

## “HE TOLLE'D AND LEGGE'D”: SAMUEL BECKETT AND ST. AUGUSTINE

### Habit and Identity in *Dream of Fair to Middling Women* and *Murphy*

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**Abstract** – Samuel Beckett's interest in St. Augustine is manifest throughout his oeuvre, both in terms of content and style, and can be traced from his very first works, such as *Whoroscope*, to his last plays and short stories. Although this interplay has been touched upon in the critical discourse on Beckett, a systematic analysis is still to be done. This paper represents a preliminary investigation into the Augustinian influence in the early Beckett, in particular *Dream of Fair to Middling Women* and *Murphy*. By considering the presence of the *Confessions* in these two novels I intend to show how St. Augustine's work played a significant role in the development of the young author, offering him the occasion to overcome his theory of habit as outlined in his early essay, *Proust*. In this text, Beckett posits habit as merely “the generic name for the countless treaties concluded between the countless subjects that constitute the individual and their countless correlative objects”. *Dream* still endorses this perspective, but already suggests a different dialectic of memory, will, and habit. This shift, I argue, can be connected to Beckett's reading of Augustine's meditations, in book VIII of the *Confessions*, on the cleavage between the spirit and the flesh. In *Murphy*, we see Beckett's 'Augustinian dialectic' fully formed: habit is no longer a veil of Maya that hides the real essence of the individual, but the condition of possibility for the subject's flight from the big world towards the truth of the inner self.

**Keywords:** Samuel Beckett; St. Augustine; Habit; Identity; *Murphy*.

From overt citations and imitations in style to the most cryptic of intertextual references, Samuel Beckett's oeuvre is riddled with references to St. Augustine, and the two authors seem to share more than a few shallow affinities. Indeed, as Mary Bryden claims, “if the young Augustine and the young Sam had been contemporaries, they might have got on very well (with Augustine probably being the more ferociously energetic and pro-active of the two)” (Bryden 1998, p. 88). However, although this interplay has been touched upon in the critical discourse on Beckett, a systematic analysis is still to be done.<sup>1</sup> This paper is a preliminary investigation into the Augustinian influence in the early Beckett: by addressing this aspect of the writer's work I intend to provide a fresh analysis of the texts and open up potential areas for future inquiry. Of course, my aim is not to reduce Beckett's works to the Augustinian influence in his texts, but to explore Augustine's role in the context of the broader creative process of the author. In doing this, it will be important to take into due account how literary texts, and those by Beckett in particular, “invent their own precursors” (Caselli 2005, p. 4), that is to say they do not simply absorb the contents and form of the source text, but they establish a dialogue with it. Just like in the case of Dante, analysed by Caselli, Augustine cannot be reduced to a mere formula that always

<sup>1</sup> See Houston 2002, Green 1994, and Barry 2009.

plays the same role in different episodes of Beckett's oeuvre; it rather represents a multifaceted conceptual tool that works in different ways within different contexts.

The first reference to Augustine in Beckett's oeuvre appears in his earliest published work, *Whoroscope*. Towards the end of the poem, in which Beckett depicts a hot-blooded Descartes' recollections, Augustine is stigmatised as a “coy old froleur”.

Fallor, ergo sum!  
 The coy old froleur!  
 He tolle'd and legge'd  
 and he buttoned on his redemptorist waistcoat.  
 No matter, let it pass.  
 I'm a bold boy I know  
 so I'm not my son  
 (even if I were a concierge)  
 nor Joachim my father's  
 but the chip of a perfect block that's neither old nor new,  
 the lonely petal of a great high bright rose. (Beckett 2002, p. 7)

At this point of his career, Beckett's direct knowledge of St. Augustine's works was probably quite superficial, but the passage demonstrates how the author was already familiar, perhaps not directly, with a crucial section from the *Confessions*. It is the episode of the *Tolle, lege* (here becoming ironically “tolle'd and legge'd”) and the transformation Augustine undergoes from a life of debauchery to a state of repentance and a conversion to a life of prayer.

Beckett attributes anger and frustration to the French philosopher, who blames Augustine's conversion of being too readily attained. He plays on Augustine's quote *Si fallor, sum* (if I am mistaken, I am)<sup>2</sup> blending it with Descartes' *Cogito, ergo sum* (I think, therefore I am). This word play is probably a reference to a section in Descartes' own responses to the objections to his *Meditations*, and in particular to those of Antoine Arnauld, who had identified affinities between the philosopher and St. Augustine. Descartes' views on this point are duly reported in Baillet's biography, which, as scholars have noted, was Beckett's primary source of information on Descartes.<sup>3</sup>

Vous m'avez obligé, dit-il, de m'avertir du passage de Saint Augustin, auquel mon *je pense donc je suis* a quelque rapport. Je trouve véritablement qu'il sen sert pour prouver la certitude de notre être, et ensuite pour faire voir qu'il y a en nous quelque image de la Trinité, en ce que: 1. nous sommes; 2. nous savons que nous sommes; 3. nous aimons cet être et ce savoir, qui est en nous. Au lieu que je m'en sers pour faire connaître que ce *moi* qui pense est une *substance immatérielle*, et qui n'a rien de corporel; qui sont deux choses fort différentes. (Baillet 2012, p. 973)

Beckett amplifies the opposition between the two philosophers in order to intensify his own poetic discourse. Beckett's Descartes superimposes Augustine's biography to his philosophy; as such, *Si fallor, sum*, becomes a justification for an easy repentance, as if his previous failings were the catalysts of his conversion. Within the context of the poem, then, Augustine's “motto” stands for a more anthropological notion of the limits of

<sup>2</sup> See *City of God*, XI, 26, where it serves as a counter-argument against the skepticism of “the Academics”. The argument is summed up in Baillet as follows: “le pire qu'il nous peut arriver dans ce que nous pensons est d'être trompés; mais que nous ne pouvons être trompés sans être effectivement” (Baillet 2012, pp. 973-4).

<sup>3</sup> Most likely, as already noted in Doherty 1992, mediated by J. P. Mahaffy's 1880 *Descartes*. See also Barry 2009, p. 73.

mankind, in a way reminiscent of Beckett's own future aesthetics of failure. It is limitation that defines the self and the human: it is through the mistakes we make that we obtain confirmation of our own existence. By contrast, Beckett's Descartes does not identify the essence of mankind with its capacity to err but, rather, with its participating to the *substance immatérielle*, the *res cogitans*, in which everything holds together, and which does not allow for mistakes or limits.<sup>4</sup> We see evidence of this suggestion in the stanza's final section, where Beckett recalls Descartes' proof of God's existence, and especially in the quasi-mystical concluding lines, in which Descartes terms himself a “chip of a perfect block that's neither old nor new,/ the lonely petal of a great high bright rose” (Beckett 2002, p. 8).

Even the minor allusion to Augustine in this early poem proves to be part of a complex intertextual strategy. In this work, Augustine is primarily considered – independently of his real views – in opposition to the vision of the universe as a 'perfect block', and as the proponent of a theory that defines error and imperfection as inherent to life. Accordingly, while it is questionable how much Beckett actually knew about Augustine while he was writing *Whoroscope*, and despite the fact that Augustine appears here only as a contrast to the protagonist Descartes, this fragment does enable us to gauge a more general understanding of his views, which constituted the starting point of a long - term, and deeper, dialogue with the author of the *Confessions*. Beckett seems to make the fictional Augustine stand for the idea of an inevitable link between being, imperfection, and guilt. This themes will strongly re-emerge in the *Trilogy*, Beckett's work that bears perhaps the most interesting Augustinian references both thematically (the problematisation of identity in memory; narration as a pledge towards some Other; guilt and loss as humankind's original states), and stylistically (in the use of the confessional mode in passages such as the following: “For I no longer know what I am doing, those are things I understand less and less, I don't deny it, for why deny it, and to whom, to you, to whom nothing is denied?” (1994, p. 46)).<sup>5</sup> By the time Beckett wrote the *Trilogy*, the lesson he had learned from the *Confessions* had become a carefully integrated aspect of his aesthetic project, and a rich and defining feature of his work. Reading Beckett's early works in this light, then, we can trace the evolving connection to Augustine and use it to study the evolution of his thought and poetics.

It was some time after the *Whoroscope* poem that Beckett began to be seriously interested in St. Augustine, and in particular after the publication of his essay on Proust. Evidence in the *Dream Notebook*, written in 1931-32, suggests that Beckett read the *Confessions* right after finishing his essay on the *Recherche*.<sup>6</sup> It would probably not be too far-fetched to consider Beckett's study of the *Confessions* as a direct response to Proust, his imagination enlivened to the themes of time, memory, and the aesthetic possibilities inherent in the autobiographical and confessional genres.

The numerous entries taken from or inspired by the *Confessions* in the *Dream Notebook*<sup>7</sup> demonstrate the attentiveness of Beckett's reading of Augustine's work.

<sup>4</sup> In this sense the expression 'no matter' of the line “No matter, let it pass” can be seen as referring to the distinction of the two substances made by the French philosopher.

<sup>5</sup> See also Olney 1993.

<sup>6</sup> Some notes on Augustine are also present in the manuscript MS10968, Trinity College Dublin. A more comprehensive analysis should not neglect the numerous quotations from Joseph McCabe's *St. Augustine and his Age* which demonstrate Beckett's earnest interest in the author. See Engelberts 2006.

<sup>7</sup> This does not imply reducing the relation between the published and the unpublished material to that of “source *versus* text” (Caselli 2005, p. 84) but, while keeping the difference between the two, trying to

Scholars have linked the quotes to E. B. Pusey's translation of Augustine, that Beckett read in a 1907 edition (Bryden 1998, p. 88), but the young writer also engaged with the original Latin, as attested by certain copied fragments present in the notebook (Pilling 1999, p. 11). These annotations are not only evidence of the intensity and depth of Beckett's auto-didacticism, as he sought to amplify his already extensive literary knowledge; they also reflect a writing technique he had learned from his friend and mentor James Joyce, and that he was emulating. These same notes surface in *Dream of Fair to Middling Women*, his first novel, where they mostly appear as intertextual references, easily detectable in the fabric of the novel. However, as already noted, Beckett's use of intertextuality is part of a complex strategy that is not always easy to penetrate. Moreover, the author often appears more concerned with the pure conceptual or verbal form of the passages he recycles rather than with their original context and meaning. This is what Beckett himself seems to claim when explaining in a famous interview to Harold Hobson his fascination for another Augustinian passage (possibly from Epistle XLVIII).<sup>8</sup>

I am interested in the shape of ideas even if I do not believe in them. There is a wonderful sentence in Augustine. I wish I could remember the Latin. It is even finer in Latin than in English. 'Do not despair; one of the thieves was saved. Do not presume; one of the thieves was damned'. That sentence has a wonderful shape. It is the shape that matter. (Hobson 1956, p. 153)

This is what mostly happens in *Dream*, in which the passages taken from the *Confessions* often seem to be quasi-virtuoso asides woven into the text for the pleasure of the author and the well-read reader. Here, the *Confessions* seem to be, as Beckett wrote in a letter to McGreevy, nothing more than a field for “phrase hunting” (Beckett 2009, p. 62).<sup>9</sup> For example at one point Belacqua describes the Smeraldina-Rima, his beloved, with words coming straight from a discourse on God in the *Confessions* (Knowlson 1996, p. 109). “She is, she exists in one and the same way, she is every way like her herself, in no way can she be injured or changed, she is not subject to time, she cannot at one time be other than at another” (Beckett 1993, p. 41). In another passage, in which Belacqua states his “absurd dilemma” regarding his conflictual feelings, another such quote from the *Confessions* appears: “when with indifference I remember my past sorrow, my mind has indifference, my memory has sorrow. The mind, upon the indifference which is in it, is indifferent; yet the memory, upon the sadness which is in it, is not sad” (Beckett 1993, p. 236. The original passage from Augustine significantly had “joy” for “indifference”).<sup>10</sup> This is the kind of “verbal booty” (Pilling 1999, p. xix) derived from Beckett's readings with which he peppers his writing.

However, Augustine's influence on Beckett does not regard only the form of the text and the use of fragments from the *Confessions* as building material for his novel, but also plays an important role from a thematic point of view. In particular, it seems to me that the *Confessions* offered Beckett a series of conceptual and aesthetic tools that enabled him to overcome his understanding of the interplay between will, identity, and habit as outlined in his early essay *Proust*. This, as already said, he had just finished writing at the time he

locate them in the same ideal space, a space that is traversed by the history, which might not strictly be teleological but that still has to be oriented, of Beckett's creativity.

<sup>8</sup> See Green 1994.

<sup>9</sup> For a detailed account of the results of such “phrase hunting” in *More Pricks than Kicks* see Pilling 2011.

<sup>10</sup> See also Pilling 1999, pp. 25-26.

undertook the reading of Augustine; indeed, it was probably in search of a new perspective on these themes that Beckett did it in the first place.

As Mary Bryden notes, Beckett focussed his attention mostly on Book VIII, the section of the *Confessions* that most overtly addresses these themes. (Bryden 1998, p. 92) It is the book which narrates Augustine's conversion, and that features the 'tolle, lege' scene addressed earlier in *Whoroscope*. By the end of the seventh book, Augustine has already decided to depart from his heretic ways, but he cannot find the moral strength to abandon his former lascivious life for good. As such, he delays the decision: “Give me chastity and continence, only not yet” he writes, one of the sentences with a “wonderful shape” that Beckett copied in *Dream* (Beckett 1993, p. 186). Augustine is torn between the divine and the earthly world, and interprets the tension as a conflict between two clearly defined wills within his soul.

Thus, I understood, by my own experience, what I had read, how the flesh lusteth against the spirit and the spirit against the flesh. Myself verily either way; yet more myself, in that which I approved in myself, than in that which in myself I disapproved. For in this last, it was now for the more part not myself, because in much I rather endured against my will, than acted willingly. And yet it was through me that custom had obtained this power of warring against me, because I had come willingly, whither I willed or not. (*Conf VIII, 11*)<sup>11</sup>

Augustine is split into two distinct wills, the will of the spirit and the will of the flesh. While the former is ready for conversion, the latter thwarts it with its inertial force, a heaviness that obstructs the rising of the spirit and that eventually brings the author to the brink of hysteria.

Lastly, in the very fever of my irresoluteness, I made with my body many such motions as men sometimes would, but cannot, if either they have not the limbs, or these be bound with bands, weakened with infirmity, or any other way hindered. Thus, if I tore my hair, beat my forehead, if locking my fingers I clasped my knee; I willed, I did it. But I might have willed, and not done it; if the power of motion in my limbs had not obeyed. So many things then I did, when "to will" was not in itself "to be able"; and I did not what both I longed incomparably more to do, and which soon after, when I should will, I should be able to do; because soon after, when I should will, I should will thoroughly. For in these things the ability was one with the will, and to will was to do; and yet was it not done: and more easily did my body obey the weakest willing of my soul, in moving its limbs at its nod, than the soul obeyed itself to accomplish in the will alone this its momentous will. (*Conf. VIII, 20*)

Augustine expresses his despair with typical bodily gestures – among which also appears a classic posture *à la* Belacqua: “locking my fingers I clasped my knee”. According to Augustine, the impotent will expressed by these gestures is the will of the flesh, for which willing does not coincide with being, since between this and that there is the diaphragm of the actively doing, the resistance of the physical world. This type of will has to submit itself to a compromise with the real, so that if the body, being somehow hampered, cannot obey, it eventually has to be frustrated. The hetero-directed intentionality of this faculty implies its impossibility to be the direct causation of itself, and is destined to be aborted. From this, Augustine deduces the body's ontological inferiority to the will of the spirit, that only owes to itself its effectiveness.

But if the will of the flesh is inferior to the will of the spirit, how is it easier to enact the former than the latter? How can the superior succumb to the inferior? Augustine

<sup>11</sup> All the quotes from Augustine are taken from E. B. Pusey's translation, the same used by the author.

develops this apparent paradox in the following paragraph, that will have a strong resonance in Beckett.

The mind commands the body, and it obeys instantly; the mind commands itself, and is resisted. The mind commands the hand to be moved; and such readiness is there, that command is scarce distinct from obedience. Yet the mind is mind, the hand is body. The mind commands the mind, its own self, to will, and yet it doth not. Whence this monstrousness? and to what end? It commands itself, I say, to will, and would not command, unless it willed, and what it commands is not done. But it willeth not entirely: therefore doth it not command entirely. For so far forth it commandeth, as it willeth: and, so far forth is the thing commanded, not done, as it willeth not. For the will commandeth that there be a will; not another, but itself. But it doth not command entirely, therefore what it commandeth, is not. For were the will entire, it would not even command it to be, because it would already be. It is therefore no monstrousness partly to will, partly to nill, but a disease of the mind, that it doth not wholly rise, by truth upborne, borne down by custom. And therefore are there two wills, for that one of them is not entire: and what the one lacketh, the other hath. (*Conf.* VIII 21)

Descartes and Geulincx<sup>12</sup> are often cited in scholarly elucidations of Beckett's quasi-obsessive interest in the dialectics of body and soul, interiority and exteriority, but passages like these might also prove useful in elucidating the author's ideas. In particular, these pages feature an element crucial to Beckett, and mostly important in the early phase of his career: the fundamental concept of habit, that Augustine introduces in explaining the paradox describing the split consciousness as “by truth upborne, borne down by custom”.

For Augustine the main point is that since there can be more than one will, the will cannot work as a principle of individuation. The will is not co-extended with the soul, but can be split into different fragments, which are equally parts of the I, but which clash one against the other. “It is therefore no monstrousness partly to will, partly to nill”, he says, and the splitting of the identity is nothing but a real “disease of the mind” (*aegritudo animi*), and is in itself part of the natural world order. The cause of this disease, for which the soul does not manage to ascend in its entirety to truth is precisely *consuetudo*, Habit. This concept overlaps the will of the flesh, that restrains the soul from conversion, binding it to materiality and to the lowest passions, tearing it asunder in the tension thus created.

There are many aspects in this idea that are not dissimilar from the theory expressed by Beckett in *Proust*. In this essay Beckett used a Schopenhauerian approach to interpret the *Recherche*; the two poles of want and boredom that, according to the philosopher, represented the two poles between which the human life oscillated, are translated in terms of construction and destruction of habit. Habit is defined as “the generic name for the countless treaties concluded between the countless subjects that constitute the individual and their countless correlative objects” (Beckett 1987, p. 19), that is, as the tendency of any human being to mediate his or her relationship with the world through a series of fixed patterns that make life easier. In this way a “second reality” (Beckett 1987, p. 19) is built, in which the subject can pretend to exist as a fixed being among fixed beings. Habit does not hold forever, though, and the treaty has to be rebuilt whenever this second reality is torn asunder by a change in the life of the subject. If these traumatic moments are the cause of the deepest pain, however, they are at the same time the condition of possibility of that transcendence from the world and time that Proust calls “involuntary memory”.

As in the *Confessions*, then, Habit is represented as the effect of the inertial force of the body and of its friction with reality, and as something that hides the truth (even though, of course, Augustine and Beckett hold two very different ideas of truth). However, what is

<sup>12</sup> See Tucker 2012 and Feldman 2006.

more interesting in this analogy is the fact that in both cases the authors speak of the split I in connection to habit, even though the forms of this splitting are radically different. In *Proust*, the I is split because it actually has no consistency at all, it changes constantly, and habit is the veil of Maya that hides this fact, creating the illusion of identity itself. On the contrary, in Augustine habit is something negative in relation to the process for attaining truth, but it is not in itself a fake, being an actual and active part in the structure of the I. In the first case the splitting is diachronical, being the “I of today other than the I of yesterday” (Beckett 1987, p. 21), and habit something that bridges over these; in the second it is synchronic, and habit is part and cause of the splitting itself.

What Beckett maintains in *Proust*, though, does not seem to be his last word on the subject, and his opinion evolves in his later works. I do not mean to bridle Beckett's *oeuvre* in a teleological perspective that would inevitably destroy the autonomy of each work, but it may be useful to interpret this change in the representation of habit as the dialectical solution of the two positions just presented, a process than can be observed in the transition from *Dream of Fair to Middling Women* to *Murphy*. It is starting from the traces left into his work by these texts and ideas that it will be possible to follow Beckett's trajectory onwards.

In *Dream*, Beckett still appears to endorse the perspective presented in *Proust*, but already suggests a different dialectic of memory, will, and habit. This shift can to a certain degree be directly traced to Beckett's reading of Augustine's meditations on the struggle between the will of the flesh and the will of the spirit. In *Murphy*, habit is no longer a veil of Maya in which the true essence of the individual is concealed, but rather the condition of possibility for the subject's flight from the external world towards the truth of the inner self. An analysis of the parallel scenes at the beginning of the two novels can serve to prove this point. In the first pages of *Dream of Fair to Middling Women*, the protagonist is sitting “on a stanchion at the end of the Carlyle Pier”, thinking about his girlfriend that has just left him to go back to Germany.

So now he sagged on the stanchion in the grateful mizzle after the supreme adieu, his hands in a jelly in his lap, his head drooped over his hands, pumping up his little blirt. He sat working himself up to the little gush of tears that would exonerate him. When he felt them coming he switched off his mind and let them settle. First the cautious syring of her in his mind till it thudded and spun with the thought of her, then not a second too soon the violent voiding and blanking of his mind so that the gush was quelled, it was balked and driven back for a da capo. (Beckett 1993, p. 4)

Belacqua first tries to force himself to cry recalling over again the details of her last goodbye. He manages to “forc[e] and foil the ebullition in this curious way”, but only for a short period since after a while, and against his will, “his mind abode serene and the well of tears dry” (Beckett 1993, pp. 4-5).

No sooner had he admitted to himself that there was nothing to be done, that he had tried himself quite with this chamber-work of sublimation, that he was seized with a pang of the darkest die, and his Smeraldina was swallowed up immediately in the much greater affliction of being a son of Adam and cursed with an insubordinate mind. (Beckett 1993, 5)

The pain for the departure of his beloved is immediately swallowed by the greater pain of discovering that he cannot even suffer for it as he would want to: “for [Belacqua] the Great Dereliction was the silver lining and its impertinent interventions” (Beckett 1993, p. 6). Beckett reproduces in this way, on a minor scale and with an ironic twist, the same process that he had discussed in reference to “the greatest passage that Proust ever wrote – *Les Intermittences du Coeur*” (Beckett 1987, p. 39). In this famous passage the narrator of

the *Recherche* describes how, because of habit, the memory of his dead grandmother fades away despite the will to keep it, so that it is as if she were killed again in the dullness of his feelings.

But already will, the will to live, the will not to suffer, Habit, having recovered from its momentary paralysis, has laid the foundations of its evil and necessary structure, and the vision of his grandmother begins to fade and to lose that miraculous relief and clarity that no effort of deliberate remembrance can impart or restore. (Beckett 1987, p. 43)

This is why, even though Belacqua first forces himself to cry, he only manages to shed tears for a short period. Like Marcel's, Belacqua's mind is represented as subject to the law of habit that sears the wounds independently of the will. At the same time, Beckett departs from the idea of habit expressed in *Proust*, introducing the contrast between will of the body and will of the soul. Belacqua does not simply realize that he cannot stop changing constantly, but also and through it he realizes how his body and his mind are split. This aspect, that was not yet present, or not in these terms, in *Proust*, can be described as the intervention of Augustine's *Confessions* in Beckett's theory of habit. Sure enough, it is with a very clear intertext from Augustine that the theme is introduced.

His mind instructed his hand now to stop being clammy and flabby in his lap and to try a little fit of convulsion, and they obeyed instantly; but when it instructed itself to pump up a few tears in respect of the girl who had left him behind her, then it resisted. (Beckett 1993, p. 5)

In this sense Belacqua's complex identity, his polyphonic being, is different from the fragmented identity that Beckett had explained in *Proust*: Belacqua is not simply different one day from the other, he is made up of the conflict between opposite aspects at any moment. At the same time, Belacqua's fragmentation of identity does not fully coincide with Augustine's, as Beckett adds to the opposition between the will of the flesh and the will of the spirit a new element: the absence of both.

At his simplest he was trine. Just think of that. A trine man! Centripetal, centrifugal and . . . not. Phoebus chasing Daphne, Narcissus flying from Echo and . . . neither. Is that neat or is it not? The chase to Vienna, the flight to Paris, the slouch to Fulda, the relapse into Dublin and . . . immunity like hell from journeys and cities. The hand to Lucien and Liebert and the Syracuse tendered and withdrawn and again tendered and again withdrawn and . . . hands forgotten. (Beckett 1987, p. 107)

Behind this triad lies a binary structure: on one side the realm of desire, in which activity and passivity keep exchanging their role, in which as soon as the object of desire is reached it transforms into something else (Dafne), or in which as soon as the subject is free from being chased melts into itself (Narcissus); on the other, the “neither”, the world beyond desire, in which the mind forgets itself and the external world and reaches its Nirvana. This is Belacqua's “enwombement and entombment”, in which he

lay lapped in a beatitude of indolence that was smoother than oil and softer than a pumpkin, dead to the dark pangs of the sons of Adam, asking nothing of the insubordinate mind. He moved with the shades of the dead and the dead-born and the unborn and the never to be born, in a Limbo purged of desire. (Beckett 1993, p. 44)

In this first novel the possibility of this world beyond becoming and desire is still not fully developed and Beckett, and Belacqua with him, remain stuck in the Purgatory of Time. This is reflected in the fact that Belacqua is not free to go in and out of this world at his will: despite the fact that he tries really hard to access the state of enwombment, he has to rely only on chance.



Convinced like a fool that it must be possible to induce at pleasure a state so desirable and necessary to himself he exhausted his ingenuity experimenting. He left no stone unturned. He trained his little brain to hold its breath, he made covenants of all kinds with his senses, he forced the lids of the little brain down against the flaring bric-à-brac, in every imaginable way he flogged on his coenaesthesia to enwomb him, to exclude the bric-à-brac and expunge the consciousness. [...] It was impossible to switch the inward glare, willfully to suppress the bureaucratic mind. It was stupid to imagine that he could be organized as Limbo and wombtomb, worse than stupid. [...] How could the will be abolished in his own tension? Or the mind appeased in paroxysms of disgust? [...] The will and nill cannot suicide, they are not free to suicide. [...] He remembers the pleasant gracious bountiful tunnel, and cannot get back. Not for the life of him. He keeps chafing and scuffling and fidgeting about, scribbling bad spirals with an awful scowl on the “belle face carrée”, instead of simply waiting until the thing happens. (Beckett 1993, p. 124)

The necessity of relying on chance to 'enwomb' himself is still a residue of the Proustian idea, according to which involuntary memory cannot be actively searched, but have to be allowed to happen, the effort to force it being nothing but an obstacle. While for Augustine the access to transcendence was allowed through an identification of the various conflicting wills within the I with the superior will of God, in *Dream* Beckett holds on the idea expressed in *Proust* according to which these experiences are not compatible to the will, but represent its annihilation. In *Dream* the Schopenhauerian *voluntas* (via Proustian's involuntary memory) is made to react with the Augustinian idea of conflicting wills, but the subsequent reaction is there not yet fully completed.

The dialectical process through which Beckett eventually overcomes the Schopenhauer/Proust/Augustine connection is eventually realised in his next novel, *Murphy*. In the opening scene of the novel, just like in *Dream*, the protagonist is shown in a moment in which the system of his habit has to break: Murphy knows that he will soon have to move from the house where he has been “eating, drinking, sleeping, and putting his clothes on and off” for six months, and that he will have to learn how to do these things in a “quite alien surrounding” (Beckett 1938, p. 1). In this way, Beckett is directly connecting Murphy's situation with the discourse on habit broached in *Proust* and continued in *Dream*, and which resonates with the Augustinian influence.

At the same time, the whole process is turned upside down: while Augustine, Marcel, and Belacqua were all trying to escape the power of habit in order to achieve the aspired change, in *Murphy* the protagonist tries to overcome the crisis and obtain his freedom by siding for habit. Instead of forcing his mind to break off the bounds of habit, Murphy reacts by *reinforcing* it. In binding himself to his rocking chair, he seeks to escape from the world of change and to remain entrenched in the world of absolute passivity. Murphy tries to make his will totally adhere to his habit, with the heaviness of his body: the opposite of Augustine, who was trying as hard as he could to adhere to his soul.

Beckett, then, follows the same trajectory drawn by Augustine, but in the opposite direction: while for Augustine the contradiction is resolved through a liberation of the will of the soul thanks to its identification with the will of God, Beckett's Murphy descends deeper and deeper into the contradiction, making the self increasingly adhere to habit until the body has been entirely reduced to a passive machine. Thus, unlike in *Dream of Fair to Middling Women* or in the essay on Proust, the experience of the enwombement is no longer left to chance, but is accessible at will thanks to the rocking chair, that works as a real machine for transcendence.

In this light, Murphy can, up to a point, be interpreted as an atypical Augustinian figure: like Augustine before the conversion he, too, is torn between the call for change and the resistance and obstructions of the body. Unlike Augustine, though, it is by nailing

down the will of the spirit to the will of the flesh, and not the opposite, that Murphy tries to solve this contradiction. In the sound of the phrase “*Quid pro quo! Quid pro quo!*” (Beckett 1938, p. 1), which expresses the utilitarian principle of the “Mercantile Gehenna”<sup>13</sup> that Murphy is invited to share, one can detect an ironical echo of that famous “*tolle, lege*” that triggered Augustine's conversion. He heard those words in the moment of profound crisis represented in book VIII and they forced him to read a random passage from the Pauline Epistles:

Not in rioting and drunkenness, not in chambering and wantonness, not in strife and envying:  
but put ye on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, in concupiscence.  
(*Rom.* 13, p. 13-14)

In reading this, Augustine forgets the will of the body, overcomes his habit, and “puts on” the Lord Jesus Christ, thus making his will conform to that superior Will. Murphy tries to attain the same results (to free himself of the Mercantile Gehenna and worldly temptations), but by taking the opposite track: rather than “buttoning his redemptorist waistcoat”, as Decartes' Augustine does in *Whoroscope*, he remains naked and forgets his will completely by making it adhere to the self-imposed limitations of his body.

For Murphy as for many of Beckett's characters, however, this attempted escape from the world will result in a failure. In this case, the failure is brought by the intervention of Celia, whose phone call succeeds where the *Quid pro quo* call had not, thus forcing Murphy to get out of his chair and into the mercantile Gehenna. Hence Celia plays in this context the role that in the *Confessions* was of Monica, Augustine's mother, but with a negative connotation. She serves as instigator, attracting Murphy into the outside world, attracting “the part of him that he hated [and that] craved for Celia [while] the part that he loved shrivelled up at the thought of her” (Beckett 1938, p. 8).

Then, when in chapter three Murphy is eventually coaxed by Celia into seeking a job, after having buttoned his (redemptorist?) shirt, we find two major Augustinian intertexts that confirm Augustine's influence and its connection to these themes. Here, Murphy is trying to convince Celia that finding a job would prove fatal for him, and they start quarrelling; Celia, who has just brought Murphy his horoscope (upon his request), is on the cusp of leaving when Murphy surrenders.

He closed his eyes and fell back. It was not his habit to make out cases for himself. An atheist chipping a deity was not more senseless than Murphy defending his course of inaction, as he did not require to be told. He had been carried away by his passion for Celia and by a most curious feeling that he should not collapse without at least the form of a struggle. This grisly relic from the days of nuts, balls, and sparrows astonished himself. To die fighting was the perfect antithesis of his whole practice, faith, and intention. (Beckett 1938, p. 10)

The reference to “the days of nuts, balls, and sparrows” is a quote from *Conf.* I, xviii. Here, in his prayer to God, Augustine recollects his youth as a boisterous child and how while playing with others he preferred “to quarrel rather than to yield”. Like the young Augustine, Murphy does not want to yield, until he realises the paradox inherent in trying to defend a passive stance through active resistance. This realisation catalyses the acceptance of Celia's blackmail, the decision to look for a job, and the breaking of his habit, leading then to his entering into the mercantile Gehenna and accepting the principle of *Quid pro quo*.

<sup>13</sup> The term *Gehenna* itself is probably another of the many loans from Augustine (see Pilling 2004, p. 49, and Ackerley 2004).

This decision will lead first to the confrontation to that much more tragic and disturbing form of passivity represented by Mr Endon and the patients of the Magdalen Mental Mercyseat, and then to the final annihilation of the main character. Murphy's willed reduction of the will to impotence, then, ends in a failure: adding the will not to will to Augustine's conflicting wills does not solve the problem of Beckett's characters, nor the philosophical problem of identity, but opens it up to a fresh perspective. This path will lead to the abandonment of the dream of a self-annihilating will, and the beginning of the investigation of that in-between in which passivity and activity, will and nill, annihilation and creation, coalesce and react.

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