

Tiago Clariano

School of Arts and Humanities, University of Lisbon¹

The Powers of Solitude: two cases of decadent solipsism

Solipsism is the belief that only a subject's impressions and reflections of the world can be known. George Santayana describes it as follows: "The solipsist is an incredulous spectator of his own romance, thinks his own adventures, fictions and accepts a solipsism of the present moment" (1955: 15). If loneliness, on the one hand, provides conditions for cleaner reflections upon the world, solipsism implies a different kind of loneliness which can be described as modern: it is a pretension to solitude in the middle of the multitude. As with any belief, solipsism can motivate a set of practices, possibly leading to actions that disregard the existence of others. In Joris-Karl Huysmans' *À Rebours*, Des Esseintes locks himself in his house to experiment with a variety of sensations; his loneliness was necessary to avoid external interferences. In Samuel Beckett's *Murphy*, the main character prefers sitting in his rocking chair, rather than looking for a job because he had read a horoscope that found it ill-advised. These narratives will instigate the theorization upon loneliness questioning the aesthetic predisposition validated by solitude, the demand for authenticity in Des Esseintes' empirical aesthetic investigations and the way Murphy finds refuge from hazards through solipsism.

Keywords: solipsism, aestheticism, decadence

¹ This paper was preliminarily presented at the Loneliness International Conference, organized by the Centre for Comparative Studies (University of Lisbon) on the 14th of February 2020. I hold a FCT doctoral scholarship (reference: 2020.05089. BD). I would like to thank João Gabriel for all the insightful conversations and unwavering support.

“No Man is an island entire of himself”
— “Meditation XVII”, John Donne

“Some man is an island”
– *Little did I know*, Stanley Cavell (2010)

Solipsism is distinguished from loneliness on the account of being a belief; as such, the word solipsist describes the people who believe that only their impressions and reflections about the world can be known. While loneliness is a feeling that can be relieved through the presence of others, solipsism understands the presence of others as a figment of belief, or rather, an intellectual production that sustains the very fabric of the universe as a product of belief. Thus, for solipsists, other people are results of their imagination (and production) of the universe. This essay aims to look at Joris-Karl Huysmans’ *À Rebours* and Samuel Beckett’s *Murphy* as literary artefacts whose protagonists live said believe of cosmological loneliness. In their own way, both Des Esseintes and Murphy act in a way to avoid the risks of living in and dealing with the outer world.

The idea for a comparison based on the solipsistic belief came from a trend that has been recently building up in our culture: the idea that the universe we live in consists of a simulation, a designation that feels more appropriate for works of fiction. Plato’s claims against poetry for its opposition to truth can be seen as an approximation of fiction to simulations: because what is fiction doesn’t happen as it is described, Plato found it more akin to lying, which prompted Aristotle to describe works of fiction as mimetic, they imitate, but they don’t replace reality. It is through said imitation that fiction acquires a philosophical level of making us think about the general what-ifs while lifting weight from the actual particular has-beens.

The cosmological belief in loneliness has been described by literature in different ways. For instance, let’s take John Donne’s “Meditation XVII” where, in the face of the signs of death conveyed by the tolling bells, we are reminded that “No man is an island entire of itself”, in a way to connect the relative human individual to the absolute

unit of the human race, which, metonymically is more similar to an ocean, than to the cut-out patterns of small individual islands. Donne wanted to impart the idea that the death of an individual was a major loss to the whole community to which this individual used to belong to. It is a meditation on empathy, on humanity, and on the ability to perceive our connection to our peers and to relativize the weight of our egos when dealing with them, stating “any man’s death diminishes me, because I am involved in mankind”, a phrase that assumes a certain fellowship between those who share the membership to mankind. Recently, however, Stanley Cavell gave his own twist to this phrase in his memory book *Little did I know*, where he stated “Some man is an island”, after moving away from the south to the north side of his country in 2003 while dealing with a conflict with his own father. After finding out some similarities between his father and himself, and after moving away, Cavell dismisses Donne’s meditation “Don’t tell me no man is an island”².

The argument for solipsism in *À Rebours* and *Murphy* will begin with the analysis of the cases of their main characters, Des Esseintes and Murphy, then some theorization will be instigated upon loneliness, the aesthetic predisposition validated by solitude, the demand for authenticity in Des Esseintes’ aesthetical investigations and the way Murphy shelters himself from worldly hazards through his skullscape.

The case of Des Esseintes

À Rebours, the book by Joris-Karl Huysmans, was translated to English as *Against the Grain* or *Against Nature*. This is a mid-nineteenth-century book that got its reputation as a “decadence handbook” seeing as it was referred to, but never mentioned by title, in Oscar Wilde’s *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, as the yellow book Lord Henry gave Dorian. The text in this book can be described by that famous Julia Kristeva’s definition of text: it is a block of quotations, and a puzzling one. Huysmans lived in the eye of the decadent storm, amidst the most renowned works of Edgar Allan Poe, Théophile Gautier, Charles Baudelaire, Émile Zola and Gustave Flaubert. For

² Cavell, Stanley, *Little did I know*, p. 19, 2010.

that, Huysmans seemed to hold a poetic identity crisis, which produced some sort of “war in Heaven” (as Harold Bloom would call it) against the poets which influenced him, and he tried facing them all at the same time. Huysmans seemed to be going through a personal identity crisis (between atheism and Christianity) and a stylistic one as well (between realism, parnasianism, naturalism and decadentism). The results of these crises are the flurry of stylistic cases and the imp to overcome reality through the manipulation of perceptions present in this yellow book. These seemingly genological or theoretical data are repeated by Des Esseintes’, the protagonist, who isolates himself to experiment with his own sensibility, building surprisingly weird artefacts and aesthetical instruments, such as decorating a turtle’s carapace with jewels or creating an *organ a bouche*.

The main character in Huysmans’ *À Rebours* is Des Esseintes, described as an effeminate bourgeois duke and the last member of his family’s blood lineage. Des Esseintes inherited a chateau in Fontenay to where he moves to live his ideal life: one in line with aestheticist and dandy values, away from society’s curious, distraught or envious glares. Being the last one of his lineage, Des Esseintes is located from the beginning in a decadent position as he moves away from society in order to isolate himself. There’s a biological aspect to this decadence, which was his predicament to inevitably terminate his lineage, something akin to the position of Usher in Edgar Allan Poe’s *The Fall of the House of Usher*, where the twins Roderick and Madeline Usher were the last members of their lineage, destined to perish in the degradation and literal fall of their own house.

Des Esseintes’ particularities lead him to enclose himself in his chateau, along with some servants who were ordered to never being seen. Des Esseintes was dedicated to a quest for sensual pleasures: his objective was the inoculation of the aesthetic experience, eliding any obstacle that could intervene in the tasting of an aesthetic phenomenon. His was a demand for the return to a state of perpetual surprise, an infantile aesthetic of constant overwhelming sensations. Which isn’t particularly a new place in literature as J. W. Goethe had already written about it in “Metamorphosis of Plants”, where the profusion of sounds, colours and odours confuse the perceiving subject:

The rich profusion thee confounds, my love,
Of flowers, spread athwart the garden. Aye,
Name upon name assails thy ears, and each
More barbarous-sounding than the one before—
Like unto each the form, yet none alike;
And so the choir hints a secret law,
A sacred mystery. Ah, love could I vouchsafe
In sweet felicity a simple answer!³

Des Esseintes aims to regain this virginal, innocent, overwhelming sort of experience of surprise, uncontaminated by knowledge or prejudiced expectations. And to do so, he must avoid any sorts of interventions in his delights. In Goethe's poem, even recalling the plants' Latin botanical names ("each / More barbarous-sounding than the one before") seem to have some impact in the aesthetic experience of the garden itself, to the point of being called "barbarous-sounding" for using the dead Latin language, instead of the lively German.

Another poetic example of this quest for an innocent aesthetic pre-disposition can be found in Charles Baudelaire's "Tout entière". In this poem, when the devil visits the poet in his room, he asks which are the characteristics that define beauty. The poet answers that beauty is contextual and dependent on the whole framework of the aesthetic experience, to prove that sensibility precedes intellectual filtration "Lorsque tout me ravit, j'ignore / Si quelque chose me séduit." In such an experience of totality, Baudelaire praises

Ô métamorphose mystique
De tous mes sens fondus en un!
Son haleine fait la musique,
Comme sa voix fait le parfum!⁴

Both Goethe's "Metamorphosis of plants" and Baudelaire's "Tout entière" seem to gloss over the subjects of an innocent aesthetic pre-disposition and the experience of totality (be it because we feel with the

³ Goethe, J. W., *The Metamorphosis of Plants*, p. 1, 2009.

⁴ Baudelaire, C., *Les Fleurs du Mal*, p. 85, 1857.

totality of our senses and not one at a time, because our body is inserted in a determined scenario where the aesthetic experience happens or because an experience is always excessive when compared to our descriptions of it)⁵. However, Des Esseintes' experiences reveal that he didn't seem to have caught up on the idea of totality sustained by these poems, of having all senses in action simultaneously.

À Rebours is divided into chapters that frame a determined sense or aesthetic fact the first one is about colours, the second one about escapism, the third one about Latin literature, and so on, until the sixteenth, which is about isolation). Like the book, so are Des Esseintes' investigations on aesthetic experiments: framed and precisely directed to specific senses or combinations of senses. Alone in his house, isolated from everyone and even from the servants that live with him, Des Esseintes observes paintings, reads books, tries on different perfumes, and invents some unique aesthetical experiments, for instance, when he decorates a turtle's carapace with jewels, or his *organ à bouche*, which associated each played note to the taste of a liquor which was simultaneously injected in the mouth of the player.

This *organ à bouche* builds on the synaesthesia idea present in Charles Baudelaire's famous "Correspondances", where the association of vocabulary that describes a certain sense is used to describe the impressions of another sense. This is expressed through the enumeration present in this poem's most renowned verse "Les parfums, les couleurs et les sons se répondent". But another interesting analogy that Des Esseintes' *organ à bouche* invokes is one with Richard Wagner's concept of the *Gesamtkunstwerk* – the total artwork – which attempted to stimulate all of the viewers' senses through a multimodal

⁵ Des Esseintes' views on flowers must also derive from these poems, for instance, when it is described that "Après les fleurs factices singent les véritables fleurs, il voulait des fleurs naturelles imitant des fleurs fausses" (1982, 97); or, later, when describing an artichoke, starting by referring to it by its Latin botanical name: «l' "Encephalartos horridus", un gigantesque artichaut de fer, peint en rouille, tel qu'on en met aux portes des châteaux, afin d'empêcher les escalades" (idem, 100). His preference for natural flowers imitating the artificial ones is akin to the moment in Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* when the Queen of Hearts' gardener cards are painting the roses red.

operatic performance. Both analogies still stem from the ideas analysed in the previous poems, Baudelaire's "Tout entière" and Goethe's "Metamorphosis of Plants", where the idea of a sensorial totality is ascribed as a property of what is usually called aesthetic experiences. This sensorial totality is lost when Des Esseintes attempts to recreate and frame kinds of aesthetic experiences and sensorial associations pertaining only to one or two senses, while divorced from life's hazards and people's judgements, in a safe haven. This leads us to a binomial which is explored in *À Rebours*: the one between aesthetic authenticity and artificiality.

The binomial between authenticity, rather than nature, and artificiality also stems from Charles Baudelaire's writings, in this case from his "Éloge du maquillage", present in the collection *Le Peintre de la vie moderne*. Baudelaire's argument is for the idea that beauty can always be further embellished and that what is natural can always be embellished by artifice. It comes as no surprise that this small essay ends with the following argument

Je permets volontiers à ceux-là que leur lourde gravité empêche de chercher le beau jusque dans ses plus minutieuses manifestations, de rire de mes réflexions et d'en accuser la puérile solennité ; leur jugement austère n'a rien qui me touche ; je me contenterai d'en appeler auprès des véritables artistes, ainsi que des femmes qui ont reçu en naissant une étincelle de ce feu sacré dont elles voudraient s'illuminer tout entières.⁶

A phrase that ends in a self-referential manner, pointing to the previously referred poem "Tout Entière", and with an association between modes of perceiving beauty and happiness. The grade of the artificiality of Des Esseintes' experiments is due to the fact that they are deliberated, planned and effectuated in an innocuous environment, away from other people and any random daily life interferences. A more authentic kind of experience is better described through "Tout entière" and "Metamorphosis of plants", where the idea of sensorial totality ("tous me sens fondus en un!" or "The rich profusion [which]

⁶ Baudelaire, Charles, "Éloge du maquillage».

confounds”) includes all the senses, the possibility of accidents and tends to be communicated to other people to get feedback. In his case, Des Esseintes could only attempt to speak to his servants, who were previously ordered to never being seen or heard. The artificiality in Des Esseintes’ aesthetic experiences stems from the fact that he caged himself inside the walls of his own mansion, with no communication with the external world and from his mode of perceiving his aesthetic experiments. This model differs from an authentic apprehension of aesthetic experiences, firstly, by trying to apprehend certain objects as if they were detached from the world and the random machinations of life itself, in close reading aesthetic exercises; secondly, because they are deliberated and controlled, effectuated in an innocuous environment, away from people’s judgement and other random daily life interferences, when a more authentic aesthetic experience is prone to accidents; finally, for aiming to specific senses when, usually, an aesthetic experience is best described through Goethe’s and Baudelaire’s poems, an engulfment of the subject in the context of sensorial ecstasy. Des Esseintes’ close reading of his books, paintings, bejewelled-tortoise and mouth-organ might give him a direct experience, with no hazardous interferences, but it is not an authentic aesthetic experience.

À Rebours was also made known by one of its most renowned readers, Oscar Wilde, who took Des Esseintes’ experiments to a new level through the protagonist of his *Picture of Dorian Gray*, where the book itself is alluded to, but never referred by its title, as a “yellow book”:

There were in it metaphors as monstrous as orchids, and as subtle in colour. The life of the senses was described in the terms of mystical philosophy. One hardly knew at times whether one was reading the spiritual ecstasies of some mediaeval saint or the morbid confessions of a modern sinner. It was a poisonous book.⁷

There’s a subtext of loneliness in both his references to the “spiritual ecstasies of some mediaeval saint” and the “morbid confessions of a modern sinner” which helps deepen the argument for solipsism in the

⁷ Wilde, Oscar, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, p. 156, 2012.

case of Des Esseintes. Mediaeval saints found the ability to clear their thoughts and expose them in loneliness, one can describe so someone such as Saint Augustine. On the other hand, modern sinners (and it takes a wild one to know another) deemed themselves as exiled for having passions which were different than the statistical average member of society had. Des Esseintes' loneliness comes across as a hybrid version of these kinds of loneliness, the one that helps a Saint reflect upon his impressions of the world and the one that makes a culprit isolate from others in order to keep them safe from his sinful behaviour. *À Rebours* is narrated in the voice of a solipsist who watches the world from between the grids of his own mental cage, able to acknowledge the existence of others and an external world, but who remains quiet, consuming and reflecting upon the artefacts he consumes.

The case of Murphy

Samuel Beckett's *Murphy* opens with the sentence "The sun shone, having no alternative, on the nothing new", a poetic attempt at correcting the *Ecclesiastes* expression "nihil sub sole novum", an expression which is recurrently used to express that nothing is truly novel in existence. However, in Beckett's correction, the sun seems to be enchained to this repetitive cycle. This is a weird way to start telling a story about someone who lives in Ireland, where the weather is pretty similar to England's, in a way that even a faintly sunny day could be considered a summer day. The sun's predicament of "having no alternative" turns out to be even stranger when we consider the Irish weather, how could it have no alternative, when it could be a very cloudy day? Finally, the complement "on the nothing new" assumes that what happens under the sun (which is everything that is under the daylight) is always predictable. Beckett's correction exercise of the renowned *Ecclesiastes*' phrase creates a reversed form of the phrase: "There's nothing new under the sun" becomes "The sun shone [, having no alternative,] on the nothing new", giving new prominence to the sun, which becomes the phrase's syntactic subject. This introduction to the novel encloses a small reference to the potential solipsism this essay explores: the sun's lack of alternatives can be associated with the system of predictions in a solipsist's point of view of the universe; as

everything happens in a mentally simulated landscape, then every fact has a certain degree of predictability.

It isn't too soon to state that Murphy, the protagonist, is the sun in this novel's solar system, as much as he is the white King in the chess game or the master puppeteer in this puppet show: all the other characters, planets, pieces and puppets circle around him and are unaware of the hands that manipulate them⁸. Murphy, like the sun, exerts such a radiance that the definition of his own form is hard to circumscribe through a simple stare. However, Murphy is described as a weak man who once read in a horoscope that it wasn't a particularly good day to look for a job, so he postponed his actions indefinitely. Murphy is presented sitting naked on his rocking-chair, waiting for time to pass:

He sat in his chair in this way because it gave him pleasure! First it gave his body pleasure, it appeased his body. Then it set him free in his mind. For it was not until his body was appeased that he could come alive in his mind, as described in section six. And life in his mind gave him pleasure, such pleasure that pleasure was not the word.⁹

Those close to him determine that a big problem in Murphy's life is his lack of definition, and the other characters in this story live on this demand of defining Murphy: Celia, as a love interest, Neary, as a friend, Miss Counihan, as a fiancé, Mr Kelly, as a madman, Mr Endon, as a chess mate.

The attempt to define or determine Murphy connects this novel to the stylistics of the Bildungsroman (the coming-of-age novel)¹⁰,

⁸ Beckett, S., Murphy, "All the puppets in this book whinge sooner or later, except Murphy, who is not a puppet", p. 71.

⁹ Beckett, S., *Murphy*, p. 15.

¹⁰ Bildung, the main concept in these kinds of novels, is described by Wilhelm von Humboldt as a free interplay between the direct impressions we receive from the world and the activities with which we answer these impressions, this interplay reflects and clarifies the image of the activity of a subject (1980, p. 238). Bildung is, thus, the need for a logical cohesion between a subject's identity and their actions. In this way, we can't disconnect Murphy's Greek etymon, *morphe*, from the great

as paradigmized by works such as J. W. Goethe's *Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre* or James Joyce's *A Portrait of the artist as a young man*, whose stories follow the development and coming of age of their main characters. In Murphy's case, it is not the protagonist who traverses a series of events in order to better define or determine his image and his personality; this work is done by his closest friends, who long to find a way to define him. The verbs employed here have particular etymological roots which undermine this idea: to *define* contains the Latin word *finis* and to *determine* contains the Latin particle *terminus*¹¹, which contaminate the semantics of these words with some sort of death or ending, which Murphy even acknowledges when he says to his friend Celia that "work would be the end of them both"¹². The etymology of Murphy goes against the possibility of definition: Murphy is a name that comes from the Greek word "Morphe", which means "form". His name is the shape of form (the word for form), and this is a form that lacks identifiable characteristics, just like Murphy, sitting naked, swaying on his rocking chair. Murphy seems to run the opposing race to Wilhelm Meister and Stephen Dedalus, not from the chaotic undefinition of a teenager to the sole captaincy of his own soul, but from the inoperability of an unemployed man to the dissipation of his remains in the form of ashes in the dirty floor of a pub. Murphy, this shapeless form, who wants to keep his undefinition and his inoperability echoes Herman Melville's *Bartleby, the scrivener*'s recurring quote "I would prefer not to".

The polysemy present in Murphy's emblematic name, which refers both to the concept of form and to the Greek deity of sleep and dreams, Morpheus, is obstinately applied to the protagonist, who is described as a "seedy solipsist,"¹³ someone who prefers solitude and the rocking of his chair to social interaction. A solipsist doesn't receive

demands of a Bildungsroman *tout court*: the constitution of a Bildung, through the moral and psychological growth of a character.

¹¹ Seidel, David Matthew, *The Comic Bildungsroman*, 2010.

¹² Beckett, S., *Murphy*, p. 35. Another interesting exchange between the couple can be found on the same page, when Celia says "I am what I do", but Murphy answers her "No, you do what you are, you do a fraction of what you are, you suffer a dreary ooze of your being into doing."

¹³ Beckett, S., *idem.*, p. 49.

or doesn't believe in thought feedback, because he thinks everything is a product of the mind. While the back-and-forth movement of the rocking-chair describes the thought progression of a solipsist, a more common (less solipsistic) way of describing such a thought movement is the floating of a boat on waves with different sizes, coming from different directions. The inconsequentiality of the solipsist derives from his inability of processing thought feedback. If everything is a product of his "skullscape," and if everything seems under a certain control of his mind's powers, then every kind of judgement received (be it good or bad, accepting or restrictive) is also a product of said "skullscape".

The "skullscape" is described in the sixth section of the novel as follows:

Murphy's mind pictured itself as a large hollow sphere, hermetically closed to the universe without. This was not an impoverishment, for it excluded nothing that it did not itself contain. Nothing ever had been, was or would be in the universe outside it but was already present as virtual, or actual, or virtual rising into actual, or actual falling into virtual, in the universe inside it.¹⁴

This is the definition of solipsism in Samuel Beckett's *Murphy*: the protagonist, longing for anaesthesia and for undefinition, creates a mental landscape where events are staged as if he was the master puppeteer of all the other characters. This is the main issue of a belief in solipsism: it is inconsequential, it is sustained in a fantastic belief that the world is happening inside the mind. This is a critical step forward from Huysmans' idea that the modulation of perception is the fundament for our impressions of reality: Huysmans' Des Esseintes locked himself away from life and society in order to (in Michael Riffaterre's words) "palliate [his] acedia"¹⁵ and Beckett's Murphy modulates his beliefs in order to attempt to manipulate the reality that encircles him.

Murphy's love interest, that person who seems to be his final stretch to connect to a world he believes is happening only inside his mind, is called Celia, a prostitute. It's Celia who endeavours to make Murphy

¹⁴ Beckett, S., *idem.*, p. 63.

¹⁵ Riffaterre, Michael, "Decadent Paradoxes", p. 65, 1999.

move from his chair and get a job at the Mary Magdalene Mental Mercyseat. However, her name is also particularly emblematic, in a way which helps to connect further with the idea for solipsism. As it happens, Celia's name sounds just like the French expression "S'il y a", which means something like "if it exists" or "if it happens" – her own name raises doubts pertaining to her ontological existence on Murphy's skullscape. This also happens to be the person he loves and who seems to love him the most back, even though her job – her definition, her end – is to be a prostitute. Celia is the only character who is obstinately defined, through a very large and absurd list of characteristics and measurements (such as her waist measurement)¹⁶. All the other characters are described minimally and satirically; for instance, Miss Counihan, Murphy's fiancé is described as "For an Irish girl, Miss Counihan was quite exceptionally anthropoid."¹⁷ It is as if all the characters in this novel existed in the faded background of a dream, with only certain stressed defining aspects, be them physical or related to their social function. At the same time, everything that is obstinately described in *Murphy* is what happens to lose its physical concreteness: on the one hand, Celia is the most defined character, through a list of about thirty attributes, and she functions as Murphy's love interest, however, her emblematic name, removes all the possibility for concreteness when it echoes a French expression of doubt around her existence "s'il y a". On the other hand, Murphy, who is a victim of around thirty attempts of being defined, seems to suffer from each re-definition: we see him working at a Mental Mercyseat, but we know as much or even less about him than one could learn through a reading of the skullscape's description on section six of this novel.

While working at the Mary Magdalene Mental Mercyseat as a nurse, Murphy meets Mr Endon, with whom he plays various chess games. However, Murphy tries to symmetrically reproduce each of

¹⁶ An extraordinary interpretation of this list of measurements and bodily qualities comes from Declan Kiberd, who wrote, in "*Murphy* and the world of Samuel Beckett": "Even in his attitude to Celia, Murphy is clinical and Physical. Celia is a prostitute. She is presented by the narrator with the suggestion that she, all body, may complement Murphy, all mind", p. 94, 2011.

¹⁷ Beckett, S., *Murphy*, p. 69.

Mr Endon's plays and ends up opening his game to lose in a "Fool's mate", by moving certain pawns in order to open for the opponent's Queen to check-mate, leaving the King with no alternative path to run to, repeating the cycle of being unable to receive feedback and act up in order to achieve distinct results. The game of chess seems to serve the purpose of explaining Murphy why staying quiet in the same place, with no movement that would allow for his definition is what is actually going to kill him—just as the King is checked.

By the end of the novel, Cooper, Murphy's servant, finds Murphy dead in his room, after an explosion provoked by a gas leak. Murphy's death reiterates the subject of attempting to define Murphy's form: "Cooper entered, found Murphy in the appalling position described in section three, assumed that a murder had been bungled and retreated headlong."¹⁸ this position had been previously described as that of a "very inexperienced diver about to enter the water"¹⁹ Murphy's comical quest for undefinition starts with his first fall from his chair, which puts him in this "inexperienced diver" position as if he was learning to dive in society itself, it culminates with the fall of his white King (and his subsequential death by gas explosion), but it is dead that his most comical moment of undefinition happens. As Cooper carries Murphy's ashes through a London pub, a man offends him and he ends up throwing Murphy's remains at him and the result is described as such:

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.²⁰

As much as death might try to finally define Murphy's form as a pot of ashes, his biggest moment of comical undefinition happens when his ashes fall and are spilt on the floor of a pub, further proving the instability of his form. Not even death can define (and, therefore, determine) Murphy's end.

¹⁸ Beckett, S., *Murphy*, p. 72.

¹⁹ Beckett, S., *Murphy*, p. 20.

²⁰ Beckett, S., *Murphy*, p. 154.

Comparing solitudes

Regarding the idea of solipsism, George Santayana once wrote that “The solipsist is an incredulous spectator of his own romance, thinks his own adventures, fictions and accepts a solipsism of the present moment”²¹. Both the characters studied across this essay find some representation through this description. While on Des Esseintes’ case we’re dealing with someone who is conceiving a model for solipsism, by isolating himself and making up his own aesthetic experiences, while still being helped by his servants (who were forbidden from seeing or interacting with him); on the other hand, Murphy is actually perceiving a solipsism as he believes the reality he lives in is fabricated by his skullscape. He spends most of his time alone and he is able to acknowledge other people and the outside world, but he sees everything as a construct built by his mind. His denial of getting a job and mingling in society is the taking of a position against an idea of destiny that depends on social interaction. Such a position is inscribed in Huysmans’ novel’s title, *À Rebours*, which means something like “going against the tide”.

While Des Esseintes’ solipsism has an aesthetical component of experimenting with and stimulating the senses, Murphy’s one has an anaesthetic component: his desires to keep swaying back and forth, alone and with no alternative, therefore, no aesthetical input, or societal feedback. On the account of their medical conditions or outcomes, while Des Esseintes’ is timely diagnosed with a problem that originated in his isolation, Murphy dies because no one was around to help him out after the gas explosion in the Mercyseat. Finally, in what comes to their intellectual production, while fate seems predictable in Murphy’s case, as he believes everything is a figment of his imagination, Des Esseintes’ isolation is motivated by a will to hide from society’s judgements and to manipulate his impressions far from the daily life hazards.

The problem which stems from solipsism in a novel is that of the constitution of a *Bildung*, which requires direct contact with aesthetic experiences and the ability to share these experiences in a societal context. Following Wilhelm von Humboldt’s ideas regarding *Bildung*,

²¹ Santayana, George, *Scepticism and Animal Faith*, p. 15, 1955.

neither Des Esseintes, nor Murphy have developed a *Bildung*, because of the lack of contact with the external world and society. However, is their personal development made unviable for believing in solipsism? There are plenty of novels where different perspectives regarding what's going on are in conflict, such as Miguel de Cervantes' *Don Quijote* or Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*. On the one hand, Alonso Quijano hallucinates the fantastic parts of his journeys, whose sober perception is given through Sancho Panza, who deconstructs Quijote's hallucinations; on the other hand, Alice abandons twice her own world and wakes up at the end of both her adventures. Regarding the first case, Quijote ends up reminding, on his deathbed, who he was and what he had been doing while hallucinating with a better story; regarding the second one, Alice wakes up and comments with her cat what she remembers about her dreams. These novels that offer multiple perspectives don't ask for a single one to be chosen, but they offer one that frames the other one (Alonso Quijano's deathbed sobriety and Alice's awakening). If there wasn't a development of character in these characters since the beginning of their stories and up until the moment they wake up to what really happened, then why do they express change?

If we read *À Rebours* or *Murphy* as cases of solipsism, then what happened in the novels won't pass from a great mental staging to our eyes, and all the attempts to define a character are made useless because there isn't an actual contact of the character with society (which seems to be inexistent). However, these characters don't stop having and living their experiences in a way that gives the reader a privileged access to their identity.

Reaching this point of the essay, an attempt at the definition of solipsism seems to be in order. Solipsism denotes the belief that only a subject's impressions and reflections about the world can be known. This word is composed of the Latin particles "Solus," an adjective (part of a class of words used to grammatically describe facts or deeds) that describes that which is alone in a category, that which is separated or isolated from others, or that which is peerless; and "Ipse," which is a pronoun (a class of words that is used to replace another) that refers to what we use to call "self," an individual's character or behaviour, to what is able to be identified through some characterization or those who own

an identity. So, on the one hand, we have the adjective “Solus,” for solitude, loneliness, or uniqueness, which describes a state of affairs pertaining to an individual, and, on the other, we have the pronoun “Ipse”, which complicates everything by being a pronoun, which means it replaces another grammatical figure, but being this pronoun “Ipse”, it pertains to the sense of self, the capability of apprehending and developing an identity. This all means that whatever is being described as sole or alone is something that’s standing for something else, a sign for a being. The “Ipse” facet of the word solipsism is what has to do with a more spiritual, or even religious, level of analysis. Take, for example, Erich Auerbach’s “Odysseus’ Scar” chapter in *Mimesis*, which is dedicated to the differences between the means of literary representation of the Biblical literature and the Homer epics. In this chapter, Auerbach describes the Biblical language as one of pronominalization, where sometimes it is hard for the reader to understand what is being referred to:

The King James version translates the opening as follows (Genesis 21: 1): “And it came to pass after these things, that God did tempt Abraham, and said to him, Abraham! and he said, Behold, here I am.” Even this opening startles us when we come to it from Homer. Where are the two speakers? We are not told. The reader, however, knows that they are not normally to be found together in one place on earth, that one of them, God, in order to speak to Abraham, must come from somewhere, must enter the earthly realm from some unknown heights or depths. Whence does he come, whence does he call to Abraham? We are not told.²²

For this essay’s argument, it is significant that a pronoun replaces the particle for identity in the word solipsism, as there’s a belief relation between the solipsist and their loneliness. Which leads us to Charles Sanders Peirce’s description of the meaning of the word solipsism: “There is in the dictionary a word, solipsism, meaning the belief that the believer is the only existing person.”²³ In this essay, “What

²² Auerbach, Erich, *Mimesis: The representation of reality in Western Literature*, p. 8, 2003.

²³ Peirce, Charles S., “What is Christian faith?”, p. 353, 1966.

is Christian faith?”, Peirce creates an analogy between solipsism (as the belief in metaphysical solitude) and prayer (as a solitary activity based on belief), the difference being that, while solipsism is an incessant belief, prayer is a sporadic activity. Peirce, then, writes about superstition, which he deems “the grime upon the venerable pavement of the sacred edifice.”²⁴ Concluding that, because of superstition and the loneliness in the activity of prayer, the self-seeking principle of prayer seems to have been confounded with a metaphysical solitude. This self-seeking principle of prayer is the demand for one’s capability of loving themselves with the further objective of mingling in a society’s affairs. This capability of learning to love and live with ourselves that prayer allows for is very different from the metaphysical belief that nothing else exists outside of one’s self.

The driving motives of Des Esseintes’ and Murphy’s characters are very different, but their isolation configures certain aspects of solipsism. Des Esseintes’ demand for what he thought was aesthetic authenticity, but that we tried to prove was artificiality, by isolating himself from society and inoculating the aesthetic experiments he was having creates a hermetic system. Murphy, on the other side, believes that everything happening around him is a product of his “skullscape.” Des Esseintes’ loneliness was an attempt to provide conditions for cleaner reflections upon the world and his impressions of it. But Murphy’s solipsism implies a different kind of loneliness, one based on a belief, which can be described as modern: it is a pretension to solitude in the middle of the multitude.

Works cited

- Auerbach, Erich, *Mimesis: The representation of reality in Western Literature*, Princeton University Press, 2003.
- Baudelaire, Charles, *Œuvres Complètes de Charles Baudelaire II – Curiosités Esthétiques*, Paris: Garnier, 1868.
- Baudelaire, Charles, *Les Fleurs du Mal*, Paris : Poulet-Malassis et de Broise Libraires-Éditeurs, 1857.

²⁴ Peirce, Charles S., *idem.*, p. 358.

- Baudelaire, Charles, “Eloge du maquillage”, https://www.gildasbernier.fr/wp-content/uploads/2011/09/Charles-Baudelaire_Eloge-du-maquillage.pdf, September 30th, 2020.
- Beckett, Samuel, *Murphy*, London: Calder Publications, 1998.
- Cavell, Stanley, *Little did I know, Excerpts from memory*, Stanford University Press, 2010.
- Goethe, Johann Wolfgang, *The Metamorphosis of Plants*, Cambridge, Massachusetts, London: The MIT Press, 2009.
- Humboldt, Wilhelm von, “Theorie der Bildung des Menschen” in *Werke in fünf Bänden*, Stuttgart, J. G. Cotta’sche Buchhandlung, 1980.
- Huysmans, Joris-Karl, *À Rebours*, Paris, Librairie des Amateurs, 1920.
- Kiberd, Declan, “*Murphy* and the World of Samuel Beckett” in *Samuel Beckett*, edited by Harold Bloom, New York: Infobase Publishing, 2011, pp. 89-99.
- Peirce, Charles Sanders, “What is Christian faith?” in *Charles Sanders Peirce: Selected Writings*, New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1966, pp. 353-357.
- Riffaterre, Michael, “Decadent Paradoxes”, translated by Liz Constable and Matthew Potolsky in *perennial decay: On the Aesthetics & Politics of Decadence*, edited by Liz Constable, Dennis Denisoff, and Matthew Potolsky, University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999, pp. 65-79.
- Santayana, George, *Scepticism and Animal Faith*, New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1955.
- Seidel, Matthew David, *The Comic Bildungsroman*, Berkeley: University of Carolina, 2010.
- Wilde, Oscar, *The Uncensored Picture of Dorian Gray*, London: Harvard University Press, 2012.