



John Francis Harty

Oscillation in Literary  
Modernism



PETER LANG

Oscillation in Literary Modernism



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**Dedicated to the memory of conversations with four Socratic Dubliners:**

**Bob Bradshaw, Ambrose Collins, John Doyle and Anthony Morrison**



## Preface

The present volume represents the finalized version of my doctoral dissertation submitted to the English faculty of Freiburg University in the year 2007. Regarding the inception of the work and the scholarly advice which guided the fledgling project out of the early morning mists, and towards formal coherence, I am indebted to Professor Jon K. Adams. In the same spirit of gratitude I would especially like to acknowledge Professor Monika Fludernik's careful guidance in bringing this project into its present form; her narratological expertise and scientific rigor combined with creative encouragement supervised the final development and completion of this study.

In my endeavor to navigate the orientating leitmotifs through the turbulent narratives of Modernism and the solipsistic cosmologies of Beckett's and Lowry's protagonists, I was privileged to avail myself of inspiring points of reference which arose in conversations with Neal O'Donoghue and John Doyle. These conversations provided invaluable contributions which critically inspired the evolution of the dissertation.

Given the fact that I am far from enjoying a close harmony with the present age, with so little technical competence as to bring me dangerously close to being an archaic aberration, I am also indebted to a golden fleet of prodigious experts in the realm of computers. Daily lives were generously organized (and frequently radically disorganized) in order to accommodate the progress of the present work. In this decisive regard the point of departure took place in Luxembourg in the person of Helen Swallow. The technical task then moved from the corridors of Luxembourg to the cellars of Freiburg. In the unique cellar beneath Helmut Schleiper's publishing house, Klaus Dathe proved to be meticulous in both English and German.

The sequence of typing then moved to the Littenweiler cellars known as "die Wanne" sequestered in the catacombic depths of the Thomas Morus Studentenheim, where the boys of "die Wanne" decisively supported this stage of the doctoral project. I name them as Udo Glanz, Andreas Robisch, Thomas Weiss, Peter Leven, Jochen Kaunert, and Michael Sieber. Their collective contribution can only be fully expressed by the words of Shakespeare:

Golden lads and girls all must,  
As chimney sweepers come to dust.

Friendship further blossomed into pragmatic support with Mara Pyke and her abundant classical allusions and Marcus Wirth with his historical emendations.



Finally let me turn to further evidence of magnanimity. Here I would like to express my gratitude for the moral and financial support that contributed towards the publication of the present work – above all Julian Siddons who provided indispensable encouragement combined with both the preliminary and final economic support for the dissertation. Anthony Morrison, with his spontaneous generosity, has testified to the fact that, despite an ideological eclipse, the philanthropic impulse of Irish socialism is far from extinguished. Friendship in both its moral and economic forms was also generously forthcoming from Ursula Galanos, Udo Glanz and Elisabeth Wintermantel-Blum.

The present work would equally be impossible to conceive without the editorial expertise of Rita Kambos and Isabelle Medweth. These editorial skills were assiduously applied towards the final proofreading.

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## Chapter I

### Introduction

#### Aims and Methodological Procedure of the Study

The title of the present inquiry already indicates that the discourse will focus on the paradigm of oscillation as the decisive structural device in certain texts of literary Modernism. The thesis that this investigation attempts to vindicate is that the two novels that constitute the corpus of this study of Modernism, Samuel Beckett's *Murphy*<sup>1</sup> and Malcolm Lowry's *Under the Volcano*,<sup>2</sup> attain their structural coherence by virtue of the narrative agency of oscillation. In order to provide a point of departure for understanding both this model of oscillation<sup>3</sup> and its distance from traditional literary designs, I would like to introduce a fundamental distinction within models of oscillation in order to show how the ideal of harmony, as theoretically articulated by Aristotle, and the eminent narrative confirmation of this principle of proportionality portrayed in the novels of Henry James, contrasts with these novels of Samuel Beckett and Malcolm Lowry. This methodological procedure will provide a theoretical and thematic context for elucidating the novels under consideration. I will therefore concentrate upon these novels as forms of narrative oscillation between the thematic polarities of despair and the carnivalesque. Such thematic binary oppositions will be further elaborated by reference to Kierkegaard's phenomenology of despair<sup>4</sup> and Bakhtin's philosophical understanding of Rabelaisian carnivalesque.<sup>5</sup>

The traditional understanding of harmony as one of the distinguishing features of literary art has not only the theoretical authority of Aristotle but also the artistic confirmation of Henry James. Aristotle's position is clear that we possess "an instinct for 'harmony' and rhythm, for structure, order, and form."<sup>6</sup> This terse Aristotelian clarity is elaborated by the Bakhtin critic, Gary Saul Morson: "for

<sup>1</sup> Samuel Beckett, *Murphy* (London: Calder and Boyars, Picador Edition, 1973; first published 1938). All further reference to this novel will be abbreviated: *Murphy*.

<sup>2</sup> Malcolm Lowry, *Under the Volcano* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1967; first published 1947). All further reference to this novel will be abbreviated: *Volcano*.

<sup>3</sup> See Chapter II for a comprehensive elucidation of this study's understanding of oscillation.

<sup>4</sup> Søren Kierkegaard, *The Sickness unto Death*, trans. Alastair Hannay (London: Penguin Books, 1989). All further reference to this book will be abbreviated: *Sickness*.

<sup>5</sup> M. M. Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, trans. Helene Iswolsky (Cambridge and London: MIT Press, 1968), p. 68. All further reference to this book will be abbreviated: *Rabelais*.

<sup>6</sup> Aristotle's *Poetics*, in *Critical Theory since Plato*, ed. Hazard Adams (New York and London: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1971), p. 50.

Aristotle, and for the tradition of poetics deriving from him, the harmony of art ideally eliminates all contingency from the artwork.”<sup>7</sup> Reference to both of these icons of the harmonic artistic achievement is indispensable for appreciating the iconoclastic novels of Modernism considered by this study. The artistic accommodation of chaos, developed into landslide proportions by these modernist novels, establishes the note of disharmony and discontent that emerges as a major destabilizing challenge to the Aristotelian/Jamesian paradigm of harmony.

My contention is that the Aristotelian concept of harmony in art, as it strives towards the elimination of chaos, contingency, and all other aspects of disharmony, receives a powerful aesthetic challenge by both Beckett and Lowry. I will argue on lines parallel with the Beckett critic C.J. Ackerley, who in his splendid annotation of *Murphy* represents the Beckettian challenge to the Aristotelian idea of harmony just alluded to as a distinguishing impulse within the novels of Beckett and Lowry, which is elucidated by Ackerley with the expression “thou surd”<sup>8</sup> and elaborated with reference to Pythagoras:

[. . .] a surd is an irrational number [. . .] there was among the Pythagoreans a fear of such irrationality, which seemed to confound the very principle of harmony and thus universal order [. . .] an essential irrationality [. . .] lay at the heart of Beckett’s distrust of the rationalist tradition from Plato to Descartes and beyond [. . .]<sup>9</sup>

Now it is this very distrust of both harmony and rationality that I suggest is one of the inspiring impulses behind the two novels under consideration. Both authors promote an alternative aesthetic centered upon the appropriate accommodation of chaos by means of the display of the forces of disharmony. This extraordinary reversal achieves a note of special irony with the realization that it takes its point of departure from one of the supreme models of harmony, a model of the quintessence of harmony as embodied by the ideal of the pendulum and the process of oscillation. While there could hardly be a more ideal embodiment of harmony than that traditionally presented by the process of oscillation, the novels of Modernism, analogous in this respect to the new science of chaos, exhibit the disharmonies and chaos neglected and marginalized by the ideal of a harmonious oscillation as embodied by the pendulum. Expressed succinctly, the aim of this study is therefore to demonstrate how the subversive forces of disharmony are introduced into the

<sup>7</sup> Gary Saul Morson, Contingency and the Literature of Process, in *Bakhtin and the Classics*, ed. R. Bracht Branham (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2002), p. 251.

<sup>8</sup> *Murphy*, p. 47.

<sup>9</sup> C.J. Ackerley, Demented Particulars: The Annotated *Murphy*, in *Journal of Beckett Studies*, volume 7, 1998, p. 75 (Tallahassee: Florida State University).

process of oscillation by these modernist novels of Beckett and Lowry. The motif of proportionality may serve as a guide for elaborating the above distinctions as they point towards a radically alternative form of narrative art.

This exposition of the role of oscillation in Modernism also indicates the theoretical approach to the novels adopted by this study. My analysis shares with Structuralism a concern with structures, but it departs from the paraphernalia of doctrinaire Structuralism by emphasizing the *energia* which always prevails against abstract formulaic geometrics, as this vital principle is elaborated by Gibson.<sup>10</sup> The choice of focusing upon oscillation together with the Bakhtinian emphasis upon the centrifugal as opposed to the centripetal functions of language contains implications that fashion the theoretical approach of this inquiry. The choice implies a greater emphasis upon paradigmatic confrontation in the mobilization of both plots. Attention to the syntagmatic level of the novels, the concatenation of narrative events at the level of the sentence, will therefore be considered only insofar as it has relevance for the illumination of the paradigmatic oscillatory agon.

What is meant here is a logic which displays both the forces of disintegration together with those forces which challenge the disintegrative impulse. A fundamental preliminary for comprehending the logic of the conflict of the respective antagonistic forces is an understanding of what makes them antagonistic, which in turn requires an insight into the respective polar forces themselves. It is the protagonist's withdrawal from the world of external reality – seen in terms of a moral or spiritual abyss – which opens up the horizon upon which the disintegrative forces and the challenge to them operate. The initial response of apocalyptic resignation, spiritual accidia, demonic intoxication, and extreme solipsistic isolation, as they erase the presence of the world, the other, and the other as lover, broadly characterize the forces of disintegration that bedevil both protagonists. Lacking all of the traditional resources to confront this annihilating desolation, such forces being unavailable because they belong to a reality that has been jettisoned, carnivalesque humor and its attendant heteroglossia alone can provide an effective alternative to challenge the desolation of total despair. In the narrative agon between the centripetal and centrifugal forces, it is the creative power of carnivalesque humor as understood by both Bakhtin and Koestler<sup>11</sup> in drawing upon the universal energies of rejuvenation that provides the indispensable alternative. A recent essay by Caryl Emerson coming to terms with Bakhtin's concept of the carnivalesque gives fresh emphasis to this point:

<sup>10</sup> Andrew Gibson, *Toward a Postmodern Theory of Narrative* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1996).

<sup>11</sup> Arthur Koestler, *The Act of Creation* (New York: Hutchinson, 1964).



Carnival laughter [. . .] is the energy that permits us to procreate in the broadest sense, to create. A burst of laughter, Koestler argues, is genetically akin to a burst of discovery and a burst of inspiration. Thus the minimum triad for humanness, Koestler suggests, is the sage, the artist, and the jester. Those who cannot laugh will have trouble knowing and creating. This point of faith is not everyone's idea of salvation, but for Bakhtin it was the sublime."<sup>12</sup>

The above line of argument suggests that, whereas in despair the protagonist withdraws into the inner self and rejects the world, the discovery of carnivalesque laughter provides a tentative *modus vivendi* with the world and the only one possible for the protagonist.

My contention is that the presence of oscillation which structures these novels of Modernism has been scarcely recognized and certainly not explicitly reflected upon. Oscillation, in a way, elaborates how despair must be both recognized and faced, it must be challenged but can never be entirely overcome or eliminated. On the other hand, once the oscillatory challenge is present, despair itself can never completely prevail. The carnivalesque provides evidence for this dual aspect of despair — its susceptibility to challenge together with its resilience against total extinction — and it is precisely this dual aspect that is provided with an assurance by oscillation. The oscillatory process testifies to a situation in which despair is not being misunderstood as a mistaken disposition to be superseded, if not totally eliminated, but as an inextinguishable force that requires perpetual challenge.

The major concern in this work is to isolate the tensions which generate oscillation and show how they establish and maintain the dynamics of both novels. Such tensions emerge from Murphy's Cartesian dualism as he is poised between the claims of the body and those of the mind, the conflicting demands of external reality against the allure of the introspective domain. In *Under the Volcano* it is the perplexing predicament of the Consul's dilemma expressed as "Could he be faithful to Yvonne and the Farolito both?"<sup>13</sup> which stimulates the process of oscillation. In both novels it is the fundamental antagonistic claims of solipsism and love, the implications of insurmountable contradictions and conflicts entailed by radical introspective orientation, poised in opposition to the claims of external reality, which establish the process of oscillation. The radical reference towards interiority exhibited by both protagonists makes all allusion to *agape* and *eros*, forces which only gain sense by appeal to external reality, precarious from the outset.

<sup>12</sup> Caryl Emerson, *Coming to Terms with Bakhtin's Carnival: Ancient, Modern, sub Specie Aeternitatis*, in *Bakhtin and the Classics*, ed. R. Bracht Branham (Evanston: Northwestern University Press), p. 20.

<sup>13</sup> *Volcano*, p. 201.