of computing in the old British system is what makes Bim's maneuver hard to detect. See *Murphy* (Paris: Les Edition de Minuit, 1965), pp. 69 ("cinq livres par mois"), and 116 ("une livre six shillings et huit pence").

6. Page 92. A phrase related to Murphy's prediction, "Murphy was inclined to think" is repeated on page 92; this calls attention to the passage about the head male nurse.

7. Mr. Endon, who never whinges, may not be a puppet; but on p. 241 he is called a "figurine."
8. The predictions about fits and quadrupeds are on p. 32; Murphy’s fit of laughter, “more like one of epilepsy,” is described on pp. 139-40; the warning about quadrupeds is justified when the dog Nellie eats Murphy’s biscuits, p. 100.

9. According to the statement in the horoscope, the moon’s position at the time of Murphy’s birth “promotes great Magical Ability of the Eye, to which the lunatic would easy succumb” (p. 32). The reference to the moon may indicate “the lunatic” is really Murphy. Murphy stares into Mr. Endon’s eyes on pp. 248-49; and he concedes defeat on p. 250.

10. Celia says, “Avoid exhaustion by speech” on p. 37, repeating a line from the horoscope. Later Celia, “in weary ellipsis of Suk,” practices what she preaches and says only, “Avoid exhaustion” when she urges Murphy to remain silent (p. 138).

11. Page 32. Suk is giving the position, in degrees, of the constellation that was rising when Murphy was born (the constellation is “THE GOAT,” or Capricorn). Unless Suk invented the figures in the horoscope, he would have needed to know the time of Murphy’s birth to within a few minutes: it takes about four minutes for a degree of longitude on the celestial sphere to traverse the horizon.

12. Murphy is twice called a “young man” and twice a “young aspirant” (p. 53). On page 75 the narrator indicates that in a year it will be 1936; and the dates given by the narrator (e.g., he refers to Thursday, 12 September, and to Friday, 11 October, on p. 114) occur in 1935.

13. According to Suk, Neptune is in “the Bull” (Taurus), and “Herschel” (Uranus) is in Aquarius (p. 33). Herschel is an old name for Uranus; and later the two planets are mentioned again (p. 230). The repetition serves as a clue to the unreliability in the horoscope passage.

14. The sidereal period of Neptune is 163.9 years. If Neptune is in Taurus between 1874 and 1889, it would not return to that constellation in the twentieth century; and it would not have been there more than once in the nineteenth century. Information on the zodiacal positions of the planets is taken from Grant Lewi, Astrology for the Millions, 4th ed. (New York: Bantam Books, 1978), pp. 268, 259.

15. On page 114 the narrator says that Celia’s triumph over Murphy “was gained about the middle of September, Thursday the 12th to be pedantic. . . .” The triumph (which is described on p. 41) comes “in the morning” (p. 29); the narrator says that the moon was full and at perigee on the night before (p. 26). This would be 11 September 1935.

16. The moon was at perigee at about 6 P.M. on 12 September 1935. This and other data about the moon’s position are from editions of Joseph Whitaker’s Almanack (London) for the years 1931-35. According to the astronomer Fred L. Whipple, the moon is full and at perigee about once a year; see Earth, Moon, and Planets (Philadelphia: Blakiston Co., 1946), p. 106.

17. The moon’s average perigee distance is 225,757 miles, and the smallest perigee distance is 221,463 miles. The maximum variation in perigee distances would be about twice the difference between these figures, or about 8,500
miles. It should be pointed out that such a figure represents an extreme: monthly variations in perigee distance are far smaller than this. Information about lunar distances is taken from Charles M. Huffer, et al., An Introduction to Astronomy (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1967), pp. 145-46.

18. Coal-sacks, also known as dark nebulae, are clouds of dust that obscure the stars beyond them; but some stars, closer to earth than the clouds, still are visible in front of them. The most prominent coal-sack in the northern hemisphere is in the constellation Lynx. For an observer in London (the M.M.M. is near London), only an object at the celestial north pole would seem to remain fixed in the sky. But there is no dark nebula in the immediate vicinity of the celestial pole; and a fairly bright star, Polaris, is located about a degree from the pole.

19. There are other passages that suggest that the diminishing importance of the stars is a sign that Murphy is withdrawing into himself. The second time the narrator says that Murphy has confidence in only two systems (p. 76), he adds: "So much the worse for him, no doubt." The narrator's attitude is like Suk's: both are skeptical about Murphy's theories. Suk advises Murphy to "resort to Harmony" (p. 32); this comment runs parallel to the narrator's observation about the "disharmony" in Murphy's two systems (p. 76).

20. The "stars he commanded," p. 175; "his stars," pp. 76, 85, 93, 183; "superfluous cartoon," p. 189. Murphy's comments about "his stars" can be compared to one about "his own dark" (p. 91). This last phrase suggests that Murphy cannot see the stars from his garret because they are obscured by his own dark.

21. The epigraph (p. 32) is from Romeo and Juliet, 5.1.24; the italics are Beckett's.

22. Romeo and Juliet, 3.2.21.

23. See Dante, Inferno, 3. 23; 16. 83; 34. 139.

24. Arthur Schopenhauer, The World as Will and Idea, trans. R. Haldane and J. Kemp (1883; rpt. London: Routlege and Kegan Paul, 1957), 1:532. (The subsequent volumes of this work contain supplements to the first; hence the end of the first volume can be considered the conclusion.) In German, the end of the passage quoted in the text reads, "diese unsere so sehr reale Welt mit allen ihren Sonnen und Milchstrassen—Nichts."


26. Page 183. The italics are Beckett's.

27. The date can be established as follows: on page 235 the narrator says that it is the afternoon of 20 October; the comment about the moon having set refers to the next dawn. Information about sunrise and moonset is taken from Whitaker's Almanack (London, 1935), pp. 110, 114. It is possible to detect this inconsistency even without an almanac. The moon in its third quarter rises in the middle of the night and sets in the middle of the day (see Stanley Wyatt, Principles of Astronomy [Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 1974], p. 133). The narrator says that there was a full moon on 11 October; hence, eleven days later, on the
night of the 20–21, the moon is just past its third quarter and sets well after sunrise. This corresponds to the information in Whitaker's *Almanack* for 21 October 1935: moonrise, 2:10 A.M.; moonset, 2:36 P.M.; sunrise, 6:34 A.M.


29. The distortion is greater than it seems to be because the change of vowels in the Baccardi-Bocardo substitution completely alters the significance of the term. The terms Beckett refers to are the first four in a series of nineteen; each one represents a different type of syllogism. A description of the system can be found in *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (New York: Macmillan and the Free Press, 1967), 5:69.