The Cambridge Journal of Postcolonial Literary Inquiry, 3(1), pp 97–115 January 2016.
 doi:10.1017/pli.2015.26

"Nor Mind Nor Body of Me Can Be Touched": The Politics of Passivity in Moyshe Kulbak's *Montog* and Samuel Beckett's *Murphy*

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This article will compare two novels: Moyshe Kulbak's Montog *("Monday") and Samuel Beckett's* Murphy. *Each novel ends with the death of its protagonist, figured as both a senseless act and the apotheosis of its hero's self-reflexive, ironic rejection of community, faith, and purpose. Drawing on theories of Hannah Arendt, this comparison proposes to read the two narratives and their preoccupation with incarceration, institutionalization, revolutionary activity, religion, and the family as profound yet oblique parables on the nature of privation, resistance, and commitment in the multiple senses. Indeed, by arguing on behalf of a "politics of failure," this comparison proposes a methodology for reading Beckett and Kulbak postcolonially that in turn invites further consideration of the postcolonial status of expatriate Irish and early-Soviet Jewish cultures, respectively. This essay creates for the two narratives a community of elective affinity that neither author would have envisioned for himself, and thus demonstrates that their respective critiques of ideological progress—via their shared strategies of parody, linguistic marginality, and exile—fulfill an explicitly political function.*

Keywords: Samuel Beckett, incarceration, modernism, novel, postcoloniality, Russian revolution, Yiddish

"It was there in Farley's kitchen, at moments like these, that Ira for the first time glimpsed a certain similarity of condition, of oppression between the Irish and the Jews, something that had never occurred to him before on 119th Street, under the domination of the pugnacious and ascendant Irish: 'He's Oirish,' mom would mimic them, her throat swelling up with extravagant pride. 'The mayor is Oirish. Jack Dempsey is Oirish. Everyone of note is Oirish. Is it true?' she would ask. 'Are they all Irish?' It seemed true; it seems as if they had come from a long line of masters, of wielders of authority. But now for the first time, he realized, and not in words so much as in feeling, that they come from a background of oppression and deprivation and subjection."[1]

—Henry Roth, *Mercy of a Rude Stream*

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1 Henry Roth, *Mercy of a Rude Stream: A Star Shines Over Mt. Morris Park* (New York: Picador, 1995), 220–21.

In the account of his prison experiences during the Biafran civil war in Nigeria of the late 1960s, Wole Soyinka describes his decision to undertake a hunger strike—a strategy that others incarcerated with him would also adopt—by writing, "The very act of taking the decision not to eat brought the futile spasm of rage and the trembling under control almost at once. My mind was working again, dispassionately."[2] The renunciation of food constitutes both an act of resistance against his unjust imprisonment, but also an effort, explicitly acknowledged, at regaining control in a situation of ostensible helplessness; if the regime that has arrested him can claim possession of his body, the only available protest is to refuse the food through which the State forces him to remain available for its continuing domination. As Soyinka later elaborates, "Something must be tested even at the risk of life. I must reach that point where nor mind nor body of me can be touched, move beyond the capacity of small minds to soil my being or reach towards it."[3] Eventually, in acquiescence of his status as a writer with access to the international press, the prison hospital offers Soyinka sleeping pills as a concession to the pain of fasting or a means of dampening his resolve against their regimen, and Soyinka responds by neither accepting nor rejecting the pills, but creating with them a ritual for dramatizing the stalemate in which he was engaged: "I . . . invented a drill of picking them up during bad spells, counting them carefully, patterning them and putting them back again. I lay flat, sat cross-legged, stood on my head, underwent a repertory of practiced and improvised positions in the battle to rule my pulse, quiet noises in the head."[4]

Soyinka's gesture of denying the sleeping pills their use-value in order to reclaim control over his otherwise powerless predicament resonates with two novels—Samuel Beckett's *Murphy* (1938) and Moyshe Kulbak's *Montog* (1926)—in ways that amplify the political significance of these earlier works' preoccupation with ritual, renunciation, and physical disengagement from the social world. In *Murphy*, for example, the eponymous protagonist strikes a characteristic pose while sitting in London's Hyde Park and contemplating the five tea biscuits he intends, but will fail, to consume for his lunch:

> Overcome by these perspectives Murphy fell forward on his face on the grass, beside those biscuits of which it could be said as truly as of the stars, that one differed from another, but of which he could not partake in their fullness until he had learnt not to prefer any one to any other.[5]

The compulsion to partake of the tea biscuits' fullness, as with so many objects constituting Murphy's external world, motivates him to calculate the 120 possible permutations of eating them, a sequence that can be experienced only if he disavows his preference for one, the ginger biscuit, over the others. This signifies a central conflict in the novel, between the interior world of Murphy's mind and the exterior

2 Wole Soyinka, *The Man Died: Prison Notes of Wole Soyinka* (1972; New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1988), 40.
3 Ibid., 225.
4 Ibid., 82–83.
5 Samuel Beckett, *Murphy* (New York: Grove, 2011), 97.

https://doi.org/10.1017/pli.2015.26 Published online by Cambridge University Press

world, which he would subordinate to his perception through permutation and proliferation rather than relation and interaction. As in many conflicts, desire becomes the force that propels the narrative forward and subverts the fiction of easy resolutions.

For a novel so hermetic in its discourse and thematic concerns, a comparative analysis may seem counterintuitive, yet it is just such a methodology that offers the prospect of social and historical interpretation, by demonstrating that Beckett's peculiar dramatization of desire and its discontents finds resonance in an unlikely near-contemporary: the Yiddish author Moyshe Kulbak's second published narrative, *Montog* ("Monday"). Kulbak (1896–1937), who was active during the 1920s in Vilna (Vilnius), Berlin, and Soviet Minsk, was best known in his lifetime as a prolific and skillful poet, exceling in both pastoral lyrics and urban expressionism; he was also the most formally experimental and philosophically engaged of Yiddish novelists, and it was likely in that capacity that he ran afoul of Stalinist censorship, which led to his early imprisonment and execution, a fate eventually shared by all prominent Soviet Yiddish writers. *Montog*, published in Warsaw, is one of the first Yiddish novels to depict the Sovietization of traditional Jewish life following the October Revolution. Its protagonist, Mordecai-Marcus, is an intellectual and Hebrew teacher arrested by the Bolsheviks for "agitation," an ironic accusation because his goals in life were passivity and renunciation of social commitments in favor of an idealization of poverty and an abdication of desire. When Mordecai-Marcus's companion Gnesye, with whom he engages in an apparently celibate courtship, begins to preach his gospel, the poor congregate to anoint him as their savior, a title he explicitly rejects. The attention this confrontation generates nonetheless attracts the Bolshevik police's notice, and they shoot him—though Kulbak allows him a final vision of the Nothing he wishes to embrace before closing the novel with his death.

The purpose of this comparison is not to establish a pattern of repetition or identification between *Montog* and *Murphy*, but to understand in what ways they are complementary. In this methodology, differences and inversions count as much as similarities and correspondence, for it is only by acknowledging the formal and historical autonomy of these two works that their thematic and structural correspondences can illuminate a reciprocal political and aesthetic dilemma—the means by which social collapse and philosophical crisis can be represented. Both politics and aesthetics bespeak a social relationship and therefore require an ethics, even as ethics remains categorically distinct from either politics or aesthetics. *Montog* and *Murphy* are premised on an analogous paradox, first enunciated during Murphy's episode with the tea biscuits: the impossible experience of fullness sought via the abandonment of desire. Both construct fragmentary social panoramas—parodies of nineteenth-century realism—by focusing on their protagonists' failed efforts to renounce bonds of family, affection, and community. Both depict characters struggling to divest themselves of social identifications in politically fraught contexts of dislocation and dispossession, and both use religious discourse to articulate the isolation of their characters from religious communion. Each of these commonalities provides a strategy for reading these works as postcolonial narratives because together they indicate how the nationhood of, respectively, Irish expatriates and Soviet Jews can be read in only fragmentary, negative terms.

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Moreover, both novels demonstrate the incapacity to transcend desire, a transcendence figured as nonbeing, through which the fullness of existence can become manifest. In conceptual terms, one link joining these narratives—and distinguishing them from the more explicit politics of a nonfictional work such as *The Man Died*—is their equation of politics with interpersonal relations; their protagonists' respective rejection of their social class must therefore be read not only as an explicitly political gesture, but as *the* political key to these works. In this sense, they each present a critique of sociability that can in turn be socially critiqued. Such a critique hinges in both conceptual and historical terms on a dialectical relationship between *privacy* and *privation*. As Hannah Arendt explains of the evolution of the private and the public in the modern era:

> [M]odern privacy is at least as sharply opposed to the social realm . . . as it is to the political, properly speaking. . . . [M]odern privacy in its most relevant function, to shelter the intimate, was discovered as the opposite not of the political sphere but of the social, and which it is therefore most closely and authentically related. . . . The intimacy of the heart, unlike the private household, has no objective tangible place in the world, nor can the society against which it protests and asserts itself be localized with the same certainty as the public sphere.[6]

The intimacy that Arendt refers to is the closed space of the private room, an intimacy that according to Arendt was first articulated by Jean-Jacques Rousseau and which fosters the creation of romantic conventions of love as well as modern conceptions of class relations.[7] Mordecai-Marcus and Murphy reject precisely these notions in pursuit of a more radical, in fact impossible, understanding of self that disavows personal relations along with a Cartesian understanding of the relationship between mind and body.

The impossible quest of these two protagonists to transcend interpersonal commitments can be read symptomatically as the failure of the social relations that were fostered by the construction of bourgeois interior spaces—spaces either in economically determined short supply among the impoverished Irish living in London during the 1930s or politically repressed by Soviet policies of the 1920s—and which in turn had encouraged the cultivation of private emotions unavailable or irrelevant to these protagonists. The urge to protect intimacy, figured in both novels as the autonomy of the mind rather than the solidarity of the heart, is why Murphy and Mordecai-Marcus feel compelled to resist the bonds of domestic relations as fervently as they do political engagement; although their refiguring of subjectivity dissents

6 Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 38–39.

7 In the contemporary American context, a right to privacy has been the central point of contestation in current debates over both reproductive freedom and marriage equality. In 1965, for example, US Supreme Court Justice William O. Douglas famously asserted in a case declaring state bans on contraception unconstitutional (*Griswold v. Connecticut*) that "We deal with a right of privacy older than the Bill of Rights." As the historian Jill Lepore points out, however, the right to privacy has developed only with respect to bourgeois property rights contemporaneous with the Constitution's Bill of Rights—and in previous Court decisions, particularly with respect to women's suffrage, the notion of privacy had been invoked as often to limit freedoms as to grant them. See Jill Lepore, "To Have and to Hold: Reproduction, Marriage, and the Constitution," *The New Yorker* (May 25, 2015): 34–39.

explicitly from the understanding of selfhood that Arendt champions, in ways that she would likely have detested, her distinctions between the social and the political remain essential to this discussion, and the respective failure of these characters' pursuit of a personal zone of impenetrable privacy perhaps confirms the indivisibility of modern selfhood as much as they resist it. In this sense, Beckett and Kulbak do not dismiss the political dimension of their narratives, each set in contexts of overdetermined political resonance, so much as they sublimate the political via a breakdown of interpersonal relationships. If Murphy and Mordecai-Marcus are incapable of domestic intimacy, how much greater is their incapacity in the political sphere, and how much more resonant is this incapacity as a mode of resistance? In either the economy of the British metropolis or the dictatorship of the proletariat, what individual political gesture is more threatening than "uselessness"?[8]

This latter question prompts a return to the passage in *Murphy* that instigated the comparison with Kulbak: Murphy's calculation of the 120 possible permutations of five tea biscuits is an explicitly noneconomic preoccupation, motivated by Murphy's poverty and resistance to employment, that illustrates by negative example Arendt's observation that economics itself "could achieve a scientific character only when men had become social beings and unanimously followed certain patterns of behavior so that those who did not keep the rules could be considered to be asocial or abnormal."[9] In dystopian terms, the whole of *Murphy* can be considered a parodic parable on the consequences of evading and resisting social, economic, and political rules. In a utopian sense, however, it can also be read as an effort at imagining its own rules, equally capricious and demanding, in order to defend the autonomy of the individual against the homogenizing demands of mass society, and more explicitly the demands placed on an Irish expatriate in imperial London. Or so at least is one conclusion one might draw of this cosmopolitan author, as deterritorialized as any Yiddish literary figure, writing a novel with a protagonist making his way through the most realistically drawn itinerary of his creator's career, in the heart of the London cityscape.[10] What, then, does a historical location of *Murphy* with *Montog* teach their readers, and how can one understand their respective historical contexts more clearly by charting the efforts of their protagonists to evade the social—the temporal and territorial habitat of history?

A response to this inquiry may be deduced from a consideration of the circumstances in which these protagonists articulate their dissent from the social domain. For Mordecai-Marcus, this process comes to fruition during his first incarceration: "Mordecai-Marcus sat on the plank bed with his legs hanging down, dangling

8 In his reading of *Murphy* as a postcolonial novel, Patrick Bixby makes a similar point, from an opposite perspective, arguing that Murphy's inability to reconcile himself with the demands of the nation-state determines the dysfunctionality of his interpersonal relationships: "Franco Moretti . . . suggests that the *Bildungsroman* as an expression of transcendental homelessness manifests a desire to accommodate the private with the public in a symbolic form that narrates the formation of an integrated subjectivity in modern European society. Beckett's narrative, expressing a much more literal homelessness, portrays the failure of its protagonist to reconcile with the demands of the nation-state and its various social institutions, and yet this failure presents itself as the precondition for postcolonial subjectivity." See Patrick Bixby, *Samuel Beckett and the Postcolonial Novel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 89.

9 Arendt, 42.

10 For a detailed discussion of *Murphy*'s itineraries through London, see Bixby, 90–105.

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underneath; he was thinking. The entire prison was slowly thinking: A quiet man is well off, living with pure Being in the world."[11] Pure Being, for Mordecai-Marcus, is a negation of the physical world, as he states emphatically at the climax of his reveries, *Es iz gornisht nishto*,[12] which can variously be translated as "Nothing is there"; "There is nothing there"; "The Nothing is what isn't"; "The Nothing is what is." Later, the protagonist will reformulate this credo by saying "Negation. Negation. Like an act of cognition. We think that a person attains cognition of the world not through a positive process of thought, but through non-thought, at the very moment when the mind is separated from the body, the time we call 'negation.' "[13] In the original moment of insight, however, the site of his realization seems to play on the dual meaning of the word used to denote it, *tefisah*, "prison" in Yiddish, but "comprehension" or "conceptualization" in Hebrew, a plausible set of associations given Mordecai-Marcus's occasional employment as a Hebrew teacher. In etymological terms, these connotations suggest the notion—relevant to both *Montog* and *Murphy*—that the mind itself serves as a prison-house for perception.

At the heart of Mordecai-Marcus's renunciation of the physical world is the desire from which he would emancipate himself, embodied in the anonymous impoverished masses whom he credits with having achieved the freedom that he seeks. Just as Mordecai-Marcus valorizes the poor as his philosophical point of reference, the living example of a class of people desiring nothing, Murphy discovers the schizophrenic as his embodiment of this metaphysical ideal. What these protagonists desire, their idealized classes seem to possess, yet in the desire itself the protagonists betray their estrangement from the group with which each identifies. Similarly, both works underscore the significance of punitive institutions—the poor house, the prison, the mental hospital—for their heroes' negative concept of freedom; where Soyinka's hunger strike had been undertaken to affect his release from prison, it is through incarceration that Murphy and Mordecai-Marcus seek their freedom. Mordecai-Marcus's repudiation of the material world, in this sense, is the ultimate rebuke of dialectical materialism, and the ostensible crimes for which he is twice arrested are both refuting the cosmological assumptions of the revolution and competing with its efforts to win the allegiance of the poor. Yet paradoxically at the enunciation of his dissent and his embrace of the nil, the charges against him are dropped. Nothing disrupts the clarity of his philosophy more than its unmediated encounter with the rudderless nothingness it proclaims, hence the prerequisite, for both protagonists, of confinement for their freedom to acquire meaning.

As with the "parable" of the five tea biscuits with which this discussion commenced, Beckett makes clear that Murphy's confinement, like Mordecai-Marcus's, is at once an exercise in renunciation and a means of experiencing the plenitude of the world in negative terms. He thus describes his protagonist's consciousness by writing,

11 Moyshe Kulbak, *Montog* (Warsaw: Kultur-lige, 1929), 34. English translation in Joachim Neugroschel, *The Shtetl: A Creative Anthology of Jewish Life in Eastern Europe* (1979; Woodstock, NY: Overlook, 1995), 537. For the sake of convenience, subsequent references to the Yiddish original of Kulbak's novel will be incorporated in footnotes as "Y"; all references to Neugroschel's English translation will be referred to in footnotes as "E."

12 Kulbak Y, 36.

13 Kulbak Y, 92; Kulbak E, 537.

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"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."[14] Parallel to the philosophical premise of idealist thought—that the mind is the structure in which the perception of the universe grants being to objects—is the suggestion of the mind as Murphy's one genuinely private domain; as Arendt notes, the original sense of privacy relates to privation, lack, or absence,[15] but here, consequently, the narrator asserts that Murphy's ultimate, impenetrable privacy is not a condition of impoverishment. Indeed, such privacy is a function and a property of the mind rather than the contemporary understanding of privacy as the zone of unfettered, unspeakable bodily function.[16] Yet at the same time that Beckett describes Murphy's retreat from the universe outside his mind toward the universe within, he undermines the claims of idealist philosophy by tying this process, with absurd comedy, to the malfunction of Murphy's body in the material world.

Murphy therefore depends on the physical constraints of his rocking chair to achieve the vacancy of consciousness necessary to apprehend the nothingness of pure being. As Beckett writes, "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. . . . And life in his mind gave him pleasure, such pleasure that pleasure was not the word."[17] This misnamed pleasure holds the key to a social reading of these works, insofar as the life of the mind for both protagonists is ultimately dependent on the captivity of the body. Murphy's rocking chair ritual represents this paradox viscerally: glossing over the mechanical difficulties of how the protagonist manages to bind himself sevenfold to the chair, the nudity and self-propulsion of his action give an obvious erotic gloss to its self-gratifying and self-abusing aspects, the climax of which[18] is the release of blood from his nose rather than what might be anticipated, but not narrated, from a lower bodily protrusion. In its repetition, this undertaking plays out as an elaborate joke premised on all the moralistic horror stories told about masturbation, read literally; it is an activity that results, successively, in Murphy's blindness, maiming, disfigurement, madness, and death. Understandably, it is an activity that requires total privacy, and its physical dimensions illustrate the impossibility of understanding Murphy's mental functions in the abstract, incorporeal terms of philosophical discourse. The inseparability of Murphy's mind from his body is as essential to understanding the novel as is their ostensible dissociation from one another, or of both from the social world.

So, too, in *Montog* is Mordecai-Marcus's pursuit of the naught inevitably a social act that in its dramatization further implicates the protagonist, critically, in the something of revolutionary politics, with its limitations on the ideological freedom and physical mobility of the individual. As Mordecai-Marcus requests following his first release from prison, "Is it possible to remain voluntarily in penitentiary? . . . You understand, I was in a state of trance, which certainly won't come back. But once again

14 Beckett, 107.
15 Arendt, 38.
16 Arendt, 73.
17 Beckett, 2.
18 Beckett, 28.

https://doi.org/10.1017/pli.2015.26 Published online by Cambridge University Press

I can sense that they will come to me, they will have to come to me, the poor. Do you understand?"[19] This impossible request—reminiscent for the anglophone reader of Oliver Twist's request for more gruel at the orphanage—signifies both the extent to which the incarcerated is exempted from the social order and the degree to which Mordecai-Marcus, like Murphy, desires such exemption for his own philosophical purposes. The request to remain in prison is the only means for Mordecai-Marcus to evade the revolution's control over him and it confirms the paradox, on which both books are premised, that the fixity of the enclosed space compensates for and contrasts with the chaotic new world of political reality. Therefore, chaos is the motivating anxiety in both narratives, as Murphy surmises when he deduces the philological connection between "chaos" and "gas,"[20] and in *Montog* this chaos is the Bolshevik revolution's destruction of previous moral, social, and metaphysical certitudes.

In this regard the dominant discourse for Mordecai-Marcus's challenge to dialectical materialism is an antinomian religious one, and Kulbak's choice of imagery to illustrate his heresies finds striking resonance in Beckett's writing. Where *Montog* employs a half-parodic mystical vocabulary syncretically derived from Hasidic kabala and Christian quietism, Murphy uses a parodic discourse of the occult—astrology, Pythagoreanism, numerology, spiritualism, etc. These references reiterate the dominant preoccupation of both novels, to establish a private order of existence in response to the chaos unleashed on the social world by political dislocation. The occult and the heretical stand in relation to religion as the inmates of the mental institution and the prison are juxtaposed against society as such: they mimic the larger system in every respect except that they are consciously closed systems where the larger social structure is conceived as open and freely circulating; where society at large is conceived primarily as an economic entity, the institutions with which Murphy and Mordecai-Marcus identify are primarily punitive. These institutions function as hermetic systems constructed for fugitives from the larger society who consider society to have failed them either because it is too open (chaotic), too restrictive (repressive), or both. Religion in these novels likewise reflects not a longing for transcendence but rather the capriciousness of any system of order. It does not create a sense of community between or among characters so much as it isolates each character in an additional structure of confinement.

To this end, Mordecai-Marcus refers to the Book of Job throughout *Montog*, and he compares his fate with its protagonist. *Murphy*'s narrator also imagines his protagonist in the Book of Job, stating "Word went round among the members of the Blake League that the Master's conception of Bildad the Shuhite had come to life and was stalking about London in a green suit, seeking whom he might comfort."[21] Although the reference to Job serves as an aesthetic model for conceptualizing Murphy, the narrator preempts any ethical lessons the Blake League might be tempted to derive from the apparition: "Murphy required for his pity no other butt than himself."[22] Indeed, religious reference in *Murphy* is always an irony cultivated by

19 Kulbak Y 41–42; Kulbak E 507.

20 Beckett, 175. On Murphy's correct surmise of the derivation of "gas" from "chaos," see Ruby Cohn, *A Beckett Canon* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2005), 82.

21 Beckett, 70.

22 Beckett, 71.

https://doi.org/10.1017/pli.2015.26 Published online by Cambridge University Press

the narrator, whereas in *Montog* Mordecai-Marcus himself serves as the primary blasphemer.

From a modern perspective, the Book of Job is the one biblical work best suited to an existential consideration of God's indifference to the suffering of humanity and His disengagement from the world of the every day, so its prominence in these works is perhaps unsurprising. More unconventional, at least for Kulbak, is the shared affinity each work has with Christological references and the Passion narrative. As Jean-Michel Rabaté writes of Murphy's effort at establishing a relationship with Mr Endon, the failure of which precipitates the final crisis resulting in Murphy's ambiguous death:

> In Murphy, the "butterfly kiss" of Murphy to Mr Endon seals the former's misunderstanding of the latter's psychosis. In this way, Murphy discovers the Nothing, which generates intolerable anxiety and leads him to look for rest in the garret. . . . [An] illusion of wordless autonomy brings Murphy as close to Mr Endon as is possible, after which he can only deplore his illusion—he falls into a state of Christ-like despair after the failure of his chess game with the schizophrenic.[23]

The butterfly kiss is therefore a Judas kiss; it is the climactic event in Murphy's ostensible martyrdom, and it signifies not the unity of two characters but their isolation from each other. To compound this irony, the Christological motif reasserts itself when Murphy's repudiated intimates from Ireland, Miss Counihan, Wylie, and Neary, come to London like a burlesque of the Three Wise Men to proclaim "our news his good,"[24] which presages not the birth of their putative savior, but his death.

Similarly, Mordecai-Marcus quotes from Matthew 12:47–50[25] to refute its equation of discipleship with family in favor of a love of being that precludes love between people.[26] Mordecai-Marcus is never more Christlike than when he engages in a disputation with Jesus. His identification with the speechless poor runs parallel to the communist valorization of the dispossessed and the Christian idealization of poverty at a time of preoccupation with Jesus running throughout Yiddish and Hebrew literature.[27] The Christ motif in *Montog* and most contemporaneous works of Jewish modernism functions neither as an assimilationist appeal to non-Jewish audiences nor a secularizing move away from traditional Jewishness, but instead as a strategy of

23 Jean-Michel Rabaté, "Murphydurke, or Towards a Phenomenology of Immaturity (Reading *Murphy* with Gombrowicz's *Ferdydurke*)," *Beckett and Phenomenology*, eds. Ulrika Maude and Matthew Feldman (New York: Continuum, 2009), 124.

24 Beckett, 226.

25 In the King James version: "Then one said unto him, Behold, thy mother and thy brethren stand without, desiring to speak with thee. But he answered and said unto him that told him, Who is my mother? and who are my brethren? And he stretched forth his hand toward his disciples, and said, Behold my mother and my brethren! For whosoever shall do the will of my Father which is in heaven, the same is my brother, and sister, and mother."

26 Kulbak Y, 54; Kulbak E, 514–15.

27 For more on the significance of Jesus to modern Jewish cultures, see Matthew Hoffman, *From Rebel to Rabbi: Reclaiming Jesus and the Making of Modern Jewish Culture* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007) and Neta Stahl, *Other and Brother: Jesus in the 20th Century Jewish Literary Landscape* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012).

https://doi.org/10.1017/pli.2015.26 Published online by Cambridge University Press

inverted sacralization. The strategy of identification with Jesus serves to "reappropriate" a historically Jewish figure from the Christian religion in a way calculated to trespass the pieties of both Christian and Jewish orthodoxies, as well as the ostensible rejection of religious faith among political radicals of all stripes. This simultaneous identification with Christ and repudiation of Christian doctrine—identifying with the figure of Jesus while disavowing the essence of his revelation—rests at the heart of Mordecai-Marcus's spiritual vocabulary and provides the motivation for the novel's title: Mordecai-Marcus rejects the Jewish Sabbath in favor of "Monday Jews," pious beggars who in traditional Jewish life would go door to door every Monday (and Thursday) seeking alms. As the poor proclaim in his honor, "We don't want a Sabbath, we don't need a Sabbath, we are weekday Jews!"[28] signifying their disavowal of religious law as well as their elevation of Monday as a new holy day.

The role that Mordecai-Marcus's companion Gnesye, a cryptic parody of Mary Magdalene,[29] plays in the spread of his antinomian gospel counts as a further instance of failed identification and disconnection, rather than relationship. Already in the salon of Mordecai-Marcus's former employer Dr. Bitshkovsky, where the erstwhile bourgeoisie reconvene following the revolution and Mordecai-Marcus's repudiation of them, she explains Mordecai-Marcus's dissent from Bolshevism as if it is an ideology they share as a couple, when in fact his rejection of politics entails a larger disentanglement from relations with other people, herself included. The terms in which she expounds upon his credo, invoking in Mordecai-Marcus's name the French revolution, Rousseau, Voltaire, Tolstoy, Dante, the Spanish dramatist Calderón, Racine, Shakespeare, and Pushkin,[30] merely reiterate a canon of liberal gentility to which prewar Russian Jews would have aspired; she misreads the radicalism of his gesture precisely because it is an extremism that excludes her along with the rest of the now-dispossessed shtetl bourgeoisie in favor of an even more disenfranchised mass whom he idealizes precisely because they are unable to communicate with him.

In *Murphy*, Celia similarly cannot complement or interact with the protagonist, so at best she comes to emulate him: "She [Celia] could not sit for long in the chair [i.e., Murphy's rocking chair] without the impulse stirring, tremulously, as for an exquisite depravity, to be naked and bound."[31] Once again, the autoerotic ritual of the rocking chair serves as the substitute for human relationships in the novel; unlike Gnesye, Celia does not come to preach her former lover's credo because, in spite of the efforts of his Irish companions, there is no community to whom she could preach, whether in depressed London or dispossessed Ireland. And yet, though there is a seeming inversion in the respective role that Celia and Gnesye play in the two novels,

28 Kulbak Y, 61; Kulbak E, 518.

29 As easily as one might make an imperfect analogy between Gnesye and Mary Magdalene, she also evokes aspects of the Polish false messiah Jacob Frank's daughter Ewa, who held a court dedicated to her father's credo after his death at Offenbach am Main, Germany. Frank (c. 1726–1791), whose heresy combined elements of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam along with the cultivated blasphemy of Shabetai Tsevi (1626–1676), as well as a great deal of personal aggrandizement and financial opportunism, was the subject of a drama, *Yankev Frank*, that Kulbak wrote while living in Berlin in the early 1920s. For more on the Frankist movement, see Pawel Maciejko, *The Mixed Multitude: Jacob Frank and the Frankist Movement, 1755–1816* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015).

30 Kulbak Y, 21–22; Kulbak E, 494–95.

31 Beckett, 67.

the consequence of their failed identification with the two protagonists proves to be the same. Celia knows definitively that Murphy has abandoned her when he removes the rocking chair from her flat, and the apocalyptic events of *Montog*'s conclusion commence when Gnesye and Mordecai-Marcus begin to address the masses of the revolutionary town with their philosophy of renunciation and rejection. As Kulbak writes, "Miss Gnesye looked as wan as a queen, and now they were bringing the king out to his people. She stared at them with lowered eyelids. And they two remained silent. And he, Mordecai-Marcus, gazed at the people. . . . And he spread forth his hands: 'Jews, today is a holiday! Who says that the poor are poor and the outcasts miserable?' "[32] When Gnesye and the poor, whom Mordecai-Marcus had idealized to the degree that they each remained inaccessible to him, begin to construct a social order out of his negationism, it alerts the authorities to the danger of his ideas and undermines the autonomy it had been conceived to protect.

Indeed, what seals Mordecai-Marcus's fate and dooms his doctrine of No is not his heretical identification with Jesus, but the poor's acceptance of him as a messiah; this act of ritual crowning complements Kulbak's previous prose narrative, *Meshiekh ben-Efraim* ("The Messiah of the House of Joseph," 1924), which depicts in comically expressionist terms the betrayal of a putative messiah and his ritual murder by a mob of his disenchanted disciples. In *Montog*, the messianic drama commences when the poor begin to congregate in the revolutionary town:

> And like a herd of swine[33] they came back to the gray streets singing and weeping. Up on the illuminated stories, the people tore gold rings from their fingers, the husbands bit the earrings off their wives' ears and threw them out the windows. But the beggars didn't pick them up for they were radiant with the dark, evil joy.[34]

The procession forms a "satanic" reconstitution of the exodus from Egypt, when the children of Israel left their captivity festooned with the gold and jewels of their masters (Exodus 11:2–3). Here, however, the Jewish beggars reject their "reparations" but continue with their journey, so that the theological significance of the Exodus, along with its teleological destination, has been revoked, leaving only the spectacle of street theater and the grotesque carnival of bourgeois Jews divesting themselves physically of their material riches. The beggars have chosen Mordecai-Marcus in a scene that combines the spectacle of the Exodus with Christ's arrival in Jerusalem—calling attention to the parallel between the New Testament and the Hebrew Bible's "original"—while mocking and turning each on its head. In this incident, a modern, Jewish "superfluous man" becomes the Yiddish *Life of Brian*, *avant la lettre*.

Religion in the two narratives thereby forms an inassimilable remainder—an element, like the poor or the insane, of resistance to the social order—that works against secular modernity's imperative to forget and their protagonists' quixotic effort

32 Kulbak Y, 62; Kulbak E, 519.

33 This choice of metaphor does double duty in signifying Mordecai-Marcus's (and implicitly Kulbak's) heretical impulses, first by associating the "Monday Jews" with the most unkosher species in the animal kingdom; second by resonating with yet another New Testament reference, of Jesus' expulsion of the demons into a herd of swine in Matthew 8:28–32.

34 Kulbak Y, 61; Kulbak E, 518–19.

https://doi.org/10.1017/pli.2015.26 Published online by Cambridge University Press

to exempt themselves from society. Religious reference is what endures when the protagonists offer no struggle against oblivion; it survives even the death of God. In *Montog*, especially, a novel more dependent on religious rhetoric than *Murphy* because of the character and origins of Yiddish discourse, both the death of God and the endurance of religious reference constitute the drama of Mordecai-Marcus's death scene, which dominates the last twenty pages of the novel. When the protagonist foretells his death, saying, "It appears, my friends, that I shall die during the next few days. Excuse my fright, it came so unexpectedly for me too. But look—at that time we thought I might not need to!"[35] he transforms the gathering of his abandoned relationships into a parodic Last Supper, suggesting that the revolution plays the role of Judas by executing him.[36] The apocalyptic mood, always palpable in Kulbak's narratives, further manifests itself as the scene develops:

> Mordecai-Marcus lay on the ruined sofa, a blanket drawn over his head, and only his long legs sticking out. He lay there sick and weak and listening, for that was the mass's order. And he heard and saw, saw blood pouring everywhere. From far away, there echoed the compressed tread of battalions. The air smelled of wild foreign flesh, and eyes darted about.[37]

At the end of the novel, Mordecai-Marcus laments his death in terms more explicitly philosophical and theological than Murphy or Beckett would use. He reiterates his Christological insinuations in negative terms; he is come not to heal the sick but to tear open their wounds, so that they may not reward him with their devotion, while the Messiah's white donkey remains riderless:

> In the radiance I saw another light, a brighter one. It was the figure of the pauper. He was coming quietly, even though I wasn't waiting for him. And when he showed me his wounds, I laughed, and it hurt me that his wounds were healing. Behold, I do not desire any reward, and every wound is dear to me. Come, I will tear open your wounds, so that they never shall heal, for I do not desire any reward. . . . Oh, it is getting darker and darker. I can only hear the song of the white donkey in the darkness. Where is it wandering without a rider?[38]

The freedom Mordecai-Marcus seeks can be achieved only through death, just as in the Christian Passion the crucifixion is a necessary eschatological conclusion of Christ's redemptive martyrdom. In explicit, graphic terms, the freedom Mordecai-Marcus has sought, like Murphy, is a freedom not just from social entanglements but also ethical obligations to other people. The corrosiveness of Mordecai-Marcus's vision, which in

35 Kulbak Y, 95; Kulbak E, 539.

36 Mordecai-Marcus's death scene also resonates with Moses's farewell to the Children of Israel in the Book of Deuteronomy, though the echoes of the Passion are more explicit given both the apocalyptic mood of Kulbak's novel and the identification, however paradoxical, of Mordecai-Marcus with Jesus. As previously noted, in *Murphy* the protagonist must play both Judas and Jesus in his private Passion play because all the dramas in the novel are inevitably subsumed within his own consciousness.

37 Kulbak Y, 100; Kulbak E, 540–41.

38 Kulbak Y, 116; Kulbak E, 550.

metaphysical terms is neither immoral nor amoral but antimoral, resonates with and provides an inverted ethics for Murphy's characterization of his own mind as "a mote in the dark of absolute freedom."[39]

In the context of this comparison, one can therefore establish a reciprocal relationship between *Murphy* and *Montog* insofar as Kulbak projects the apocalypse onto the collective in response to the historical violence of the Russian revolution, whereas Beckett visits the repressive violence he perceives in the metropolis upon the body of Murphy himself. The political context continuously foregrounded in Kulbak's novel can be inferred only from Beckett's narrative, but even without an explicit gesture in this regard from the author one can nonetheless understand Murphy's decision as a citizen of the Irish Free State to immigrate to London as a kind of recolonization, moving from the ostensible independence he had experienced in his homeland back to a subaltern position in the imperial capital.[40] Other Irish immigrants to England have attested to the political and emotional resonances of such an itinerary,[41] and biographers have documented that such was Beckett's own humiliating experience during the many months he spent in London from 1933 to 1935.[42] Given the novel's cultivated irony toward its characters' Irish origins,[43] one can read Murphy's repudiation of both the Irish circle that had followed him to London and the few entanglements from which he extricates himself while there as a rejection of either an Irish or an English national identity.[44] Indeed, given his absence of a given name and the nearly generic nature of his family name, one of the most

39 Beckett, 112.

40 Richard McGuire offers an additional, eloquent observation on how Murphy's night-shift employment at the Magdalen Mental Mercyseat asylum further connects Beckett's protagonist with a familiar postcolonial trajectory: "Murphy's work experience . . . belongs to that range of Irish London Underground construction and maintenance tunnelers, Caribbean London Underground railway staff, Irish and Caribbean factory workers, and Irish and Caribbean nurses in the National Health Service in Britain, in the middle decades of the twentieth century. Murphy's ultimately chosen way of working in London is in the manner of many migrants on the margins of daylight, nine-to-five society: he is largely unknown to many of those who, in the sunlit hours, frequent the city and claim it as their domain." See 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): 247. Professor Tyrus Miller has my heartfelt thanks for providing me with this reference.

41 Perhaps the most graphic account of this discontent can be found in (the British-born!) Shane MacGowan's song "The Old Main Drag"; see (hear!), The Pogues, *Rum, Sodomy, and the Lash* (1985; Audio CD: Rhino Records, 2006).

42 As James Knowlson writes, in terms echoed by other biographers, "Although he was in London for most of 1934, the focus of much of Beckett's interest and attention remained, naturally enough, in Ireland. . . . He hated London and was infuriated by the patronizing English habit of addressing him in pubs or shops as 'Pat' or 'Paddy'." See James Knowlson, *Damned to Fame: The Life of Samuel Beckett* (New York: Grove, 2004), 178–79. Lois Gordon further elaborates that "during the years Beckett lived in London, not only were there many 'down-and-out-Irishmen,' but *everyone* was down and out: it was the middle of the Depression. . . . During his stay in London, nearly three million people were unemployed and London had become a city of poor housing, ill health, and a widely demoralized population." See Lois G. Gordon, *The World of Samuel Beckett, 1906–1946* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), 93, emphasis in original.

43 Perhaps most vividly evoked in the narrator's description of Murphy's erstwhile lover, "For an Irish girl Miss Counihan was quite exceptionally anthropoid." See Beckett, 118.

44 For a compelling summary of the political factors that would have motivated Murphy's rejection of an Irish national identity, when repressive notions of conformity and unity were most forcefully articulated and legislated in the Irish Free State, see Bixby, 86–87.

common in Ireland, Murphy's flight to the asocial and apolitical constitutes a rejection of the concept of identity as understood in the sense either of affinity—identification with a larger group—or of individuation, personhood. Escaping from the social for Murphy becomes inextricable from an escape from the self.

If Beckett's choice of the name *Murphy* for his expatriate protagonist signifies the ultimate emptying of identity and identification with either Ireland or England, Kulbak similarly plays on the overdetermined resonances of his protagonist's name. Mordecai-Marcus is typical of Ashkenazic double names—like Dov-Ber, Tsvi-Hirsh, Shloyme-Zalman, or Menakhem-Mendl—in that the second half of the name is a German-derived phonetic echo or literal translation of the first, Hebrew half. Yet the particular example of Mordecai-Marcus alludes to connections in early-nineteenth-century Yiddish writing, developed by *maskilim*, proponents of the so-called Jewish Enlightenment (*haskalah*), to the Purim story in the Book of Esther and its male protagonist Mordecai. For *maskilim*, the biblical Mordecai was a perfect prototype for an ideological hero because he was both a Jewish communal leader and the consort of imperial power. Yoking the name *Marcus* to the name *Mordecai* served as shorthand for maskilic aspirations to combine fidelity to Jewish tradition with an embrace of modern European culture.[45] Kulbak underscores these resonances by making his Mordecai-Marcus a Hebrew teacher, which in both practical terms, as a means of making a living, and ideological ones, to valorize the use of the biblical language as the preeminent Jewish contribution to civilization, was an ideal maskilic occupation.[46]

By 1917, however, this putative maskilic hero has degenerated into the proverbial Yiddish *luftmentsh*, a person who "lives on air" and nothing else, so that Mordecai-Marcus's parodically negative messianism provides as much an internal critique of Jewish ideologies of modern redemption as it does an external satire of Bolshevik utopianism. This critique of a defunct Jewish ideology resonates with the protagonist's association with two female beggars, Stesye and Gnesye, who live and work in a graveyard and who serve to embody both material poverty and messianic expectation. The fact that their names rhyme and that one beggar shares the same name as Mordecai-Marcus's ostensible love interest reflects a flattening of supporting characters also found in *Murphy*, as when Beckett writes, "All the puppets in this book whinge sooner or later, except Murphy, who is not a puppet."[47] For both writers, the reduction of supporting characters to caricatures suggests an analogous emptying of ideological responses to the obsolescent status of these characters, poised between life and death.

Similarly, when Kulbak narrates Mordecai-Marcus's first arrest,[48] he does so from the perspective of Mordecai-Marcus's senile father Yude—whose name is a typical

45 The definitive study of this phenomenon in Jewish literature is Chone Shmeruk, *Hashem hamashma'uti Mordkhe-Markus: gilgulo hasifruti shel ideal hevrati* ("The Significant Name Mordkhe-Markus: the Literary Transformations of a Social Ideal"), *Tarbitz* 29.1 (1959): 76–98.

46 As Shmuel Feiner writes of one nineteenth-century *maskil*, "According to [Shalom] Hacohen, the correct meaning of *Aufklärung* in the Jewish context was the cultivation of Hebrew language and literature, especially Hebrew poetry." See Shmuel Feiner, "Toward a Historical Definition of the Haskalah," *New Perspectives on the Haskalah*, eds. Shmuel Feiner and David Sorkin (London: Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2001), 194.

47 Beckett, 122.

48 Kulbak Y, 16–17; Kulbak E, 492.

https://doi.org/10.1017/pli.2015.26 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Yiddish abbreviation, like "Paddy" for "Patrick," of the biblical name Yehudah (Judah), but also inevitably an echo of the German *Jude*, "Jew"—a traditional small-town shopkeeper whose stock has apparently gone unreplenished since the start of the first world war and who refuses to sell even the stale candy on the shelf to the single customer visiting his store at the time of the arrest. In this manner Kulbak depicts everything in the "revolutionary shtetl"[49] of the novel as outdated and moribund, in order to emphasize that the setting of a small town at once traditionally Jewish and caught in the grips of the Bolshevik revolution is a contradiction in temporal terms; *Montog*'s collision of temporalities between stereotypical nineteenth-century iconography and the revolutionary violence ushering in the Soviet Union conveys the notion that Mordecai-Marcus is in every possible sense a "man out of time." The temporal dislocations that Kulbak dramatizes, between nineteenth-century traditions and the revolution of the twentieth century, between aspirations toward modernity and *Bildung* and the reality of warfare and political repression, in turn shed light on a comparably postcolonial dilemma for Beckett in *Murphy*: the "man out of time" at the center of *Montog* corresponds in temporal terms to Beckett's novel about a "man out of place," whether in Ireland, England, or anywhere in the physical, material world.

Just as Mordecai-Marcus's name consciously evokes an earlier era in Yiddish literature in order to empty its ideological resonances of their intended significance, *Montog* as a whole is replete with intertextual references to earlier works in Yiddish literature that make explicit the disruption of Jewish culture following World War I.[50] Most specifically, Kulbak first describes the salon of Dr. Bitshkovsky, where Mordecai-Marcus prophesies his own death, as "a half-darkened dining room, which

49 The formulation "revolutionary shtetl" recurs habitually throughout the novel, and unlike Beckett's specific location of *Murphy* in London, this is the only spatial marker for the story's action. A *shtetl* in Yiddish discourse refers not just literally to a small town but specifically to a habitat for traditional Jewish culture, replete with a Jewish communal infrastructure, houses of worship and study, and facilities for the maintenance of Jewish observance such as a ritual bath, a Jewish cemetery, and a kosher slaughterhouse. In nineteenth-century Yiddish and Hebrew literature, it was conventional to render the shtetl in prototypical terms rather than to place narratives in specific, historically identifiable locations; this practice emphasized the idea of the shtetl as an archetypal Jewish space, and although this convention had faded among many of Kulbak's contemporaries in favor of greater narrative verisimilitude, his adherence to this practice underscores the temporal contradiction between Jewish tradition and revolutionary modernity at the heart of the narrative. For more on the uses of the shtetl as archetype, see Dan Miron, "The Literary Image of the Shtetl," *The Image of the Shtetl and Other Essays of Modern Jewish Literary Imagination* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2000), 1–48.

50 Without wishing to go so far afield in tracing these allusions that the comparison of *Montog* with *Murphy* gets lost in the process, one can nonetheless observe that at one point in Kulbak's novel the two beggar women, Stesye and Gnesye, dream of themselves being transformed into soldiers (Kulbak Y, 28; Kulbak E, 499), an image that blurs boundaries of both gender and selfhood, and conflates these two figures with the androgynous accidental soldiers at the center of Mendele Moykher-Sforim's 1878 novel *The Travels of Benjamin III* (*Masoes Benyomin hashlishi* in Yiddish and Hebrew); when Mordecai-Marcus says, "Behold, there exists a great prayer that is prayed not with the lips, and that no one hears, and that prayer is the holiest" (Kulbak Y, 64; Kulbak E, 520), Kulbak takes his cue from Y. L. Peretz's 1894 short story "Kabalists" (*Mekubolim* in Yiddish and Hebrew), that story's mystical aspirations now purged of their crypto-aesthetic symbolism in favor of the nihilist-expressionist fatalism of a prayer offered not to God but to *nothingness*. It is moreover worth mentioning, in this context, that Kulbak's devotion to a theology of negation—as my friends Yitzhak Melamed and Ada Rapoport-Albert have suggested to me—derives as much from a negative theology discernible in kabalistic, and specifically Hasidic, theology as Peretz's story does.

https://doi.org/10.1017/pli.2015.26 Published online by Cambridge University Press

carried the scent of medicine, against the walls on the floor rested dusty paintings in heavy frames,"[51] where the sickly daughter Lena continuously plays the Edvard Grieg composition "Aase's Death" on the piano. In prewar Jewish literature, by writers such as H. D. Nomberg and Dovid Bergelson in Yiddish, or Uri Nisan Gnessin in Hebrew, such a scene would convey a sense of the old tradition's sclerosis and stasis, along with the unfulfilled bourgeois promises of gentility and high culture. Kulbak pushes these implications far further, however, by introducing two former soldiers, Bitshkovsky's son Misha and his deranged comrade Leontshik, who have been maimed and left "shell-shock" by their combat experiences. Beyond the historical significance that their presence in the novel conveys, Leontshik pathologically projects the violence he has experienced, attempting to assault both Mordecai-Marcus's companion Gnesye and Lena Bitshkovsky in two counterbalanced incidents.

This eruption of sexual violence in the novel is almost without precedent in Yiddish literature. Though his attempt to beat Gnesye sadistically[52] serves as an attack on her chastity with Mordecai-Marcus and an affront toward the ostensible purity of her ascetic ideals, the incident with Lena provides a more complex psychodynamic of sexuality and gender roles in the instant that Kulbak depicts:

> He flung and twisted himself lengthwise, like a long worm. And his hands grabbed her, he wrenched his body to fall on the floor, but she wouldn't let go. Silent, silent, she lay upon him, coiled like a leech in a shell, gnawing with a frenzied sweetness on the bleeding throat. And her eyes bulged out as though hanging from her forehead.[53]

What begins as Leontshik's attempted rape of Lena ends vampirically with Lena warding off his attack by biting him on the neck. The only overt portrayal of sexuality in the novel is the reciprocal violence of these two characters. Moreover, the grammatical structure of these sentences is parataxis, a characteristic technique in Kulbak's prose[54]; the absence of more complicated grammatical relationships reflects the absence of logical motivation for the characters' actions as well as the lack of relationship between the two. The decadence of their coupling reiterates the impossibility of experiencing love in the world of Kulbak's novel, but also its use of the vampire motif underscores the status of these characters as neither alive nor defunct, but "undead."

It is significant of *Montog*'s narrative logic that its only instance of reciprocal sexuality is a parodic *Liebestod* between two minor characters whom the narrator likens to invertebrate animals, a worm and a leech, respectively. Yet it is precisely Kulbak's recontextualization of stock characters from earlier Yiddish fiction in the grotesquely obsolescent setting of the revolutionary shtetl that enables him to retain the markers of a social order, now corrupted into dysfunction and decrepitude

51 Kulbak Y, 22; Kulbak E, 495.
52 Kulbak Y, 26-27; Kulbak E, 498.
53 Kulbak Y, 71-72; Kulbak E, 525.
54 As my teacher Avrom Novershtern has written, "Parataxis, the coordinated clause, is the distinguishing characteristic of Kulbak's style, which is explicitly concerned with coupling very heterogeneous materials." See Avrom Novershtern, *Moyshe Kulbak's Meshiekh ben-Efrayim: A yidish-modernistish verk in zayn literarishn gerem* ("Moyshe Kulbak's *Meshiekh ben-Efrayim*: A Yiddish-Modernist Work in its Literary Context"), *Di Goldene keyt* 126 (1989): 199. The translation from the Yiddish is my own.

https://doi.org/10.1017/pli.2015.26 Published online by Cambridge University Press

in the new historical dispensation. This dynamic provides the externalization of his protagonist's apocalyptic foreboding, whereas for Murphy the only response to the violence of dislocation is internalization. As Beckett writes in perhaps the most explicitly political statement of the entire novel, "To die fighting was the perfect antithesis of his whole practice, faith, and intention."[55] What substitutes for political struggle as well as any engagement with other people—as both object of desire and cause of death, *Liebe* and *Tod*—is Murphy's sadomasochistic rocking chair ritual. Through the solipsism of the ritual itself, however, both the absence of social interaction and the persistence of Murphy's desire receive their most vivid depiction. In its comic dimensions, the rocking chair motif illustrates how far short Murphy falls, literally, of the impossible aspiration to transcend the corporeal, while in its catastrophic, absurdly tragic consequences the author's own dismissal of his character's antimoral metaphysics might be surmised.

This metaphysics nonetheless becomes political, and therefore postcolonial, via its own negativity: if, as this comparison has asserted, postcolonial histories require the concept of nationhood to be read negatively because nationhood is what postcolonial cultures have been denied formally or institutionally, then *Murphy* and *Montog* can exemplify an affirmation of postcoloniality as an ideological goal to be valorized. Their negativity thereby acquires a paradoxically positive value. From Arendt's perspective, which is the perspective of European modernity, the protagonists of these two novels have failed the historical potential of modernity by repudiating their obligations to behave as rational, sociable subjects.[56] If one takes Kulbak and Beckett's textual politics seriously, though, then Murphy or Mordecai-Marcus's evasions of social obligation, affiliation, and commitment—this last category a double entendre for both works, given their respective focus on incarceration—would provide a means of conceiving a negation of national identity that might be well suited to the contemporary global moment. Murphy's refusal to see himself as English or Irish, together with Mordecai-Marcus's efforts to resist identification with traditional Jewishness or emerging Soviet dictates, his insistence on playing the contradictions between the two against each other as a mode of resistance to both, offer a potentially positive model for imagining a more borderless and fluid understanding of citizenship, which allows its adherents to see postcoloniality not only in the deprivational sense of lacking national institutions, self-determination, or a recognized history, but also in an emancipatory sense of being at home in the world, anywhere in the world, even in captivity, exile, or diaspora.

In this sense, as much as Arendt might suggest that an "adamant" postcoloniality would signify a surrender of the social obligations defining the modern subject, one

55 Beckett, 38.

56 Jean-Michel Rabaté has pointed this out to me in response to the earliest draft of this article. By way of response, one can suggest that Beckett never reiterated the specific, and specified, politics of *Murphy* in the postwar era, and of course Kulbak never had the chance to revisit his political fatalism following his own execution! These historical facts notwithstanding, I wish to suggest here a more tentative and theoretical response to this objection, through which these two novels might be read not just as cautionary examples, but also as anticipatory parables for a politics more comprehensible today than during the epoch(s) in which they were written. Such a reimagining of their respective political potential mandates a recognition that postcolonial authors articulate a crisis in modernity that has come to characterize metropolitan nations as much as colonized or neocolonized ones and that this crisis is the norm in which all global citizens currently reside.

can understand characters like Murphy or Mordecai-Marcus, however absurd or self-defeating their narrative fates are, as precursors of a contemporary postmodernity. Seen from this perspective, *Montog* and *Murphy* suggest that homelessness and cosmopolitanism, statelessness and transnationalism, are complementary conditions, viewed through conflicting temporal lenses. What intervenes between and within these dialectics is a question of self-determination: the exile of an emigrant and a refugee cannot be equated so long as the former chooses his or her status and the latter is forced to assume his or her condition because of more powerful, predatory, punitive social forces. These two novels thus demonstrate, like Wole Soyinka's prison narrative, how deprivation can serve as a conscious strategy for evading just such antagonistic forces at a point when their hegemony seems otherwise pervasive and inescapable. Under these conditions, the erasure of selfhood can serve as an ultimate assertion of will and the only political option available. At the same time, the tragic ending that *Montog* and *Murphy* share illustrates the limitations of their strategies, as well as the desperation that has determined their respective fates. In the historical context under which their protagonists were conceived, an alternate end for either of them would be impossible. It would be naïve to contend that contemporary circumstances offer better prospects for the freedom toward which these characters strive, so their deaths inoculate both their authors and their readers against accepting a salvation in art that remains unavailable in life.

Under the terms of this political reading, a comparison can be made with Arthur Schopenhauer, the philosopher with whom Kulbak in equal degree to Beckett is engaged in his most sustained critical dialogue. As with Schopenhauer, the desire for *nothing* in *Murphy* and *Montog* proves to be a desire in fact for something after all. In this respect Ato Quayson remarks of Murphy's fixation on the tea biscuits, which has so preoccupied this discussion: "He [Murphy] does not want to free himself from desire; rather his desire is precisely to translate the mundane act of eating into an avenue for accessing mathematical possibilities."[57] In *Murphy*, the bodily becomes a vehicle for the abstract infinitude of thought. Yet by focusing continuously on the process of achieving this transubstantiation, Beckett reminds the reader of the inextricability of one from the other. Similarly, Mordecai-Marcus's irreconcilable embrace and rejection of the physical world—his metaphysical aspirations and cultivated blasphemies against Judaism, Christianity, and Bolshevism, as well as his embrace of poverty neither as a moral nor a political ideal but a philosophical principle—suggest paths of critique for Beckett's early work: both paths that Beckett pursued in his subsequent aesthetic development and deepening contemplation of the pathos and bathos of physical pain, psychological domination, and institutional oppression, but also a road of irresolvable tension and ambivalence contemplated but not taken.

To see these two novels as offering a failed politics requires no special interpretive skills: failure is all either offers in abundance. But to see them also as suggesting a politics of failure enables the reader to understand the (limited, to be sure) political function of passivity, as well as the possibility of constructing a community, vicariously, out of the artifacts of dispossession. The precedent of Wole Soyinka's

57 See Ato Quayson, "Autism, Narrative, and Emotions: On Samuel Beckett's *Murphy*," *University of Toronto Quarterly* 79.2 (Spring 2010): 852–53.

prison hunger strike with which this discussion has begun—an example that stands in rebuke of political passivity, as the historical fact of Kulbak's martyrdom and Beckett's involvement with the French resistance also would—serves in this context to underscore the sense of confinement that Mordecai-Marcus and Murphy feel in the social world; they respond to a feeling of entrapment as acute as the plight of the political prisoner by incorporating it in their affinity with the sibling institutions of the prison and the mental hospital, respectively, each of which functions in political terms as a structure for containing the disruptive, unproductive, and dangerous impediments to the social order. Their strategy of renunciation, like Soyinka's, is an effort at gaining control that can acquire meaning only in the context of their powerlessness. For Soyinka, this gesture was an act of protest against a repressive but thoroughly human regime against which the author eventually achieved a signal victory. For Beckett and Kulbak's characters, the same gesture counts as a gambit against the impersonal, existential fact of change as such. This is a conflict in which change always prevails. Both novels owe their existence to this fact.

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This article was conceived at the Frankel Institute for Advanced Jewish Studies at the University of Michigan; the institute, its staff, and my colleagues there have my sincere gratitude for their support of my research. Jackie Blackman, Lois Overbeck, and Jean-Michel Rabaté provided generous and stimulating responses to my work in draft form, as did an audience convened by the Leonard and Helen R. Stulman Program in Jewish Studies at the Johns Hopkins University. I wish to thank Kenneth B. Moss and Mary Otterbein for my invitation there. Particular thanks are due to Sara Nadal-Melsió, and at a later stage, Kata Gellen, for their engaged, insightful, and constructive reading of my work in successive versions.