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## Beckett in Bedsitland: *Murphy* and Urban Spatial Justice

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### Abstract

Samuel Beckett's *Murphy* (1938) belongs in the history of London slum and bohemia writing. This article situates it there via a study of the lockable, rented rooms (including bed-sitting rooms or bedsits in converted houses but also rooms in residential institutions) of this, Beckett's debut novel. The reading is informed by the concept of spatial justice, developed in critical urbanism by political economy researchers and human geographers. *Murphy* has been read in the framework of London (im)migrant writing by writers with Irish and Caribbean backgrounds but not so far as the novel inaugurating a tradition identified here as rented room writing. Such a tradition links the 1930s writing of Beckett with the 1950s and 1960s writing of inner London districts then undergoing gentrification. The article's methods include close reading of rooms and the vocabulary surrounding them in *Murphy*, but also the identification of parallels between Beckett's novel and others in the wider London slum and bohemia tradition produced between the 1880s and the 1960s. The shared and mutating features of a *long durée* in literary London call for further investigation including longer-range temporal comparisons contributing to a goal of giving the right to the city back to long-dead urban residents.

**Keywords:** Beckett, Samuel; London; bedsit; housing; literary urban studies

Social space merits more attention in Samuel Beckett studies than it has had so far. Literary sociologies connecting housing and creative writing in twentieth-century settings as a means of understanding the imaginative space of the home, meanwhile, could say more about Beckett. This article fills both of these gaps via a reading of rented rooms in Beckett's first novel, *Murphy* (1938). The reading indicates how literary studies focused on urban materiality, such as that of confined living space, could contribute to discussions of spatial justice and injustice led by researchers in human geography and political economy. More than this, the Beckettian room could disrupt existing perspectives on living conditions in actual twentieth-century societies, for example those of Irish migrants to London in the 1930s.

Variations on the near-empty space appear in multiple Beckett texts. This article explores those found in his 1938 novel *Murphy*, asking how its textual space relates to actual rented rooms. People's access to residential property is an aspect of urban spatial justice in which economics figures alongside perceptions of gender and ethnicity. I propose that a specific mode of housing, life in rented rooms taken for a few weeks or a few months at a time, materially affects literary content. Using a term common in twentieth-century Britain, I call this mode of housing the bedsit life. The article is part of an ongoing broader study of London residential space in literature which works with the pairing of slum and neighbourhood as it operated between the 1820s and the 1970s.<sup>1</sup> These two terms, their usual associations negative and

positive respectively, often apply to the same urban zones. The word *slum* first (in the 1820s) labelled a crowded central London neighbourhood said by writers such as the journalist Pierce Egan to have been packed with Irish immigrants.<sup>2</sup> The bedsitland of *Murphy* partially but not fully overlaps with the idea of the slum. Equally important to the novel is the notion of *bohemia* as a zone where artists and loafers take up both shorter- and longer-term residence. The spatial labels *slum* and *bohemia*, like impromptu formulations from twentieth-century London such as ‘grotland’ give imaginative qualities to zones in the city that are cartographically identifiable.<sup>3</sup>

In relation to the spaces of Beckett's life and works, *Murphy*'s identifiable topographies distinguish it from Beckett's postwar works, although there are connections between the earlier and later phases. The spatial politics of room renting in 1930s London affected both incomers from Ireland and others at the lower end of the market. A growing body of work in literary studies, to which this article adds, investigates how housing conditions were framed in modernist-era British literature.<sup>4</sup> Toponymically rich, *Murphy* depicts both street-level neighbourhoods and neighbour relations inside houses. The former are identifiably those of 1930s London in low-status localities close to industry but also not far from central and wealthy districts. These include the Market Road area of Islington, in North London, and the Lots Road area of Chelsea, South-West London. The novel also has bigger spatial frames; spanning London via the mobile spatial perspective of a bus route crossing London; using London as a link in a chain from Ireland to France.

### **Topographies, Traditions and Spatial Justice**

*Murphy*, then, is a novel that is awash with identifiable place settings, yet in it Beckett repeatedly steps away from the physical world that humans label with toponyms. He does so via encapsulations of isolation and abstraction that are represented intradiegetically, such as the chess board and the padded cell. These seeming nowhere-zones anticipate the spaces of later works by Beckett (for instance *Endgame*). Additionally, *Murphy* invites comparison with the instances of spatial justice and injustice detectable in the history of Irish migration to England.<sup>5</sup> The literary and cultural history of Irish London includes the lexical phenomenon already mentioned in which, during the early nineteenth century, the word *slum* was coined to talk about an area on the north-eastern fringes of Westminster, today in central London. The area was also (on account of its residents' purported Catholicism) sarcastically labelled by Egan ‘the Holy Land’.<sup>6</sup> This was the Church Street Rookery in the parish of St Giles in the Fields.<sup>7</sup>

Readers of *Murphy* have sometimes taken its references to actual place to be ciphers for something else. Beckett scholar C. J. Ackerley, for instance, presents topo-biographical details

as background to *Murphy*. He outlines how Beckett ‘stayed at 4 Ampton St nr Gray’s Inn Rd for six weeks in July-August 1932’, then ‘from Christmas 1933 to late 1935 [...] lived in SW London first at 48 Paulton’s Square then at 34 Gertrude St, where he rented a room with the Frost family for 15 months’.<sup>8</sup> Rather than place contexts such as these, however, for Ackerley it is intellectual contexts that matter in a reading of Beckett: ‘his reading and the close relationship to the European and Classical traditions, literary and philosophical, upon which it draws’.<sup>9</sup> During the 1920s as a student in Paris, Beckett read extensively in the works of René Descartes.<sup>10</sup> Following on from this, Ackerley and S.E. Gontarski argue, ‘the rationalist tradition from Spinoza through Geulincz, Leibniz, and Kant to Schopenhauer became his intellectual milieu’. But even though *Murphy* was written not long after these studies an emphasis on the undoubtedly real rationalist elements of *Murphy*, notably the binary of self and world in which the two are apart, tends to obscure social dimensions of the novel. Cartesian readings of Beckett are themselves a tradition in Beckett scholarship established early on by the influential critic Hugh Kenner and completely rejected by some readers.<sup>11</sup>

My spatial focus is different from those found in earlier treatments of the novel exploring its topographic dimensions, including those of London street and district names. Studies by Ackerley, Jason Finch and Nicolas Tredell concentrate on what we could call the *A-Z* place component of *Murphy*.<sup>12</sup> Tredell, for instance, ends by insisting on *Murphy*’s ‘precisely metropolitan’ quality. Known as the *A-Z* for short, the *Geographer’s A-Z Atlas* was a pocket-sized street atlas which became the bible of newcomers and room-renters in the London in which Beckett himself dwelled in the summer of 1935 and then as a longer-term resident between 1933 and 1935. It first appeared in 1936, in between Beckett’s spell as a London renter and the appearance of *Murphy*. Rather than on the street map, this article’s focus is on the internal space of rented and otherwise temporarily occupied rooms found all through *Murphy*. Relevant to the topic among previous studies is Richard McGuire’s explicitly ‘postcolonial’ comparison between *Murphy* and another novel, Sam Selvon’s 1956 *The Lonely Londoners*.<sup>13</sup> Adapting a well-established reading of *The Lonely Londoners* as a novel concerned with ‘arrival and attempts at settlement’ by Anglophone Caribbean migrants to London in the 1950s, McGuire calls *Murphy* ‘a novel of Irish migratory experience in 1930s London’.<sup>14</sup> His concern is not with a kind of space, like the room as considered here, however, but with a category of person: the drifter.

Pointing towards the need for social readings of *Murphy* to develop, Ackerley insists on the importance it places on ‘the particulars, demented and otherwise, that for Beckett constitute the only possible straws of understanding, philosophical or fictional’.<sup>15</sup> And yet Ackerley’s

assembly of a gazetteer-like guide to the London details of *Murphy* (and the Irish ones), actually takes the novel away from either contextualisation in twentieth-century social specifics or a view of it as framing questions that were at stake in the urban contestations, British, Irish and otherwise, of the 1930s. One route towards such a reading involves exploring categories of dwelling as they are represented in literature. Dwelling places that are judged socially improper or undesirable have featured in recent studies of twentieth-century British literature, for instance that of Emily Cuming.<sup>16</sup>

The new mode of reading needed for *Murphy* engages with political theory and critical geography, and specifically the concept of spatial justice. Housing is political. The rented room dweller is trapped in a space which the market packages and prices. Such a person occupies a city that is anything but held in common. Spatial justice has been debated in urban studies and planning since the 1960s, although not always under this name. The critical geographer David Harvey in his 1973 book *Social Justice and the City*, for instance, calls it ‘territorial justice’.<sup>17</sup> Other researchers developing the idea include Jane Jacobs, Henri Lefebvre, Manuel Castells, Iris Marion Young and Peter Marcuse. Several concise accounts of spatial justice were collected into the 2009 first issue of the journal *Justice spatiale / Spatial Justice*. The period 2008-12 was that of neoliberalism’s great crisis, whereas Beckett and his character Murphy in 1930s London were living through the previous grand crisis of capitalism, the Great Depression. Closely related to this idea of spatial justice, geographical formulations, for instance by Alison Blunt and Robyn Dowling, theorise home as a nexus of contests and experiences.<sup>18</sup> The rented rooms of *Murphy* are examples of homes. Renting by the week and frequently moving, Murphy embodies transience, but every human home is temporary, while some endure until an individual dies.

### **Law, Injustice and the Rented Room**

McGuire’s brief reading of *Murphy* alongside *The Lonely Londoners* emphasizes migration as a spatial context and theme of Beckett’s debut. Rooms, spatial environments on a much smaller scale, McGuire mentions several times but does not thematise. But people exist in rooms. I am typing this in a room, which I prefer to another room nearby because of the way the afternoon sun falls across a table and onto a wall and bookshelf in here.

The bed-sitting room (also bedsitter or bedsit) was a distinctive rental arrangement in Britain between the First World War and the 1980s following 1915 legislation on rent control which drew a distinction between furnished and unfurnished accommodation.<sup>19</sup> The *Oxford English Dictionary* (OED)’s first examples of *bed-sitting room* as a noun describe London in

the 1930s. The term denoted a single-room rental unit in a house with a lock on the door: despite access to shared space in the house such as the hallways and bathroom, this was a private dwelling rather than a portion of someone else's house. This private quality distinguished the bedsit from, say, the boarding house.<sup>20</sup> In the latter, residents including tourists and travelling workers such as actors and salespeople shared spaces such as a living room and a dining room with others, and typically received cooked meals. Chiara Briganti and Kathy Mezei contrast interwar London novels of the bedsit with those of the boarding house, arguing that while the former focus on 'an individual's inner consciousness and his or her struggle with agency', the latter describe 'a community framed by [...] restrictive practices' and the 'social practice and spaces of' a 'communal dwelling'.<sup>21</sup> Cultural studies of the bedsit, including that of Briganti and Mezei, have focused on it as a spatial zone of precarity which was nevertheless culturally productive, for example in providing room for migrants and people with non-traditional sexual identities.<sup>22</sup> The market conditions in which it existed were marked by ambiguity and so was its social identity, however.<sup>23</sup> It was a space which enabled social climbing as well as social decline, forever transient, rather than having the seemingly unambiguous working-class identity of, say, the terraced house in the vicinity of a factory or coal mine.

Varied rented rooms appear in *Murphy*, most of them in London, and they are frequently viewed through the eyes of incomers from Ireland. The London rooms of the novel are in multiple city districts of the city with their varying levels of cost, respectability and status hinted at via precise deployment of toponym. To begin at the beginning, Beckett introduces us to Murphy as he is in a room:

The sun shone, having no alternative, on the nothing new. Murphy sat out of it, as though he were free, in a mew in West Brompton. Here for what might have been six months he had eaten, drunk, slept, and put his clothes on and off, in a medium-sized cage of north-western aspect commanding an unbroken view of medium-sized cages of south-eastern aspect. Soon he would have to make other arrangements, for the mew had been condemned.<sup>24</sup>

A mew is a cage, specifically for hawks, and by extension the building where such birds are housed, with the OED's first example for this sense dating from 1375.<sup>25</sup> We are also invited to think that Murphy lives in a mews house, a house in a backstreet of former stables and servants' quarters, a sort of street that still exists in districts of London like West Brompton that were marketed to the mid-Victorian upper middle classes when built. The word *mews* has a specifically London origin, since the royal 'mew' at Charing Cross later became the royal stable buildings, on the site of today's Trafalgar Square. By the 1630s, as John Donne records (in the

earliest example the OED finds), *mews* was beginning to be used for other such stable blocks built behind the houses of wealthier people. So, like *slum*, *mews* is a word that began in a specific part of central London at a specific time, describing local **materialities**.

**In** the room is light, given by the sun, falling onto surfaces in ways that are determined by aspect (whether north-facing or south-facing, etc.), the progress of day and night, the seasons and also – crucially – the spatial arrangements of urban buildings found in the locality.

Such physical arrangements as Murphy's initial 'unbroken view of medium-sized cages of south-eastern aspect' coexist with the financial and kinetic 'arrangements' that he must imminently make, the building where he lodges being 'condemned'. Such condemnation results from one of the numerous **slum clearance** projects led by municipal government in London following **post-World-War-One** Acts of Parliament aimed at sweeping away some of the city's immense quantity of overcrowded and decayed Victorian housing.<sup>26</sup> Cooper, 'âme damnée and man-of-all-work' to Murphy's sometime Cork-based guru Neary, (34) views the now-demolished 'mew' as 'not only unfit for human habitation but condemned by the central authority'.<sup>27</sup> Murphy, thanks to the demolition, has moved on by the time Cooper arrives.

A specific aspect of spatial (in)justice related to the bed-sitting room is the fact that tenants in bedsits (and other accommodation rented out furnished) were less protected from eviction or rent increases than if they occupied accommodation defined as unfurnished (often called 'a flat'). The UK's 1915 Rent and Mortgage Restriction Act specifically excluded properties containing furniture from its rent control provisions.<sup>28</sup> Peter Marcuse proposes 'two cardinal forms of spatial injustice', and Murphy is the victim of both. They are '[t]he involuntary confinement of any group to a limited space – segregation, ghettoization, what Marcuse calls 'the unfreedom argument', and '[t]he allocation of resources unequally over space', his 'unfair resources argument'.<sup>29</sup> The spatial injustice of the rented room consists, to quote Lisa Brawley's description of neoliberalism, in its 'radical "de-politicization" of structural inequality'.<sup>30</sup>

### ***Murphy* in a Longue Durée of London Slum and Bohemia Writing**

*Murphy*, then, is a text of Irish migration to London that illuminates spatial **(in)justice, housing, and** the specifics of the London housing market, including the shift towards what by the 1960s would be labelled as gentrification.<sup>31</sup> It also belongs to a London-specific body of writing. A long-term tradition of London slum and bohemia writing stretches from the Regency to the 1980s. As well as containing a complex narrative of change when seen diachronically, this tradition throws up certain social roles and types of space again and again. Prejudice against

incomers forced to take the cheapest and often least hygienic lodgings is one of these. In the twentieth century, working-class London-Irish incomers faced racism related to that found in the genesis of the word *slum* (in the supposedly Irish-dominated Church Street Rookery of St Giles). This racism operated most infamously via signs and advertisements announcing that they, together with non-white migrants to the UK, were not welcome in rental accommodation. As McGuire argues, Beckett's character Murphy shares with Selvon's arrivals from the Caribbean a reluctance to work, and the experience of unstable sexual relationships. Ultimately, the 'drifter' characters of both *Murphy* and *The Lonely Londoners* occupy positions 'on the fringes of the society in which they live, in the city'.<sup>32</sup> 'Few migrant characters in either novel stay in one lodging house for long', McGuire remarks.

More, arguably, than Selvon, however, Beckett in *Murphy* aestheticizes London slum space. Murphy's opening perspective in the 'mew' is comparable with what Cuming finds in Kathleen Woodward's 1928 *Jipping Street*, a semi-fictionalized memoir of growing up poor in Bermondsey, straight across the River Thames from London's ancient central zone. On Cuming's reading, Woodward's slum is focalised around the outward view from the rented room, recalling the dichotomy between repressed upper-middle-class life and possibilities beyond proposed two decades earlier by E.M. Forster:<sup>33</sup>

The view from the back window of the canal reveals the weekly ritual of the retrieval of dead bodies which are laid out on the canal banks before being taken away to the mortuary. But it is important to note here that the slum interior, for once, is not simply observed but is a viewpoint – specifically one which renders the surrounding environment through a notably stylised, modernist idiom.<sup>34</sup>

Most of the Bermondsey known in childhood by Woodward's protagonist would disappear in 1930s slum clearance and 1940s bombing, replaced ultimately by estates of postwar public housing. Covering the Fulham-Chelsea borders and an obscure section of northern Islington, before leaving London proper for the hospital, Murphy's rooms are in inner London zones unlike Bermondsey: peripheral to some of those affected early by seriously overheating property prices during the 1950s.<sup>35</sup> In other words, Beckett's aestheticization paves the way for post-1950s gentrification in part through its air of authenticity, which comes across as a refusal to prettify. Murphy himself is a displaced Dubliner in London who is neither a working man nor an intellectual. In the course of the book, he lives at three addresses in the London area, firstly two rented rooms (one the West Brompton mew, the other on Brewery Road in a grimy and recessed section of Islington), and finally in a garret at a mental hospital in the suburbs where he is hired to work as a nurse-orderly.



As discussed in the next section, the lockable rooms of *Murphy* include cells and hotel rooms as well as the rooms in cities where people, it would seem voluntarily, lodge for longer periods and call home. The words *bedsit* and *bed-sitting room* do not appear in the text of *Murphy*, but we hear that one of *Murphy*'s Irish pursuers, Wylie, 'had found a sitting-bedroom' identified as being in 'Earl's Court', at one point. The *bedsit* has aspects that are both social and experientially embodied. *Murphy* and Celia find themselves living in one because of 'the antimonies of unmarried love': you live where you can, as migrants find.<sup>36</sup> Being an unmarried couple with enough money for one room between you puts you in areas of non-respectable lodgings. This means lodging in former single-family houses now let out by proprietors short enough of money not to ask their tenants many questions. The *bedsit* is a bedroom that is also a sitting room, and thus could seem to meet both the night-time and the daytime requirements of a human. With sitting in mind, one character in *Murphy*, the wandering vagabond and detective Cooper, cannot sit for most of the plot, but becomes able to at the very end after *Murphy*'s death.<sup>37</sup> Yet the supposed completeness of this place, the *bedsit* or 'sitting-bedroom', also drives the occupant forth from it, and around the city, since its walls make it resemble a cell, a place of incarceration.

*Murphy* fits into the long-term history of London 'slum' and bohemian fictions across the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. This stretches from the writings of Charles Dickens and W.M. Thackeray in the 1840s through to novelists such as Selvon, Andrew Salkey, Lynne Reid Banks and Alexander Baron representing the multiculturalism of 1950s and 1960s migrant and student London. The later group place characters resembling aspiring writers into areas classed as slums.<sup>38</sup> Within this tradition the central paradox is that while low-life scenes and grimy or decayed buildings are frequently described, the perspective is not a working-class one.<sup>39</sup> Importantly, the room as a space of both limitation and self-preservation also appears between 1900 and 1930 in writing by elite Londoners such as Forster and Virginia Woolf.<sup>40</sup> *Murphy* describes London in an era preceding the one in which the word *gentrification* was coined. During the 1930s, areas like Fulham, West Brompton and Islington seemed decayed, unfashionable and not very central. While late-Victorian writers such as Margaret Harkness, George Gissing and Arthur Morrison separated plebeian environments in London from the upper social levels of the same city to the extent of classing them as different worlds, the uncertain status of twilight zones becomes of interest to the protagonists of rented room novels starting with *Murphy*.<sup>41</sup>

Within the *longue durée* of London slum writing, the period between the 1930s and the 1960s appears as one dominated by *rented room* writing.<sup>42</sup> More than on the street environment

of so-called slums and their vicinity, or even the corridors and passageways memorialized in writing by Henry James, Gissing and Compton MacKenzie from between the 1880s and World War One, the perspective in **rented room** writing like *Murphy* is from within a room, that of an individual behind a closed door.<sup>43</sup> Alongside *Murphy*, examples of **rented room** writing include William Plomer's *The Case Is Altered*, Norman Collins's 1945 *London Belongs to Me*, *The Lonely Londoners* and Colin McInnes's 1959 *Absolute Beginners*.<sup>44</sup>

Numerous aspects of *Murphy* parallel the contents of earlier and later novels from the London slum / bohemia tradition narrating life in a room. They include encounters with strangers in dark corridors, the role of a staircase in managing the socially diverse inhabitants of a house, relationships to authority figures such as doctors, police officers and coroners, and, sometimes, efforts at forced entry to a putatively private space in a house where it is thought that something is wrong. The latter occurs for example in Thackeray's 1840s *Pendennis* as it does in **Murphy**; mysterious strangers in dark corridors are found in James's *The Princess Casamassima* and Gissing's *Thyrza*, both written in the 1880s, as in *Murphy*; a doctor must be paid for by a slum householder in *Murphy* as in Arnold Bennett's 1923 *Riceman Steps*. Violent crime and self-harm features in many novels from the tradition within the confines of the rented room in the house, with the lessee or landlady the one who must somehow adjudicate.<sup>45</sup> Here there are connections to be drawn between *Murphy* and *The Case Is Altered*, based on a real-life murder in a Kensington house where the author lodged, as well as with Baron's *The Low Life*, and Banks's *The L-Shaped Room*, from close to the counter-culture of the 1960s.<sup>46</sup>

### **A Spectrum of Rooms**

In the dichotomy proposed by Ackerley and Gontarski, the room is a real-world space that parallels the 'little world' or 'microcosm' of philosophical rationalism 'as opposed to the "big world" or macrocosm, each reflecting in the other the laws of perfect proportion so that the little world becomes the mirror of the whole, as in the monadology of Leibniz'.<sup>47</sup> *Murphy* is a novel of multiple types of room. Beyond the rooms where Murphy himself stays, various other rooms appear. These include: hotel rooms in both Dublin and London; a rented room in Germany recalled by Murphy; another room in the Islington lodging house where Murphy and Celia stay, in which an old man who is a fellow tenant kills himself by cutting his throat; and various public, institutional and commercial spaces.<sup>48</sup> The latter category of non-single-person rooms (whether or not public) includes a tea shop, the mortuary, wards and recreation rooms of the mental hospital, and the entrance hall of the Dublin General Post Office, containing Oliver Sheppard's bronze statue representing the death of Cú Chulainn. Another is in the novel's

mental hospital, the Magdalen Mental Mercyseat (or MMM). The MMM has been identified by Beckett's biographer James Knowlson with the Bethlem Royal Hospital, once Bedlam, moved from central London to the suburban borders of Surrey and Kent in 1930, a handful of years before Beckett's novel was published.<sup>49</sup>

Murphy earlier in the book is presented as the opposite **of labourer** – one stereotype of the Irish worker in England – since he resists work. Yet at the MMM he ultimately does become a peripatetic worker, becoming a nurse there thanks to a suggestion by a randomly-encountered fellow Irishman. At the MMM Murphy is given a room to live in which he calls a garret. He contrasts garrets with an ordinary or domestic category of rented room: 'What passed for a garret in Great Britain and Ireland was really nothing more than an attic. An attic! [...] A basement was better than an attic'.<sup>50</sup> The room at the hospital, Murphy thinks, is better even than the garret he earlier rented in Germany, perhaps because it is more confining, more strangely shaped, excludes more.

[...] the garret that he now saw was not an attic, nor yet a mansard, but a genuine garret, not half, but twice as good as the one in Hanover, because half as large. The ceiling and the outer wall were one, a superb surge of white, pitched at the perfect angle of farthest trajectory, pierced by a small frosted skylight, ideal for closing against the sun by day and opening by night to the stars.<sup>51</sup>

Such thoughts of course challenge the standard notion that bigger means better, as do the room's furnishings. Murphy finds the garret fitting because it contains a completely broken bed ('so low and gone in the springs that even unfreighted the middle grazed the ground') already 'wedged lengthways into the cleft of floor and ceiling, so that Murphy was saved the trouble of moving it into that position'.<sup>52</sup> Hardly a desirable room to rent, and indeed Murphy shortly afterwards dies here, gassed by a makeshift solution to the room's lack of heating – an ambiguous death, perhaps accident, perhaps suicide.

The different types of room presented in *Murphy* partly mirror one another via experiential and medicalising qualities. In the non-condemned house, for example at Brewery Road in Islington where Murphy briefly lodges with Celia in a big room **with a linoleum floor recalling modernist aesthetics and a fake-genteel landlady**, the individual is, willy-nilly, part of an institution.<sup>53</sup> As such, the bedsit relates to the cell or the room in a hospital. The mental hospital, as in a short story like Bernard Malamud's post-war New York-set 'The Letter', reveals things about what is supposedly normal life through its dialectic with the world beyond its gates.<sup>54</sup> Life at both the 'mew' and in Brewery Road is confined and redolent of mental illness but also a retreat. Murphy desires 'asylum' as he trudges back to Brewery Road after a

failed job hunt, ready to trade anything for ‘five minutes in his chair’.<sup>55</sup> Fetishizing the room, then, is an aspect of the bedsit: this is what Murphy does in defining and aestheticizing the horrible garret seemingly better defined by its lacks than its advantages. Appropriately, Murphy expresses love for the padded cell, another category of lockable room at the MMM. He considers padded cells ‘indoor bowers of bliss’, special because ‘windowless, like a monad’, representative of what he valorises as ‘the little world’.<sup>56</sup>

Rooms with windows contain the passage of light across their walls, as well as views of what is visible beyond. Window and door are both threshold and border, of course. Living in any single room, classically with windows in the direction of just one compass point, and with other buildings nearby, introduces relations with particular lines on the wall or shifting geometrical patterns of light. Celia sits ‘embedded in a jelly of life’ at Brewery Road, where ‘her afternoon’ becomes characterised by footsteps above, ‘the rocking-chair and the vermigrade play of light’; Murphy sees the mind as something resembling a room, a ‘chamber that pictured itself as a sphere full of light fading into dark’.<sup>57</sup> Like Gissing’s character Harold Biffen, a novelist, in *New Grub Street* (1891), Murphy is profoundly alienated from his non-respectable neighbours as well as from respectable London.<sup>58</sup>

So *Murphy* belongs, as well as in Beckett’s own canon, to others: that of Irish and other migrants’ stories in London; that of life in limited room-space in the London in a particular era, the era of smog, railways and terraced houses. This is a belonging to specific categories in architectural and legal discourse. *Murphy* belongs, this is to say, to what it also in different ways dismisses, as ‘physical fact’.<sup>59</sup> Such dismissal leads, in the novel’s last sections to seemingly casual gestures including the note Murphy leaves behind him asking that his ashes be flushed down a particular toilet in the Abbey Theatre, Dublin, preferably during a performance.<sup>60</sup> Murphy dies in his garret, is cremated in the mortuary chamber of the hospital and then his ashes are kicked by Cooper and others around another room of a sort inseparable from the time of the clock, in a pub:

By closing time the body, mind and soul of Murphy were freely distributed over the floor of the saloon; and before another dayspring greyned the earth had been swept away with the sand, the beer, the butts, the glass, the matches, the spits, the vomit.<sup>61</sup>

It is through the cycles of light and darkness, through the way that light falls across a given time of day on a particular day of the year, that we meet the uniqueness of every room. The ‘sun’ in the ‘mew’ of Murphy’s opening and the switching on of electric lights in the pub at the end show this.<sup>62</sup> Tracing such movement questions any notion of room experience as shared

between biologically-alike humans, let alone any bare dichotomising of big and small, external and internal.

The bedsit perhaps presumes the pub ‘saloon’, including the one in which Murphy is ultimately distributed, because you cannot sit in your bed-sitter all day. Beckett indicates the diversity of rooms in the city. Here, the key dichotomy, subtly explored in *Murphy*, is that of public space and private space, vital concepts for social scientists concerned with urban experience. This diversity underlines the point that the London rented rooms of Murphy need reading as part of the whole spectrum of rooms Beckett presents in *Murphy*. Here, literary reading offers not just a contribution but also a philosophical challenge to social investigation. The social positioning and discursive construction of, say, a room, belongs in patterns and traditions of human experience which go beyond the social and beyond one historical moment.

## Conclusion

Social justice is vital in thinking about the bedsit, slum clearance, and mental health politics. In *Murphy*, Beckett explores the ways in which human existence (and experience) happens within the confines of space and time, as discussed by the philosophers and the psychoanalysts. The richly patterned unsolvable puzzle of the novel is, like the expanses of nineteenth-century urban novels like Dickens’s, a rendering of urban complexity. This article has developed the rich existing discussion of *Murphy* by contextualising Beckett’s first novel it in a history of London novels of the room. I have argued that the traditions into which *Murphy* belongs include that of literary London. The room of *Murphy* is perceptible through both philosophical and sociological lenses – ideally through both at once.

*Murphy* is a novel of migration but also of urban modernity. Existence in the specific confines of the rented room, offered according to the ever-changing terms of a housing market and linked to local wages, is a phenomenon that emerged in industrialised cities at a specific historical point. But as Gaston Bachelard would later point out, life in specific categories of space is key to human being.<sup>63</sup> There is a paradoxical doubleness in Beckett’s rooms, whose social side is under-examined while their non-social – individual – side could comment on social scientists’ notions of urbanity. His seeming closeness to bare human bodily universalities (such as our inescapable confinement in time’s cycles including those of our own mortal decay) combines with the emergence of his writings so specifically and so canonically from actual metropolises of urban modernity, as experienced in certain rooms and portions of Paris, London and Dublin. Critical social thinkers like Brawley, Marcuse and Soja view spatial justice as if

from outside the system which establishes inequalities; another perspective looks from the point of view of the ‘central authority’ which orders the demolition of Murphy’s ‘mew’. Both perspectives, this literary fiction and study of it shows, are incomplete.<sup>64</sup>

<sup>1</sup> See e.g. Jason Finch, ‘How Cultural? How Material? Reading the Slums of London, 1820-1850’, in *Imagining Spaces and Places*, ed. Saija Isomaa et al. (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars, 2013), 85–106; Jason Finch, ‘The Peripheries of London Slumland in George Gissing and Alexander Baron’, in *Literature and the Peripheral City*, ed. Lieven Ameel, Jason Finch and Markku Salmela (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 56–74; Jason Finch, ‘Grotland Explored: The Fleeting Urban Imaginaries of Post-War Inner West London’, *Journal of Urban Cultural Studies* 2.3 (2015): 275–95; Jason Finch, ‘Literary Excavations in London’s St Giles: Writing the Rookery, Past and Present’, *Yhdyskuntasuunnittelu-lehti / Finnish Journal of Urban Studies* 54.2 (2016): 74–93; Jason Finch, **London** Jewish ... and Working Class? Social Mobility and Boundary-Crossing in Simon Blumenfeld and Alexander Baron’, in *Working-Class Writing: Theory and Practice*, ed. Ben Clarke and Nick Hubble (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 207–28; Jason Finch, **Workers in the Dawn**, Slum Writing and London’s “Urban Majority” Districts, in *George Gissing and the Place of Realism*, ed. Rebecca Hutcheon (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars, 2021), 36–54; Jason Finch and Jessica Kelly, ‘Disinterring Slum-Clearance London: Expertise and User Perspectives in the 1930s Maritime East End’, *Literary Geographies* 7.1 (2021): 127–45.

<sup>2</sup> The earliest use in print of the word in its current sense is usually said to be in Pierce Egan, *Life in London; or, the Day and Night Scenes of Jerry Hawthorn, Esq. and His Elegant Friend Corinthian Tom, Accompanied by Bob Logic, the Oxonian, in Their Rambles and Sprees through the Metropolis* (London: Sherwood, Neely and Jones, 1821). Egan inaugurates the canonical literary history of the term *slum* which historians and urbanists in the twenty-first century have set out as background to their studies of its application in the contemporary world: Mike Davis, *Planet of Slums* (London: Verso 2006); Alan Mayne, *Slums: The History of a Global Injustice* (London: Reaktion, 2017), 49–52.

<sup>3</sup> Finch, ‘Grotland Explored’. London’s most famously bohemian quarter in the mid-twentieth century, at its height in the 1940s, was perhaps Fitzrovia, a zone north of Oxford Street and west of Tottenham Court Road in the West End of **London** the etymology of whose name (from Fitzroy Square and Fitzroy Street, London W1) **recalls bohemia**.

<sup>4</sup> E.g. Anna Cottrell, *London Writing of the 1930s* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2017); Emily Cuming, *Housing, Class and Gender in Modern British Writing, 1880–2012* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press); Finch and Kelly, ‘Disinterring Slum-Clearance London’.

<sup>5</sup> On Beckettian nowhere-spaces: Jason Finch, ‘Beckett’s Manywheres’, *Literary Geographies* 1.1 (2015): 7–23; revised as Chapter 8 of Jason Finch, *Deep Locational Criticism: Imaginative Place in Literary Research and Teaching* (Amsterdam: Benjamins, 2016), 173–88.

<sup>6</sup> Egan, *Life in London*, 343.

<sup>7</sup> On the Church Street, St Giles, Rookery see Adam Crymble, ‘The Decline and Fall of an Early Modern Slum: London’s St Giles “Rookery”, c. 1550–1850’, *Urban History* 49.2 (2022); Finch, ‘Literary Excavations’; David R. Green and Alan Parton, ‘Slums and Slum Life in Victorian England: London and Birmingham at Mid-Century’, in S.M. Gaskell (ed.), *Slums* (Leicester: Leicester University Press, 1990), 17–91. Crymble (‘Decline and Fall’, 315) argues that the area’s ‘popular connection to poor Irish Catholic migrants [...] made it an easy trope for otherness’ when its social reality was more complex (wealthier families lived there alongside the very poor).

<sup>8</sup> C.J. Ackerley, *Demented Particulars: The Annotated ‘Murphy’* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2010), 12.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

<sup>10</sup> C.J. Ackerley and S.E. Gontarski, *The Faber Companion to Samuel Beckett: A Reader’s Guide to His Works, Life, and Thought* (London: Faber, 2006 [2004]).

<sup>11</sup> E.g. by Harold Bloom, *The Western Canon: The Books and Schools of the Ages* (New York: Riverhead, 1994), 463; Matthew Feldman, *Beckett’s Books: A Cultural History of Samuel Beckett’s ‘Interwar Notes’* (London: Continuum, 2006), who argues that ‘René Descartes’ shadow has been cast across Beckett Studies far too



emphatically and for far too long' (2). See also Anthony Uhlman, 'Beckett and Philosophy', in S.E. Gontarski (ed.), *A Companion to Samuel Beckett* (Chichester, UK: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), 84–96.

<sup>12</sup> Ackerley, *Demented Particulars*; Finch, 'Beckett's Manywheres'; Nicolas Tredell, 'Samuel Beckett: *Murphy* (1938)'. <http://literarylondon.org/london-fictions/beckett-murphy-1938/>.

<sup>13</sup> Richard McGuire, 'Migrant Drifters: Samuel Beckett's *Murphy* and Sam Selvon's *The Lonely Londoners* in a Postcolonial Comparative Context', *Comparative Critical Studies* 11.2–3 (2014): 235–48.

<sup>14</sup> McGuire, 'Migrant Drifters', 235.

<sup>15</sup> Ackerley, *Demented Particulars*, 10.

<sup>16</sup> Cuming, *Housing, Class and Gender*.

<sup>17</sup> Edward W. Soja, 'The City and Spatial Justice', *Justice spatiale / Spatial Justice* 1 (2009), <https://www.jssj.org/article/la-ville-et-la-justice-spatiale/>.

<sup>18</sup> Alison Blunt and Robyn Dowling, *Home* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2007).

<sup>19</sup> 'The Increase of Rent and Mortgage Interest (War Restrictions) Act 1915 was introduced in order to protect both tenants and landlords. The Act restricted rents on smaller, unfurnished, 'working class' dwellings and also held landlords' mortgage interest rates to August 1914 levels' (Wendy Wilson, 'A Short History of Rent Control', House of Commons Briefing Paper 6747 (London: House of Commons Library, 2017). <<https://researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/SN06747/SN06747.pdf>>.

<sup>20</sup> Chiara Briganti and Kathy Mezei, 'Introduction: Living with Strangers', in Chiara Briganti and Kathy Mezei, eds, *Living with Strangers: Bedsits and Boarding Houses in Modern English Life, Literature and Film* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2018), 1–24 [14]; Chiara Briganti and Kathy Mezei, 'Aspidistras and Divans: Transient Spaces in the London Novel, 1920s to 1940s', in Briganti and Mezei, eds., *Living with Strangers*.

<sup>21</sup> Briganti and Mezei, 'Aspidistras and Divans', 25, 26. On boarding-house writing see also Cuming, *Housing, Class and Gender*, 73–122.

<sup>22</sup> Cuming includes writing of the 'lodging-house', the building containing bedsits, in her Chapter 2 together with boarding-house fiction.

<sup>23</sup> Briganti and Mezei, 'Introduction', 2.

<sup>24</sup> Samuel Beckett, *Murphy* [1938] (London: John Calder, 1977), 5 (hereafter *Murphy*).

<sup>25</sup> OED s.v. *mew*, n.

<sup>26</sup> See Finch and Kelly, 'Disinterring Slum-Clearance London'; J.A. Yelling, *Slums and Redevelopment: Policy and Practice in England, 1918 – 45, with Particular Reference to London* (London: UCL Press, 1992).

<sup>27</sup> *Murphy*, 34, 74.

<sup>28</sup> Wilson, 'Short History of Rent Control', 3.

<sup>29</sup> Peter Marcuse, 'Spatial Justice: Derivative but Causal of Social Injustice'. *Justice spatiale / Spatial Justice* 1 (2009). <https://www.jssj.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/12/JSSJ1-4en2.pdf>.

<sup>30</sup> Lisa Brawley, 'The Practice of Spatial Justice in Crisis', *Justice spatiale / Spatial Justice* 1 (2009). <https://www.jssj.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/12/JSSJ1-2en2.pdf>.

<sup>31</sup> On Irish migration to London and the London Irish, see Jerry White, *London in the Nineteenth Century: 'A Human Awful Wonder of God'* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2007), 131–39, on the London Irish of the Victorian period. On the specifics of the Church Street Rookery, Crymble, 'Decline and Fall'; Green and Parton, 'Slums and Slum Life'.

<sup>32</sup> McGuire, 'Migrant Drifters', 237.

<sup>33</sup> E.M. Forster, *A Room with a View* (London: Edward Arnold, 1908).

<sup>34</sup> Cuming, *Housing, Class and Gender*, 60.

<sup>35</sup> See Finch, 'Grotland Explored'.

<sup>36</sup> *Murphy*, 41.

<sup>37</sup> *Murphy*, 143.

<sup>38</sup> Dickens's *David Copperfield* and Thackeray's *Pendennis* both appeared in the late 1840s. In the twentieth century and specifically the 1950s and 1960s: Lynne Reid Banks, *The L-Shaped Room* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1962); Alexander Baron, *Rosie Hogarth* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1951); Andrew Salkey, *Escape to an Autumn Pavement* (London: Hutchinson, 1960).

<sup>39</sup> On questions of social class and migration in relation to the London 'slum', see Finch, 'London Jewish ... and Working Class?'.

<sup>40</sup> Forster, *A Room with a View*; Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own* (London: Hogarth Press, 1929).

<sup>41</sup> For example, Harkness's 1887 novel *A City Girl*, Gissing's 1889 *The Nether World*, and Morrison's 1894 *A Child of the Jago*.

<sup>42</sup> The concept of *longue durée* as a complex expanse making varied-length time units interact is that of Fernand Braudel. See his 'History and the Social Sciences: The *Longue Durée*' [1958], translated by Immanuel Wallerstein, *Review (Fernand Braudel Center)* 32.2 (2009): 171–203.

<sup>43</sup> James's *The Princess Casamassima* (1886); Gissing's *Thyrza* (1887) and MacKenzie's *Sinister Street* (1913–14). As an example of the closed-door perspective take a 1963 novel in which a family the protagonist has

befriended suddenly leave his bedsit house to be replaced by a different sort of tenant: ‘a Pole with a face like a prison door. He was one of those frightening solitaires who go in and out of a house at strange hours, always silent; to this day I know nothing about him’: Alexander Baron, *The Low Life* (London: Black Spring Press, 2010 [1963], 115.

<sup>44</sup> William Plomer, *The Case Is Altered* (London: Hogarth Press, 1932); Norman Collins, *London Belongs to Me* (London: Collins, 1945); Sam Selvon, *The Lonely Londoners* (London: Allan Wingate, 1956); Colin MacInnes, *Absolute Beginners* (London: MacGibbon & Kee, 1959).

<sup>45</sup> Arnold Bennett, *Riceyman Steps* (London: Cassell, 1923).

<sup>46</sup> Lynne Reid Banks, *The L-Shaped Room* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1960).

<sup>47</sup> Ackerley and Gontarski, *Faber Companion to Samuel Beckett*, 321 – 22; cf. Finch, *Deep Locational Criticism*, 178–79.

<sup>48</sup> The Dublin room where we see Wylie and Miss Counihan, the latter leaning over the window so she is above the characteristic spiked railings below: *Murphy*, 71–76. The garret in Germany Murphy earlier rented recalled: *Murphy*, 93. The suicide (of a man who never leaves his room): *Murphy*, 77–79.

<sup>49</sup> Tredell, ‘Murphy’, quoting from *Damned to Fame*, James Knowlson’s 1996 biography of Beckett.

<sup>50</sup> *Murphy*, 93.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>53</sup> The Brewery Road room’s linoleum floor is ‘of exquisite design, a dim geometry of blue, grey and brown that delighted Murphy because it called Braque to his mind, and Celia because it delighted Murphy’ (*Murphy*, 40).

<sup>54</sup> Bernard Malamud, ‘The Letter’, in *Rembrandt’s Hat* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1982), 99–106. On the Malamud story and its spatial indexicality, see Finch, *Deep Locational Criticism*, 119–31.

<sup>55</sup> *Murphy*, 47–48.

<sup>56</sup> *Murphy*, 103, 90.

<sup>57</sup> *Murphy*, 42, 78, 64–65. In the rationalist dichotomy, Murphy’s own self, as opposed to the world, is a ‘mental chamber’ (*Murphy*, 64).

<sup>58</sup> George Gissing, *New Grub Street* (London: Smith, Elder, 1891), e.g. 262–63.

<sup>59</sup> *Murphy*, 64.

<sup>60</sup> *Murphy*, 151.

<sup>61</sup> *Murphy*, 154.

<sup>62</sup> *Murphy*, 5, 154.

<sup>63</sup> Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space* [1958], translated by Maria Jolas (Boston: Beacon Press, 1969).

<sup>64</sup> *Murphy*, 74.