In 1967 a young woman, Sighle Kennedy, was working on her dissertation about the work of Samuel Beckett. She wrote him a letter, asking him to evaluate the validity of her thesis. Beckett wrote a short note back that included the following sentence: “If I were in the unenviable position of having to study my work, my points of departure would be the ‘Naught is more real . . .’ and the ‘Ubi nihil vales . . .’ both already in Murphy and neither very rational” (Kennedy, 1971, p. 300).

The first quotation appears on page 138 of Murphy (1938), where the narrator describes Murphy losing consciousness after his game of chess with Mr. Endon. The full sentence is: “Not the numb peace of their own suspension [the senses], but the positive peace that comes when the somethings give way, or perhaps simply add up, to the Nothing, than which in the guffaw of the Abderite naught is more real.” The Abderite is the Greek philosopher Democritus, who believed that the senses have power over the mind and that humans have no control over the material world. Naught is an arithmetic term that represents nothing, but which can be combined with something else to become “something.” Therefore, “naught is more real” than nothing. The second phrase is found on page 101 of Murphy, where Murphy’s predilection for the “little world” (i.e., the internal world of the mind) over the “big world” (i.e., the external world of reality and other people) is explained: “How should he tolerate, let alone cultivate, the occasions of fiasco, having once beheld the beatific idols of his cave?”

In the beautiful Belgo-Latin of Arnold Geulinex: Ubi nihil vales, ibi nihil velis.” Geulinex was a Belgian follower of Descartes with whom Beckett became intrigued while in Paris in 1930. Geulinex claimed that the only thing human beings can control is their
mental state and that true independence is only achievable within the individual’s own mind. The quote from Geulinex means the following: “Where you are worth nothing, you should want nothing.” Passivity and indifference to passion would give a person power over the body and desire, according to Geulinex; however, because the human mind is unable to grasp the mind of God, humanity is ultimately helpless.

Even though both thinkers hold opposite views about mind and matter, they reach the same conclusion about the ultimate helplessness of the human being. Beckett, in choosing these two quotes, emphasizes the state of nothingness and nothing as points of departure for understanding his work. There are two expressions of nothing—naught and nihil—the first signifying nothing, and the second referring to the worthlessness or meaninglessness associated with helplessness and lack of desire or passion, both are linked to “nothing.”

*Webster’s* dictionary defines nothing as both emptiness and meaninglessness or worthlessness—the absence of value. The concept of nothing carries within it the notion of “no-thing”: the absence of a thing, the absence of an unconsciously or consciously expected thing, or the experience of being a “no-thing” because of the absence or failure of response that is expected. “No-thing” also is an idea that holds within it all of the experiences of the ineffable, the ineluctable, the nonthinkable, the unknowable—that which is not physically “real” (i.e., experienced directly by the senses). All religious, philosophical, and mystical systems of thought throughout time and across different cultures deal with nothing and the “no-thing” in various ways, but always as a central subject.

Experiences of nothing are expressed and symbolized in a variety of ways: as persecutory forces, oceanic bliss, benign acceptance, or a void, for example. In addition, the state of being “nothing” is seen as that which brings one closest to God, as in the Christian apophatic (negative) mystical tradition of St. John of the Cross and Pseudo-Dionysius. According to Jaurretche (1977), “By relinquishing the world of sense and reason, the process of revelation and understanding becomes that of describing the void. This spiritual knowledge, termed negative or apophatic, comprises one of the main foundations of Christian mysticism” (p. 12). From a psychological standpoint, however, whether nothing is an experience of (1) transformation, creativity, and transcendence, (2) persecutory annihilation, or (3) a state of being that is unbearable, thereby necessitating the creation of rituals and beliefs that are followed rigidly without thought (i.e., cults) has less to do with the content of the particular belief systems than with one’s personal experiences of nothing and how one finds a way to make meaning out of those experiences.
The question as to how human beings develop the capacity for a sense of Self, a sense of place in the world, a sense of narrative with regard to one’s life, a sense of meaning, and ultimately a sense of existence, of Being, is intimately related to experience—specifically, the experience of an other in the early years of life. The experience of an other will always imply a “nothing” in many different variations, however, we all “fall” from being part of someone—we are all exiles in a sense. The question is how that fall was facilitated or impinged upon by the ones who cared for us: Will the space of nothing be an experience of a black hole and fragmentation or a space for growth, development, curiosity, play, and creativity?

An investigation into the concept of nothing in terms of the signifier of the experience of nothing, the concept of “no-thing,” and the experience of nothingness, along with the capacity to make meaning of nothing, that is, the ability to experience nothing and meaninglessness as described in Beckett’s novel Murphy, is a point of departure toward understanding the psychoanalytic work of Wilfred Bion and vice versa. It is also a way of exploring what may be congruence in the thinking of these two men. This exploration of the work of an artist and of a psychoanalyst can open up important paths of understanding how and why human beings experience the state of nothing as either annihilating or transformative.

The connection between the thinking of Samuel Beckett and that of Wilfred Bion goes beyond the fact that they both wrote between the 1930s and 1970s and were probably influenced similarly by the political, intellectual, and artistic climate of the times. It becomes especially interesting when one considers that Beckett was in psychoanalysis with Bion three times a week for 2 years while he was writing Murphy. There has been some speculation about the influence each man might have had on the other. Did Bion’s therapeutic experience with Beckett bring to life some of his developing notions about psychotic and nonpsychotic thinking? Did Bion’s work with Beckett enable the latter to give words to feelings and experiences that would become themes in his various works of prose and theater? Since neither man ever spoke publicly about their two-year relationship, it is impossible to know. It has been speculated that each was the other’s “imaginary twin” (Anzieu, 1989; Simon, 1988), a term taken from Bion’s first psychoanalytic paper, which he presented for his membership in the British Psychoanalytic Society in 1950. I believe that the question of influence is fruitful only in the context of the concepts and themes that are present in the work of both men. The purpose of pursuing this question is to broaden our understanding of each man’s work as well as the larger goal of broadening our own personal understanding.
and experience of being human.

With these points in mind, I first give a brief overview of what is publicly known about the nature of Bion and Beckett’s therapeutic relationship, highlighting those facts that are relevant to an understanding of their work. I then discuss concepts from the work of Bion (keeping in mind that his major theoretical works were written after his analyses with both John Rickman and Melanie Klein) that I feel are most important for this discussion, as well as some ideas from other theorists, both contemporary with Bion and current, which are relevant to the ideas being explored. I then give a synopsis of Murphy and discuss the Bionian and (other concepts) illustrated in Murphy.

BION AND BECKETT: JANUARY 1934—DECEMBER 1935

In 1933, when Beckett’s father died, Beckett was in Dublin with his grieving mother and brother. He had always had a variety of physical problems, but they seemed to get rapidly worse over that year. He confided in his friend Geoffrey Thompson, who was a young doctor pondering the possibility of pursuing a career in psychiatry. According to Deidre Bair’s (1978) major biography of Beckett, he “insisted that all of life was a disease, with babyhood at its beginning. Man, to him, was the prime example of the mortally ill, for man began as a helpless infant, unable to attend to himself, and most of the time ended in the same manner. In man’s beginning and end there was immobility, and each man was thus at the mercy of all others” (p. 170). Beckett’s physical symptoms included insomnia; night terrors that involved profuse sweating, heart palpitations, and panic; urination difficulty, and constipation. The night terrors would get so severe that he could only calm down when his brother would get into bed with him and hold him. He also had painful boils on his neck and anus. Thompson told him, finally, that he thought Beckett’s symptoms were psychosomatic and insisted that he go into psychoanalysis as soon as possible.

In January of 1934 Beckett wrested himself from his mother and went to London. On Thompson’s recommendation he went to the Tavistock Clinic and began psychotherapy with a young intern named Bion. Beckett was familiar with the idea of psychoanalysis, as it was very influential in the thinking and work of the artists and writers of the time. Beckett had read Jung’s (1930) essay on “Psychology and Poetry” and he had signed a document in 1932 outlining the precepts of “Verticalism”—an offshoot of surrealism—which was called “Poetry is Vertical.” This aesthetic credo, heavily influenced by Jung, asserts “the hegemony of the inner life over the outer life.” It posits that “the reality of depth can be conquered . . . by a stupor which proceeds from the irrational to a world beyond a world,” in addition to saying that the
psychiatric condition is a surface manifestation of the “transcendental ‘I’” (cited in Kennedy, 1971, p. 303).

In the first eight months of 1934, Beckett wrote, among other things, “A Case in a Thousand,” which seems related to his analysis with Bion. In the story, Doctor Nye treats the son of his old nanny. The boy has an empyema, (a collection of pus in a cavity) that needs to be opened and drained, but the boy’s condition worsens, and when surgery is performed, he dies. As the doctor and the nanny stand on a bridge with water flowing beneath, he comments that there is something he has always wanted to ask her. She wonders if it was the same thing she has wanted to tell him. The narrator tells us that the nanny then “related a matter connected with her son’s earliest years so trivial and intimate that it need not be enlarged upon here, but from the elucidation of which Dr. Nye, that sad man, expected great things” (p. 24).

We see here several features of Beckett’s work that relate specifically to psychoanalysis, and appear in later works: the metaphor of draining, which is the term he used to describe his analysis with Bion—“draining the puddle of my heart by repeated forays in my pre-history” (Bair, 1978, p. 198); the idea of a central gap or blank in the history that is censored, and which is something vaguely sexual in nature; and Beckett’s hostile, condescending viewpoint about psychoanalysis in general, as well as his fascination with it.

Beckett began *Murphy* in the fall of 1934. His ambivalence about his analysis with Bion can be seen in a note written in 1935 in which he comments that he was about to complete his 133rd session with Bion and that therapy was a never-ending “squabble.” According to Bair (1978), he took “inordinate pleasure in tabloid accounts of poor unfortunates bled white by shyster analysts” (p. 197). He also said that “remaining alive might prove intolerable if the analysis should fail, but he had faced this fact and had been able to cope with it. He concluded gloomily that he spent most of his time with Bion and the rest walking” (p. 198). Beckett’s analysis apparently centered on his inability to separate from his mother physically, emotionally, and financially.

For example, he made repeated trips to Dublin, at her request, despite Bion’s advice not to do so. In the spring of 1935 Geoffrey Thompson moved to London as a psychiatric resident at the Bethlehem Royal Hospital in Beckenham, which was to become the prototype for the Magdalan Mental Mercy Seat in *Murphy*. Beckett’s repeated experiences with Thompson at the hospital gave him much material for *Murphy* and enabled him to envision the second half of the novel. Beckett had decided that he would end his analysis with Bion after Christmas because he felt “the results were hardly in keeping with the expenditure of time and money” and it was “limping along” (Bair, 1978, p. 198). Bair speculates that Bion must have sensed Beckett’s discontent
because he took the unusual step of inviting Beckett to dinner
and then to a lecture by Carl Jung at the Tavistock Clinic.
Whatever Bion’s reason was, the lecture proved to be extremely
important for Beckett’s understanding of himself and his artistic
process. This lecture was Jung’s third at the Tavistock, and in it
he presented his idea that the unity of consciousness is an illusion
and that consciousness is comprised of “complexes” that
have little personalities of their own. Jung (1968) asserted, “Because
complexes have a certain will power, a sort of ego, we find
that in a schizophrenic condition they emancipate themselves
from conscious control to such an extent that they become visible
and audible. They appear as visions, they speak in voices
which are like the voices of definite people” (pp. 80–81). Jung
continued:
[when] your conscious autonomy loses its tension and its energy
. . . you get more and more under the fascination of unconscious
contents . . . and that energy reappears in the increased activity of
unconscious contents. The fascination of unconscious contents
gradually grows stronger and conscious control vanishes in proportion
until finally the patient sinks into the unconscious altogether
and becomes completely victimized by it. He is the victim
of a new autonomous activity that does not start from his ego but
starts from the dark sphere. (p. 82)
This view of autonomous complexes gave Beckett the impetus
to move the action of Murphy into Murphy’s mind, as well as
giving Beckett validation of his experience of his own creative
process. The fascination with the unconscious leading to its
power of the conscious mind will be the major trajectory in the
story of Murphy. Beckett’s later works of prose and theater, with
their use of fragmentary personalities with disembodied voices,
also come to mind as examples of his continued exploration of
and fascination with the contents of the unconscious.
A second aspect of Jung’s lecture may have been even more
important to Beckett. Jung mentioned a ten-year old girl whose
dreams, he felt, “contained an uncanny premonition of her early
death.” Jung concluded that “she had never been born entirely”
(Jung, 1968, p.107). This remark had profound significance for
Beckett, who found in it an explanation for his need to continue
to go back to his mother, his desire to stay in bed, and his memories
of his birth as “painful.” He felt that his own sense of incompleteness
was due to never having been born properly. Beckett
was in fact physically born in a town called Stillorgan, an ironic
name that shows up in Murphy: “‘Run him back to Stillorgan,’
said the CG. . . . ‘Never fear, sergeant,’ he said, urging Neary towards
the exit, ‘back to the cell, blood heat, next best thing to
never being born, no heroes, no fisc, no—’” (p. 29).
This idea of being alive but not “born” is used explicitly in
Beckett’s 1956 radio play “All That Fall”; however, one can see
it in his repeated conjunctions of birth and death—for example,
“wombtomb”—throughout his works. The notion of being psychologically
“unborn” is a key to understanding the character
of Murphy as being drawn inexorably to a prebirth womb-like experience of nothingness, which is a kind of comfort in its idealized form. In addition, if Murphy has never been psychologically “born,” he exists as neither alive nor dead, but someplace in-between.1

Beckett was determined to end analysis, leave London, and return to Dublin. According to Bair (1978), “Bion discreetly suggested that Beckett was not ready for such a move because he was still not free of the crippling neurosis engendered by his relationship with his mother and that as soon as he was under her roof she would return to her old complaints” (p. 214). It took Beckett until 1937 to realize that Bion had been right and to finally leave Dublin for Paris. Although Beckett never returned to analysis with Bion, or anyone, he retained an avid interest in psychoanalytic literature. Bair tells us that later in life he was very interested in Jones’s biography of Freud and questioned a nephew of his who had become a psychiatrist about the ideas of Melanie Klein, particularly the idea of “rematriation,” or re-mothering in the transference.

Clearly this resonance with the concept of “rematriation” refers back to Beckett’s interest in how to become “psychologically born” and shows his continued interest in psychoanalysis, even though he also continued to speak derisively about it throughout his work. In Beckett and the Mythology of Psychoanalysis, Phil Baker (1997) compiles a list of psychoanalytic terms culled from Beckett’s entire corpus that show his level of sophistication with regard to psychoanalytic concepts, even though he called them “dog-vomit jargon” (p. xi). The list includes cathexes, introjected, endopsychic, syntonic, narcissism, schizoidal, sublimation, fetish, psychosis, domination complex, alienation, introverted, manic, anal complex and the little ego and the big id (p. xi). The last phrases, as well as some of the others, are from Murphy.

BION

The concepts in Bion’s work that are central to Murphy all revolve around the following question: What promotes or inhibits knowledge? An amplification of this question would ask about several related issues: What enables us to be able to think about something and give it meaning in such a way that we can learn from experience? What would cause the lack of ability to create such meaning? Finally, what would be the consequences of such an inability?

Bion’s project confronts us with the disturbing fact that psychotic thought processes lurk beneath the surface of the mental operations of all nonpsychotic people, or “normal neurotics,” as Freud put it—and often inform behavior and communication at an unconscious level, thereby blurring the ability to distinguish between “sanity” and madness. Bion asks what conditions and experiences are necessary for the development of an apparatus for thinking thoughts, a process that involves linking sense impressions
and affects, then linking those “proto-mental” preconceptions with concepts that have meaning and with language that can be used for thinking and communicating. One of Bion’s most important concepts is that of the container, or containing function, the prototype of which is the mother in a state of reverie. Such a mother is capable of withstanding the infant’s terror and nameless dread of annihilation in the face of absence: physical, emotional, or cognitive. In addition, the containing mother is able to take in and reflect expressions of joy and pleasure. This synchrony with both negative and positive affective states, together with the mother’s ability to hold them and not be overwhelmed by them, gradually allows the infant to be able to hold and tolerate these states of mind. This safe place shares many qualities with Winnicott’s (1960) “maternal holding environment” and Grotstein’s (1983) “background object of primary identification,” but adds the notion of a “thinking couple.”

Bion emphasizes the importance of the mother’s capacity to withstand the projection of raw emotional states and her ability to transform them into digestible bits of meaning for the infant that gradually can be added to other bits of meaning. If this metabolization and regulation by the mother does not occur, for whatever reason, the terrifying and overwhelming undigested bodily sensations and feelings the infant projected onto the mother are taken back into the infant with increasing power. As a result, both the external and internal worlds of the infant become filled with persecutory objects. The inside is smothering and claustrophobic and the outside is a war zone filled with imminent fragmentation. In the interest of survival, the infant must try to find some form of containment. Esther Bick (1968) calls this fall-back form of containment in autistic children a “second skin.”

In the character of Murphy we see a man who is trying to use his mind as a kind of “skin.” He is trying to find containment but does not know how to produce thoughts that he can use for thinking, nor can he locate a place in which to store thoughts for later use. The schizoid defense mechanisms of splitting, projective identification, denial, and idealization are utilized as an ultimately futile attempt to preserve a closed and toxic system. Because the goal of the life instinct, which is coupling and relating,

Not-thing, and Nothing
the space between things. Bion believes that we have preconceptions—“empty thoughts” or inborn expectations—which, when mated with a realization (negative or positive), form a conception; fixed conceptions then become concepts or thoughts that can be used for thinking. In Bion’s model, for example, we have an inborn expectation of union with the attuned face and body of the mother which, if met with the positive realization of an experience of union, leads to the ability to tolerate the frustration that occurs in the absence of the mother (a negative realization). For Bion, a thought is the mating of a preconception with a negative realization that involves frustration; therefore, the capacity to think is dependent on the experience of sufficient good realizations consistently over time to enable an infant to tolerate the negative realizations. If the expectation of “breast” is mated with “no breast” and the infant can tolerate the frustration of that empty space, the emptiness is filled with the thought of a no-breast and the apparatus for thinking develops, as well as a thinker to think the thoughts. Bion, along with Melanie Klein, asserts that in the beginning the good mother absent is equivalent to the bad mother present. In their line of thinking, in the absence of the ability to tolerate frustration, emptiness is immediately filled with something, and because fear and primitive rage are felt in the absence of the good breast, that “something” is bad.

If a “good-enough mother,” to use Winnicott’s (1960) term, can take in the dread or rage without splitting it off herself or retaliating, the infant gradually develops an ability to tolerate absence and not be overwhelmed by the emergence of terrifying sensations and feelings. Also, if a “good-enough” mother can attune and synchronize with her infant’s positive physical and affective states, whether they are excitement, joy, wonderment, surprise, or the quiet reverie of a mutual gaze, the infant is able to gradually tolerate his or her own states of being in the absence of the maternal object. Bion calls this interaction a positive form of projective identification that is a method of communication whereby the caregiver modifies feelings in a way that enables them eventually to be thought about by the infant. In today’s neurobiological language we would call this developmental point the beginning of a capacity for “self-regulation” or “autoregulation,” which depends upon the existence of an external regulating source for its development (Schore, 2001a). If, on the other hand, the mother cannot contain or tolerate the infant’s projections and states of being, the physically or emotionally absent “good breast” is felt as an overwhelming “bad breast” present in phantasy, and the infant has no way to think about it; therefore the feelings have to be evacuated in some way—either into the body/psyche or outwardly. This unbearable state, if prolonged, can lead to an intolerance of space and, as a result, the nothing of space is filled with persecutory no-things; omnipotence replaces the processing of thoughts and feelings, and omniscience
replaces learning from experience.
The notion of omnipotence as a form of self-regulation that is a solution to the infant’s conflict due to neglect and lack of attunement on the part of the caregiver has currently been discussed by Novick and Novick (2003). They state that “one system of self-regulation is attuned to inner and outer reality, has access to the full range of affects, and is characterized by competence, love and creativity. We call this the ‘open system.’ The other, which we call the ‘closed system’ avoids reality and is characterized by sadomasochism, omnipotence, and stasis” (p. 1). This distinction between an open and closed system is not only relevant in a Bionian context, but is also exemplified in a metaphorical way in Murphy.
The main question Bion asks is “How do you deal with ‘what-is-not’?” If “what-is-not” is a void filled with annihilation, fragmentation, and destruction, then filling it with persecutory no-things, attacks on linking, splitting, omnipotence, and omniscience can be understood as a way of surviving. Without the ability to process sense impressions and affects, there is the conNOTHINGNESS, NO-THING, AND NOTHING 619 stant danger of flooding, which then leads to the need to evacuate the intolerable feelings. The world becomes divided between sensory and emotional feelings that lead to links filled with cruelty. These links are overwhelmingly painful, and the attempts to manage them through splitting and evacuation lead to an experience of a blank, meaningless world. For Bion, our psychological “birth” involves an experience of catastrophe wherein the unformed, unnamed, unknown is struggling to be born, and whose birth is dependent upon the ability to tolerate nothing in the form of absence. This ability, which is dependent upon goodenough attunement, synchrony, and responsiveness between the infant and caregiver, facilitates the development of connections that link the developing self with another being and facilitate the internal cohesion essential to a sense of self.
If we cannot experience catastrophe because of an intolerance of space, there is an attack on any kind of link, resulting in either manic, omnipotent merger or evacuation into the body or outside into others and the world. Bion suggests that pain is then used as a defense against suffering. He also suggests that fear of dying is linked with the will to live; therefore, if fear is split off, then so is vitality, meaning, enthusiasm, creativity, and will, leaving the person in a state of meaningless, nameless dread, which of course will have to be eliminated somehow. Bion calls this attack on linking and thinking and feeling $K$ which stands for anti-knowledge or hatred of knowing, learning, or awareness—all of which imply connections, change, and the ability to tolerate space and dependence. If $K$ predominates, then there is a reversal and perversion of what is healthy with what is not. For example, superficial relationships free of pain, fear, love, dependence, hate, energy, and ambiguity are idealized, as are rigid belief systems, rituals, and even “insanity.” The
person exists in a passionless and meaningless purgatory—neither alive nor dead but somewhere in-between, enduring, but not suffering.

It is clear that what is hated in this state of mind are emotions (and, as Bion [1967] says in “Attacks on Linking,” “it is a short step from hatred of emotions to hatred of life itself” [p. 107]). Bion stresses that a hatred of emotions leads to an intensification of them and therefore to the increasing need for ever more powerful defenses against them. Later in “Attacks on Linking” he says,

The internal object which in its origin was an external breast that refused to introject, harbour, and so modify the baneful force of emotion, is felt, paradoxically, to intensify, relative to the strength of the ego, the emotions against which it initiates its attacks. These attacks on the linking function of emotion lead to an overprominence in the psychotic part of the personality of links that appear to be logical, almost mathematical, but never emotionally reasonable. Consequently the links surviving are perverse, cruel and sterile. (1967, pp. 108–109)

Additionally, Bion (1967) states in “A Theory of Thinking,” “If the projection is not accepted by the mother the infant feels that its feeling is stripped of such meaning as it has. It therefore reintrojects, not a fear of dying made tolerable, but a nameless dread” (p.116). Along these lines he also maintains, “The internal object has the characteristics of a greedy vagina-like breast that strips all the goodness that the infant receives or gives, leaving only degenerate objects. This internal object starves the host of all understanding that is made available” (p. 115).

At this point distinctions between nothingness, no-thing, and nothing in Bion’s model of the development of thinking are necessary. Nothingness is a state of nameless dread, annihilation, and fragmentation that cannot be thought about, but is an overwhelming chaos of sense impressions, affects, and preconceptions—it is body and early mind and therefore “proto-mental.” If nothingness cannot be tolerated through the experience of containment and modification provided by an attuned mother capable of reverie, absence or lack is filled with no-things that are reifications of the raw, negative sensory and affective experiences in the form of a bad object that is present and persecutory. Additionally, the mechanism for making connections and meaning is attacked.

Eigen (1996) states:
To escape the difficulty of interacting with no-thing, we not only fill no-thing with things, but also relate to no-thing as a thing. . . . By making objects into no-things and vice versa, the mind Practices a decisive evasion. No-thing as a term of experience is nulled by being converted into objects of common sense or nightmare. NOTHINGNESS, NO-THING, AND NOTHING 621

One soothes or scares oneself into oblivion and tries to soothescare others as well. (p. 46)

For Bion, the ability to tolerate, or modify nothingness and no-things leads to the ability to think about a good object that is
absent. To conceptualize and signify nothing is the beginning of
the ability to imagine and symbolize something that is not there,
leading to thinking and the ability to give meaning to experience.
Conversely, an inability to tolerate no-thing, Bion states,
amounts to a kind of murder of the mind, resulting in a state of
stupor. This extreme solution to the failure of the caregiver itself
is intolerable. As Eigen (1996) asserts:
One cannot rest in a dead mind. One finds no repose in stupor–
hallucinosis–megalomania. One is afraid of one’s mental death,
even if one is very far along the death process. One is trapped
between stupor–hallucinosis–megalomania and the fear of it and
oscillates between them. One is unable to use or relate to either
fear or stupor, but is arrested in a kind of narcotic electrocution.
(p. 48)
We will see that Beckett’s Murphy is caught in just this kind of
doomed oscillation.
Grotstein (1990) discusses these ideas and links them to
meaning and meaninglessness in a useful way. He states that the
worst fear a human being can experience is that of the “disintegration
of self and objects, disappearance, dissolution–the advent
of meaninglessness and nothingness” (p. 257). Furthermore,
he posits that the death instinct is a “passive vehicle of
expression (signifier) of the anticipation and realization of the
apocalyptic experience of the ‘black hole’ phenomenon (the signified).
The death instinct is our preparedness to anticipate and
therefore adapt to (regulate) this ultimate horror” (p. 258). He
understands meaninglessness as being both primary and secondary.
Primary meaninglessness is a primal emptiness, a waiting for
realization in experience, whereas secondary meaninglessness is
a “turning one’s back on experience and returning to the void
. . . but now no longer the pristine void but rather a ‘black hole’
of tormenting nothingness paradoxically mixed with nameless
dread, the decathedected chards or residues of abandoned meaning”
(p. 267). Nothingness is also primary or secondary according
to Grotstein (1990):
In its primary sense it is the matrix or “ether” of primary meaninglessness
and is the emptiness which must be experienced in
order for meaningful experience to be realized. In its secondary
sense it constitutes the negation of being, corresponding to the
negation of meaning in secondary meaninglessness (as in Bion’s
“Attacks On Linking”). (p. 268)
Grotstein (1990) discusses Bion’s differentiation between
“no-thingness” and “nothingness” in the following way:
“no-thingness” is the concrete negative something which positively
obtrudes the space or gap of separation from the object
(where nothingness is not tolerated). Failure to tolerate the gap
and its empty nothingness causes a default into “no-thingness,”
failing which there is a more costly default into the disintegrative
nothingness of the ‘black-hole’.” (p. 270)
On the other hand, “nothingness’ (if tolerated) designates the
infant’s capacity to contemplate an empty nothingness which the
object’s absence created” (p. 270). I would add that the capacity
to do that opens the way for the infant to think about “nothing” as the absence of something, leading to the ability to give meaning to experience.

To summarize, the ability to think; to experience healthy curiosity; to regulate, tolerate, and contain emotions; to learn from experience; to develop a sense of meaning with regard to one’s life, oneself, and others; and to creatively contemplate and continually transform nothingness or the “unknowable” (Bion’s “O”) are all characteristic of the nonpsychotic personality that is predicated on adequate containment by an attuned mother. The psychotic personality, as described by Bion, results from an experience of failure of the containing function, and is characterized by the following: minute splitting of thinking and the mind (the apparatus for thinking); an experience of fragmentation of mind and objects; a feeling of being trapped in one’s mind; a sense of nameless dread; a sense of disintegration or falling forever; attacks on awareness and the mechanism responsible for awareness and feeling; the inability to bear absence (while experiencing links as being filled with cruelty); being bombarded with sensations; intolerance of suffering; manic searches for a container; dread of loss of intimacy with hallucinosis; hatred of emotions and learning; omnipotence; omniscience; rigid beliefs; and a sense of meaninglessness and numbness.

For the purpose of this discussion it is important to note that Bion believes that people who are predominantly nonpsychotic still have psychotic thought mechanisms and defenses, and, likewise, people who are predominantly psychotic have nonpsychotic thought mechanisms and capacities. The relative dominance of one over the other can be due to the extreme nature of one’s early experiences and/or the vicissitudes of life. He posits that mental health is a kind of balance between the two, achieved via the capacity for oscillations and flexibility—a “sane psychosis” or “psychotic sanity,” as opposed to an “insane psychosis.” Beckett presents us with a character that has both kinds of thinking present in him, but whose nonpsychotic tendencies or desires are losing the battle with his psychotic mechanisms and pleasures or seductions from the beginning, and who eventually loses himself psychically and physically.

The sun shone, having no alternative, on the nothing new. Murphy sat out of it, as though he were free . . . in a medium-sized cage of north-western aspect commanding an unbroken view of medium-sized cages on south-eastern aspect. . . . He sat naked in his rocking chair of undressed teak, guaranteed not to crack, warp, shrink, corrode or creak at night. It was his own, it never left him. . . . He sat in his chair 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. . . . And life in his mind gave him pleasure, such pleasure that pleasure was not the word." (p. 5)

With these words, Beckett begins his first published novel, Murphy. Many of the themes of the novel are presented in these
opening lines: the inexorability of time and planetary motion; the fact that the world and the life on it, upon which the sun shone, were “nothing new”; the anti-name name of “Murphy”—a name chosen because it was the most common surname in Ireland and given to a man with no first name; the appearance of freedom while in a cage within other cages; a man naked like an infant in the rocking chair, as if in a mother’s lap, rocking compulsively in an attempt at self-soothing; the choice of an object for comfort that is guaranteed not to change form or make noise; the need to appease the body as a way of freeing the man to live in his mind; and the idealization of separating the mind from the body and becoming all mind.

The movement of the sun and planets is noted throughout the novel, and the novel’s action is punctuated by references to the exact time, date, and astrological position. The circularity and repetitiousness of the movement within a closed system is contrasted to the hopelessness of any attempt at movement and the illusion of free will on the part of human beings. The idea that any attempt at movement will lead to failure is most clearly shown in the metaphor of the chess game that Murphy plays with Mr. Endon at the climax of the novel. This is a game in which a piece cannot be moved unless it can be returned safely to its original position. Bair (1978) tells us that Beckett and Thompson played such a game, and that “Beckett argued and then tried to demonstrate that once the pieces are set up on the board, any move from then on will only weaken one’s position and that strength lies only in not moving at all” (p. 221).

There is an all-knowing narrator who comments on the action and explains Murphy’s mind to us in Chapter 6. The story told briefly is as follows: Murphy is living with Celia, a prostitute who picked him up on the “previous midsummer night.” Murphy does not want Celia to return to streetwalking, but does not have enough money for them both. Celia delivers an ultimatum that either he gets work or she will begin streetwalking again. Murphy will not do anything until he sees his horoscope; he sends Celia to get the paper and he eventually, and reluctantly, begins to look for a job.

The action shifts to Murphy’s former teacher, Neary, who is discovered by a former student, Wylie, banging his head against the buttocks of a statue in Dublin. We discover that Neary is in love with Miss Counihan, who is in love with Murphy and who thinks he is in London making enough money so that he can send for her. Wylie advises Neary to find Murphy himself, and he does so with his companion Cooper. In the meantime Wylie and Miss Counihan become lovers. When Neary does not return, they go to London. Now there are four people who want to find Murphy. By the time they track down Celia, Murphy has found a job as a nurse at the Magdalen Mental Mercy Seat, where he finds that he feels at home among the schizophrenics.
He gets his chair and lives in a garret with a rigged heating system that turns the gas on when someone pulls the chain in a toilet. Mr. Endon, a schizophrenic patient at the hospital, with whom he plays chess, particularly intrigues him. He loses consciousness after the game and finds that Mr. Endon is gone. Murphy locates him; he gazes into Mr. Endon's eyes and finds himself identified with the inaccessibility and implacability he sees there.

Murphy leaves the mental hospital and takes his clothes off as he walks. He tries to conjure up images and faces in his mind and fails; when he reaches his garret, he lights the candle, gets into his chair and rocks. It is only a matter of time before someone pulls the chain and the gas goes on, but because of Murphy's state of mind he cannot light the jet, eventually the candle causes the gas fumes to explode, and Murphy is burned to death. He has left instructions for the disposal of his body, which include being burnt with the ashes put into a paper bag and taken to the "necessary house" in the Abby Theatre in Dublin. There he stipulated the chain be pulled on them, preferably during the performance of a piece. This sequence does not unfold according to Murphy's wishes, however, because Cooper goes into a pub while carrying Murphy's ashes and, in a fit of anger, throws them at someone: "By closing time, the body, mind and soul of Murphy were freely distributed over the floor of the saloon: and before another dayspring greyened the earth had been swept away with the sand, the beer, the butts, the glass, the matches, the spits, the vomit" (p. 154).

Murphy cannot function in the "big world"—the world of other people, society, external "reality." He cannot work, and his relationships are a collection of characters split off from him. He is drawn to Celia, but, as he says, the part of him that he loves hates Celia, and the part of him that he hates is drawn to her. He idealizes the "little world"—the world of his mind—and eventually the only place in which he feels at home and can "work" is a place where there are others who live in their little worlds as well—the mental hospital with all its psychotic patients. From the beginning of the novel, the nonpsychotic part of his mind is already failing and the idealized psychotic part is in the ascendant position.

Murphy's split between body and mind, between the internal and external worlds, between feelings and thoughts and thoughts and thoughts is commented on throughout the novel. The narrator describes Murphy's purpose in studying with Neary as a way of controlling his heart, which is alternately burst or seized:

It was the mediation between these extremes that Neary called the Apmonia. When he got tired of calling it Apmonia he called it Isonomy. When he got sick of the sound of Isonomy he called it Attunement. But he might call it what he liked, into Murphy's heart it would not enter. Neary could not blend the opposites in Murphy's heart. (p. 6)
When Murphy rocks in his chair, we are told that “the big world died down in favour of the little where he could love himself," and later, “soon his body would be quiet. Most things under the moon got slower and slower and then stopped, a rock got faster and faster and then stopped. Soon his body would be quiet, soon he would be free” (p. 9). When he works up his chair to the “maximum rock,” we are told that “Slowly the world died down, the big world where Quid pro quo was cried as wares and the light never waned the same way twice; in favor of the little, as described in section six, where he could love himself” (p. 8).

The splitting consistent with $\zeta K$ as described by Bion can be seen in Murphy’s speech, which is denuded of vitality and meaning: “She [Celia] felt, as she felt so often with Murphy, spattered with words that went dead as soon as they sounded; each word obliterated, before it had time to make sense, but the word that came next: so that in the end she did not know what had been said. It was like difficult music heard for the first time” (p. 27).

In Chapter 6, wherein we are given a description of Murphy’s mind, the narrator tells us that “Murphy’s mind pictured itself as a large hollow sphere, hermetically closed to the universe without. . . . He was split, one part of him never left this mental chamber that pictured itself as a sphere full of light fading into dark, because there was no way out” (p. 63). We are told that there were three zones: (1) the light, where pleasure was found in reversing experience, where the world of the body was broken up into the pieces of a toy; (2) the half-light, where pleasure was found in contemplation — states of peace; and 3) the dark, which was a flux of forms, a perpetual coming together and falling asunder of forms . . . nothing but forms becoming and crumbling into the fragments of a new becoming, without love or hate or any intelligible principle of change. Here there was nothing but commotion and pure forms of commotion. Here he was not free, but a mote in the dark of absolute freedom. He did not move, he was a point in the ceaseless unconditioned generation and passing away of line." . . . He spent more and more time “in the dark, in the willlessness, a mote in its absolute freedom.” (pp. 65–66)

Early in the novel Neary says, “Murphy, all life is figure and ground,” to which Murphy replies, “But a wandering to find a home” (p. 6). Murphy’s “ground” is his idea of “home”; however, this home, for him, involves the rejection of “figure”—that is, the other or others. Later, Murphy’s process of fading into nothingness is described as “Neary’s big blooming buzzing confusion or ground, mercifully free of figure” (p. 138). Therefore, when Murphy lets go of reality in his attempt to achieve an idealized state of nothingness or a ground/home, he has nothing to actually ground him—no “container” or “background object”—only a “black hole.”

As Murphy identifies more and more with the psychotic patients in the hospital, Ticklepenny (the nurse who got Murphy the job) comments that Murphy reminds him of Clarke, a patient
who had been in a catatonic stupor for three weeks. We are told that:
in effect Murphy's night was good, perhaps the best since nights began so long ago to be bad, the reason being not so much that he had his chair again as that the self whom he loved had the aspect, even to Ticklepenny's inexpert eye, of a real alienation. Or to put it perhaps more nicely: conferred that aspect on the self he hated. (p. 109)

After the game of chess with Mr. Endon, Murphy drifts into a state of nothingness without his rocking chair and upon awakening finds that he has lost Mr. Endon. As mentioned, the rules of the game of chess were that each person could move a piece only if it were possible to move the piece back to its original position. Therefore, the game is such that there is the illusion of movement without actual movement. Endon continues to play, with no recognition of the other with whom he is playing. Murphy's moves become increasingly more frantic as he tries to get Mr. Endon to see him. At the end, Murphy had a chance to move his queen in such a way as to force Endon to notice the move—and therefore Murphy—but at that point he resigns himself to not being seen by Mr. Endon and gives up—he surrenders. This is what led to his spiral into nothing. Once he finds the lost Mr. Endon, he brings him back to bed, gazes into his eyes and says

The last at last seen of him, himself unseen by him, and of himself. The last Mr. Murphy saw of Mr. Endon was Mr. Murphy unseen by Mr. Endon. This was also the last Murphy saw of Murphy. . . . The relation between Mr. Murphy and Mr. Endon could not have been better summed up by the former's sorrow at seeing himself in the latter's immunity from seeing anything but himself. *Mr. Murphy is a speck in Mr. Endon's unseen.* (p. 140, emphasis added).

Murphy, for all of his attempts to idealize nothingness, has not been able to attain it. He can only get close to it through identification with someone who is in it and who does not see or recognize him. Murphy's intolerance of frustration is not so great that he has to resort to extreme mechanisms of evasion—yet it is too great to bear the experience of reality. Murphy's dilemma is that he cannot "be" fully in either world. He is too sane to be psychotic and too psychotic to be sane.

Bion (1967) discusses the terrible state of mind that exists as the result of the "dreadful awareness" of the nonpsychotic part of the personality:

He wishes to love. Feeling incapable of frustration he resorts to a murderous assault, or a token assault, as a method of disburdening the psyche of the unwanted emotions. The assault is but the outward expression of an explosive projective identification by virtue of which his murderous hatred, together with bits of his personality, is scattered far and wide into the real objects, members of society included, by which he is surrounded. He now feels free to be loving, but is surrounded by bizarre objects each compounded of real people and things, destructive hatred, and murderous
conscience. The picture is further complicated because, although it is true to say the patient feels free to love, at least in intention, the violence of the explosion leaves him denuded also of his feelings of love. (p. 84).

Murphy’s inability to tolerate emptiness without having to fill up the space with pain and continuous movement as a way to anesthetize himself and his inability to tolerate the suffering that comes with connections with others—which necessarily implies separation as well as passionate links—leads to his inability to function in the “big world” and his continual search for a container. However, because links with other humans (Celia) are experienced as filled with cruelty and dread, he is led to an idealization of a state of no feelings, no connections, no thoughts, and to a need to find an inanimate container (the chair), a nonseeing, nonfeeling mirror (Mr. Endon), and finally to his own mind. Even when he stipulates a specific container for the remains of his body and mind, a toilet, as described in the note found near his body detailing his wishes about how he wanted his remains to be disposed of, he fails to attain what he asks for; instead, fragments of what are left of him end are scattered all over a barroom floor mixed with dirt, cigarette butts, and vomit. In trying to understand what Murphy sees in Mr. Endon’s eyes, I am reminded of an interpretation given by Grotstein (1990) to a female patient who said that her mother treated her “as if I were nothing.” His interpretation was as follows:

You have attached the illusion of somethingness to the nothingness which you felt mother imprinted [you] with as her bonding to you. When your analysis and your professional life impart significance and meaningfulness to you, this painfully contrasts with and jeopardizes your background support with your mother which is based upon the something of your nothingness and meaninglessness to her. To be meaningful to yourself through me and through others in your present life strips away the something of the former nothingness and meaninglessness and causes you to feel abjectly meaningless and nothing in a more meaningfully, frightening way. Paradoxically, if you accept this new meaning, you are feeling deprived of the only true background presence you have ever known—the something of being nothing to somebody. In other words, if I feel that I am something to another only when I am nothing, then the only meaning for me is meaninglessness. The meaning and significance that come from being something to another would jeopardize my whole structure of meaning which is paradoxically based upon meaninglessness. Beckett’s Mr. Endon then can be seen as an unseeing, nonresponsive, nonreceptive mother whose eyes are perverse and deadly mirrors. Similarly, an infant’s attempts to penetrate a nonpresent, rejecting mother become more and more frantic and filled with hostility as the nonaccepting, impenetrable mother reflects these franticness and hostility back to the infant. After Murphy’s gazes at Mr. Endon, he tears off his clothes and frantically tries to conjure up images of people he has
known. When that tactic fails, he tries to think of anything he has known.
In the unbearable state of being something only when one is nothing to someone else, it is as though one exists only by not existing—as if one is alive only by killing the life within oneself. This existential paradox may correspond to what Beckett responded to in Jung’s lecture about someone who was alive and yet had not been born. In describing Murphy’s plight in Chapter 5, we are told that
His troubles began early. To go back no farther than the vagitus, it had not been the proper A of the international concert pitch, with 435 double vibrations per second, but the double flat of this. How he winced, the honest obstetrician, a devout member of the old Dublin Orchestral Society and an amateur flautist of some merit. With what sorrow he recorded that of all the millions of little larynges cursing in unison at that particular moment, the infant Murphy’s alone was off the note. To go back no farther than the vagitus.” (p. 44)
In the end, Murphy who was neither completely alive nor completely dead but somewhere in between, finally came alive in the dead, unseeing eyes of a schizophrenic. He becomes “incandescent” and takes off his clothes as he walks, trying to get pictures of people from his life:
He tried with the men, women, children and animals that belong to even worse stories than this. In vain in all cases. He could not get a picture in his mind of any creature he had met, animal or human. Scraps of bodies, of landscapes, hands, eyes, lines and colours evoking nothing rose and climbed out of sight before him, as though reeled upward off a spoon level with his throat. It was his experience that this should be stopped, whenever possible, before the deeper coils were reached. (p. 141)
He then gets into his chair and begins rocking faster and faster until “the gas went on in the wc, excellent gas, superfine chaos. Soon his body was quiet” (p. 142).
BECKETT AND BION—DEATH AND REBIRTH
Reading Murphy, one gets the impression that Beckett is gazing at Murphy in a way that is similar to how Murphy gazes at Mr. Endon. Beckett presents in Murphy a loving and almost affectionate portrait of a man caught between the “little world” and the “big world,” a man who is constantly seeking a “home” in a disembodied mind—and he allows (or needs) that man to die. When Beckett began his psychoanalytic therapy with Bion, he too was walking the streets plagued by suicidal thoughts. He was pathologically and inextricably tied to his rejecting, harsh, and demanding mother. Upon his termination of his therapy with Bion, Beckett went back to his mother briefly, but shortly realized that he had to leave both Ireland and her. In 1937 he left her in Ireland to make a life for himself in Paris and shortly thereafter received the news that Murphy was accepted for publication. In 1939, Hitler’s troops marched on Eastern Europe, and by 1940 Beckett was a member of the French Resistance, acting with great heroism. While in seclusion toward the end of the
war, he began to suffer from depression and what Bair (1978) calls his “most serious breakdown.” He began writing *Watt* as a means of staying sane. *Watt* undergoes a process of mental deterioration; however, as Bair notes, “Like Murphy, Watt clearly perceives the world around him. But, Watt is unlike Murphy, who tries to perfect the hermeticism of his mind before he realizes that he is doomed to sanity and cannot surrender to his inner being” (p. 330).

Coincident with the death of Murphy in his writing was the “death” or ending of Beckett’s therapy with Bion. Is it possible that he found enough containment and “good-enough” mothering in the young Bion to be able to also project the failed mother onto Bion, so that in leaving Bion, Beckett was able to let the part of himself that was pathologically tied to his mother die? If so, then perhaps Beckett was psychologically “reborn” with enough of a sense of an internal “ground” to be able to tolerate the nothingness of his depression and give voice to it rather than be annihilated by it. It is also possible that Bion was able to provide a sense of holding that allowed Beckett the space to go into his “madness” and destructiveness and to “break down” as a way to free himself from the fear of madness and the torment of being frozen by the original “catastrophe” (Eigen, 2003; Winnicott, 1989). In this sense, Bion might have been able to resonate with, and survive Beckett’s terrifying states of mind and facilitate what he will later call “murder as psychic birth” in the sense of learning that one can survive murder and experience a kind of death that is the necessary precursor to rebirth (Eigen, 2003, p. 734).

Beyond these speculations, it is helpful to appreciate the fact that Beckett possessed the ability to give form to his internal struggle through writing. In short, his art played an important role in his efforts to name the unnameable. His writing itself contains the paradox of giving voice to the problem of the lack of a voice and putting into words what is experienced as wordless. In other words, his writing about nothing, no-thing, and nothingness is transformative. In addition, in writing about alienation and the inability to love and communicate, he is, in fact, communicating with people and expressing complex, deep, and disturbing conflicts that are part of the experience of being alive—conflicts and fears with which all human beings can resonate at some level. In a 1949 work, *Disjecta* he expresses this paradox in the following way: “The expression that there is nothing to express, nothing with which to express, nothing from which to express, no power to express, no desire to express, together with the obligation to express” (cited in Katz, 1999, p. 1). In an even later work, *Texts for Nothing* (1967), he says, “Where would I go, if I could go, who would I be, if I could be, what would I say, if I had a voice, who says this, saying it’s me?” (cited in Katz, 1999, p. 1). Beckett’s art becomes a radical affirmation of and gives voice to nothing as the “naught that is more real
CONCLUSION

There appears to be congruence between what Bion investigated psychoanalytically regarding the development of the capacity to think, and what Beckett explored through writing regarding the struggle between the desire to live and make meaning of one's life, and the fear as well as seduction of losing one's mind or destroying it in the face of overwhelming pain, terror, and the chaos of meaninglessness. The notions of nothing, no-thing, and nothingness could act as points of departure for understanding the work of both men, as well as facilitating an understanding of what perhaps may be points of correspondence between them. The important existential questions explored by these two thinkers in very different ways resonate in other areas of inquiry also devoted to understanding what it means to be human.

Both Bion and Beckett were clearly interested in experiences of which we can never ultimately "know" anything, and therefore the question becomes the following: How can we think about the unthinkable, name the unnameable, and know the unknowable—nothingness? Bion and Beckett ask each of us: With what do we fill the space left in the absence of an object? How do we signify nothing? They both seem to have similar answers to those questions: Only by being able to tolerate the frustration of not-knowing, only by being able to face emptiness without trying to fill it with no-things or idealizing it as a way of denying feeling, dependence, or desire, can one actually experience meaning emerging as a process of creative interpretation and interaction with the world. The capacity to experience an ongoing sense of being with the awareness of no-thing, and to therefore be open to growth, development, creative agency, and love is dependent upon an experience of existing in the mind, eyes, and gaze of an-other in the dance of attuned, rhythmic synchrony. Inherent in the concept of naught as a form of nothing is the open space for creative symbolic representations which represent nothing and therefore allow emptiness, absence and nothing to be thought about and transformed.

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NOTE


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