



10.2478/abcsj-2020-0003

Urban Space, Singularity and Networks in
Laura Del-Rivo's *The Furnished Room* (1961)

NICOLAS TREDELL

University of Sussex & Palgrave Macmillan, Great Britain

Abstract

This essay explores the representation of interior and exterior urban space in Laura Del-Rivo's novel *The Furnished Room* (1961) through the lenses of singularity and networking, which are proposed as preferable alternatives to notions such as individuality and community, especially in the analysis of city life and literature. The essay examines portrayals of four kinds of urban space in the novel – the furnished room, the office, the café and the street – which seem to offer escapes from the perceived constrictions of the family home, the suburb and the Church. It analyses the novel's sensory evocations of such urban spaces, especially through smell and sight. The essay also considers how the narrative conveys the enticements of the abstract and impersonal network of money. It relates these elements to its young male protagonist, an existentialist (anti-)hero who suffers from a recurrent sense of unreality and who seeks a more sustained version of the greater intensity glimpsed in epiphanies, privileged moments in which the world seems temporarily transfigured into a visionary space. The essay suggests that the novel respects but questions his quest by dramatizing his wrong choices and by ending with a view of urban space given over to women and children.

Keywords: café, epiphanies, *The Furnished Room*, networking, money, office, room, singularity, street, urban space

The ideas of urban space, singularity and networking provide three interrelated perspectives on Laura Del-Rivo's trenchant first novel *The Furnished Room*. This was published in Hutchinson's "New Authors" series in 1961 and reissued by Five Leaves Press in 2011 as one of their

New London Editions in their “Beats, Bums & Bohemians” series.ⁱ Set mainly in London, particularly in and around Soho and Notting Hill (with occasional excursions into the suburbs, provinces and countryside), *The Furnished Room* moves through imaginative evocations of a variety of interior and exterior spaces, including furnished rooms (also known as bedsitters in the period in which the novel is set), flats, houses, cafés, pubs, offices, streets, fairgrounds and markets.

The protagonist, Joseph Ignatius (known as Joe) Beckett, is a man in his early twenties living alone in London in the furnished room of the novel’s title and working at an office job he finds futile. Although he sometimes makes entries in a notebook, he does not seem to aspire to be a writer or any other kind of artist. He gets involved with women but shows no sign of wanting to marry and settle down with his main girlfriend, Ilsa Barnes. A lapsed Catholic, he feels unable to return to the faith but seeks a sense of purpose and direction that would be as strong, or stronger, as that of the dedicated priest he wanted to be at the age of 15. He does not want, however, to commit himself to any specific set of religious beliefs. This quest for purpose and direction eventually leads him, encouraged by his dark angel Dick Dyce, into crime and ironic disappointment. At the end of the novel, he seems destined for prison.

In terms of narrative technique, *The Furnished Room* tells its tale in the third person, with Beckett as the viewpoint character, and proceeds chronologically, except for a few flashbacks to Beckett’s past. Del-Rivo’s succinct prose, however, has a discontinuity that conveys the fragmentation of Beckett’s life as it shifts from one semi-discrete moment to the next, disrupting the flow of a linear story. On one level, we can read the novel as a work of urban naturalism. If we set it in the cultural context of 1950s Britain from which it emerged, we can relate it particularly to what was then called “kitchen-sink” realism, which focused on impoverished people living in cramped, run-down environments. The adjective “kitchen-sink” served as a metonymy for such environments, even if actual kitchens and sinks were absent. Beckett’s furnished room has neither. We can also, however, discern in *The Furnished Room* elements of the philosophical novel, like Sartre’s *La nausée* (1938), which evokes perceptual and psychological experiences that dramatize

philosophical issues, and of the related genre of the “metaphysical thriller” that combines concerns about reality, meaning and being with thriller elements, especially murder; examples would include Fyodor Dostoevsky’s *Crime and Punishment* (1866), Friedrich Dürrenmatt’s *The Pledge* (1958) and *Ritual in the Dark* (1960) by Colin Wilson, a friend and associate of Del-Rivo at the time (Tredell, *Novels* 71-108).

The Furnished Room evokes the recurrent sense of unreality that Beckett experiences in both interior and exterior urban spaces. On an Underground train, for example, he looks at his fellow-passengers “and none of them seemed real. It struck him as absurd, all these people sitting there and believing they were real” (Del-Rivo 42). In this respect, Del-Rivo’s novel continues and develops a trope of urban life as a space of unreality that runs from the mid-nineteenth into the twentieth century. It includes, for instance, the “cité pleine de rêves” [“city full of dreams”] of Baudelaire’s “Tableaux Parisiens” in *Les Fleurs du Mal* (1857; 1998: 176-78), and the “Unreal City” of T.S. Eliot’s *Waste Land* (1922; Eliot 1977: 62, 68). Del-Rivo’s novel is also, however, punctuated by what we can call, adapting a term from James Joyce, “epiphanies,” or what E.F.N. Jephcott, in his *Proust and Rilke: The Literature of Expanded Consciousness* (1972) terms “privileged moments” (15-31). These are moments in which usually mundane elements of everyday life, for example, perceptions of apparently banal aspects of interior and exterior urban environments, take on an intense, near-visionary quality. We can see an example of such a moment in Joyce’s *Stephen Hero*, the early version of the novel that became *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916), where the protagonist, Stephen Dedalus, says that the clock on the Ballast Office in Dublin “is only an item in the catalogue of Dublin’s street furniture” but that, if the “spiritual eye” can “adjust its vision to an exact focus,” this “item” becomes “epiphanised” and offers “a sudden spiritual manifestation” (Joyce 216, 217). Here, however, “spiritual” should not be taken to imply any necessary belief in the existence of God or of a preternatural sphere beyond the material world. Epiphanies may be wholly secular. Similarly, in *The Furnished Room*, objects that are, on one level, merely items in the catalogue of domestic, office or street furniture in the urban space of London can appear at moments as they might if seen

through the cleansed doors of perception that William Blake invoked in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* (c. 1790-93).ⁱⁱ For Beckett, these are “the occasional visions into super-reality given to the victims of unreality” (Del-Rivo 94).

In exploring *The Furnished Room* further, this essay will use the terms “singularity” and “networking,” in preference to more common terms such as “individuality” and “community.” We will now outline the reasons for preferring these terms and then embark on a more detailed analysis of the text.

Singularity

“Individuality” can suggest a coherent self that a person already possesses in latent form, and which is actualized in a set of actions and experiences. Alternatively, it can indicate a coherent self that a person achieves by the eventual integration of a set of actions and experiences, as in the traditional *Bildungsroman*. It is, however, questionable whether, even in such a *Bildungsroman*, coherence is ever fully achieved. It is also questionable whether such coherence is wholly desirable, in literature or life. This essay takes the position that such an idea of individuality is an illusion and that it may limit the possibilities of a person. If we relate this to urban space, we can suggest that the appeal of such space, as experienced within the temporal span of a person’s existence, is the proliferation of possibilities it seems to offer to construct a singularity. Singularity here means an identity that is distinctive, and in that respect singular, but is not that of a coherent “individual” or of a “single” person in a sense that carries negative connotations. We see an example of such negative connotations in the use of the modern term “singleton” to mean a person living alone outside a long-term relationship, which often carries the implication that such a state is deficient and in need of remedy by matrimonial, familial and/or communal identifications.

Back in 1974, in his nonfiction book *Soft City*, the novelist and cultural critic Jonathan Raban caught the sense of opportunity that cities appear to offer for the construction of singularity (though he did not use that term). Raban affirmed that “[c]ities, unlike villages and small towns,

are plastic by nature. We mould them in our images” (9). He acknowledged that such plasticity was not unfettered. Cities, “in their turn, shape us by the resistance they offer when we try to impose our own personal form on them” (9). Those who construct such an identity do not make it just as they please but under circumstances existing already, given and transmitted from the past. They do, however, have, or at least feel they have, a degree of freedom in their self-construction. It is true, as David Harvey suggests in *The Condition of Postmodernity* (1989), that it would be easy to show that Raban offered “a rather particular perception of matters on the part of a young professional newly arrived in London” (5). We could also add that such a perception is not only age- and class-bound to some extent, but also implicitly gendered, assuming a freedom of action that, in the later twentieth-century city, would still have been a prerogative of male more than female subjects. It would be wrong, however, to conclude that this kind of self-construction in and through urban spaces is therefore reserved only for young professional male newcomers to the city. Even with full allowance for such real constraints as class, income, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, age and health, it is, in principle, open to anyone.

This process of construction is a form of *bricolage*, of a sort of do-it-yourself person-making that puts together an identity from whatever is ready to hand, internally and externally, psychologically and physically. This identity is never wholly coherent and complete, but always open to the fluctuations of desire and the force of events, and to a contingency that may seem vertiginous or serendipitous, or sometimes both at once. Such *bricolage* may be more flexibly practiced in relation to networks than communities, since the latter may restrict the possibilities of self-making by their relatively limited repertoire of resources and the pressure they can exert to conform to their community codes. At this point, we need to address the concept of community.

Networking

“Community” is an intriguing term because, in the 1950s and 1960s, it almost always carried a positive charge and still does so today. A

widespread if sometimes rather vague feeling persists that “community” is a good thing. The cultural critic Raymond Williams used the term positively a lot, but he did point out, in *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society* (1988), that “unlike all other terms of social organization (*state, nation, society*, etc.) it [community] seems never to be used unfavourably, and never to be given any positive opposing or distinguishing term” (76, original italics). But, as both fiction and nonfiction amply suggest, a community can be experienced as constricting, cloying, claustrophobic, a cage to escape from rather than a safe space to stay within. One major strand of fiction about capital cities, London or Paris, say, focuses on protagonists who leave their community of origin in a rural village, suburb or province, or even within the metropolis itself, and use the capital to try to construct a singular identity that is not locked into a specific community and that instead employs networks. A community also has the capacity to turn, sometimes violently, and on occasion even lethally, against those who seem to threaten it. To point out these negative aspects of “community” is not to dismiss the positive value of the idea or the reality but to highlight its darker sides.

The “positive opposing or distinguishing term” to “community,” this essay proposes, is “networking.” This should not be seen as necessarily inferior or superior to “community,” but as a positive alternative to it. Those who escape a constricting community and do not want to enter another one, with its concomitant risk of further constriction, can network instead. Prior to the digital era, this is what people who came physically to live in London or other big cities to escape communal and familial pressures did, at least for a time. They engaged in networking in order to construct a singularity for themselves, associating with a range of groups, but not so closely that any one group became constricting. It is this process of seeking to construct a singularity through networks that Del-Rivo’s first novel explores and dramatizes as it shows its protagonist moving through a variety of interior and exterior urban spaces. We shall now consider four of these in turn: the room, the office, the café and the street.

Room

The title of *The Furnished Room*, even before we start the main text, immediately introduces the idea of an interior space that has both positive and negative connotations. Positively, it can be a place of escape, welcome seclusion, and relative safety; it may provide a space to read, to write, to study, to think, to meditate. Indeed Beckett, in an echo of his Catholic upbringing, sometimes thinks of his room as “a monastic cell” (Del-Rivo 19). But a room can also seem a space of constriction, of isolation, of loneliness, like a tomb as evoked in Andrew Marvell’s poem “To His Coy Mistress”: “The Grave’s a fine and private place, / But none I think, do there embrace” (Marvell 26). Beckett, however, does achieve some furtive embracements, smuggling in his main girlfriend, Ilsa, despite the close surveillance of his landlady. A furnished room is, moreover, often seen as temporary: a spatial actualization of the supposedly liminal stage of life that falls between leaving a family home and settling down in “a home of one’s own.” A common urban nightmare of the period in which *The Furnished Room* first appeared was that of ending up, old and alone, in a seedy bedsitter. Indeed, this is the fate of one of the characters in *The Furnished Room*, though the novel intimates that this state may not be as wholly negative as is sometimes supposed.

Although it is possible to find furnished rooms in small towns and indeed in villages, such habitats tend, in both literature and life, to be mainly associated with capital cities, or at least large ones. Examples include St Petersburg in Dostoevsky’s *Crime and Punishment* and Ivan Goncharov’s *Oblomov* (1859); Paris in Balzac’s *Père Goriot* (1835) and Henri Barbusse’s *L’Enfer* (1908); and London in Samuel Beckett’s *Murphy* (1938) and Lynne Reid Banks’ *The L-Shaped Room* (1960). Banks’ novel, like Del-Rivo’s, includes the word “room” in its title.ⁱⁱⁱ Such rooms are also associated with an isolation that is ironic insofar as it is perceived as being shared by multitudes. They offer an urban enactment of Matthew Arnold’s line in his famous poem on the human condition: “To Marguerite – Continued.” “We mortal millions live *alone*” (Arnold 197, original italics). One place in which people do literally live alone while being massed together is in the furnished rooms of large cities. T.S.

Eliot's poem *Preludes* explicitly links this kind of multiple isolation with rooming-houses: "One thinks of all the hands / That are raising dingy shades / In a thousand furnished rooms" (Eliot 22).

It is important to distinguish between furnished rooms in a house that also provides meals for its lodgers in a communal dining room, so that the residents have an opportunity to gather daily round a table to eat and talk (as in *Père Goriot* or *L'Enfer*), and those that do not, even if they still have a landlady on the premises. The furnished room of Del-Rivo's first novel is of the latter kind. In postwar London, another term for such accommodation was becoming more widespread: "bedsitter." In Del-Rivo's novel the terms "furnished room" and "bedsitter" are virtually interchangeable and synonymous. Her narrative also occasionally uses terms that were becoming part of popularized sociological discourse at the time. One is the term "bedsitter-land" (Del-Rivo 10). This was used in a topographical sense to denote those areas of London, such as Notting Hill, in which bedsitters seemed the most widespread form of accommodation. It was also employed in a more general sense to mean the experiential world of people who lived in such accommodation, whether or not they lived in the same area. The other pop-sociology term that features in *The Furnished Room* is "bedsitter loneliness" (Del-Rivo 195). This denotes the perceived isolation of such a mode of living. Echoing and updating Eliot's lines about "a thousand furnished rooms," Del-Rivo's novel speaks at one point of "[t]he thousands who lived alone in bedsitters" (136).

Joe Beckett has escaped into a series of furnished rooms from what he experiences as three constricting social spaces. One of these is his family home with his mother and father. Another is that of suburbia, or what the novel describes as "the subtopia of semi-detached houses with net curtains" (Del-Rivo 54). The third is that of the Catholic Church, which offers both the community created in communal acts of worship and access to a global network, particularly in the pre-Vatican II days when the mass, conducted in Latin, was the same everywhere, so that a person who went to a Catholic church anywhere in the world could expect a virtually identical religious service. But in Beckett's perception, Catholicism too, despite its global reach, is entrapped by the suburbs. The novel symbolizes this by the newly built "yellow-brick" ecclesiastical

edifice near his family home. “St Elizabeth’s Church was in a suburban-afternoon road of identical dolls’ houses” (Del-Rivo 65). While Beckett shows no desire to return to his parental home, to “subtopia,” or to the Catholic Church, he still feels the pull of them in three ways. One is through his emotionally manipulative mother. Another is through two priests at St Elizabeth’s with whom he debates religion, Father Dominic and Father Hogan. The third, and most important, is his sense of the continued need for the kind of belief and purpose that Catholicism, in the days when he wished to be a priest, once seemed to promise.

Searching for singularity, Beckett “lived in various furnished rooms” that have a generic quality, in a sense merging into one. They are all “much the same” (Del-Rivo 7). The specific room in which he lives for most of the novel is in Tewkesbury Road W11. No road of that name exists in that postal district but many similar roads do. The fixtures and fittings of his present abode are typical, though they incorporate some specific variations. The room contains a bed, an armchair and a table (“a folding card-table with a scarred, green-felt top”). It also has a wardrobe, a gas fire, a “greasy” gas ring (“on a tin tray”), a gas meter (“fixed so that the tenant did not get the full value of the shillings [inserted]” (Del-Rivo 7)), a wash-stand, and a slop bucket (the rooms lack running water). This catalogue of the items in Beckett’s room might feature in a work of urban or “kitchen-sink” realism. All the furnished rooms he has inhabited do, however, share one distinctive characteristic that offers the prospect, if not the reality, of escape from their confinement into a larger and freer space. They are rooms with a view, attic dwellings through whose window Beckett can look out. As he affirms on one occasion to Ilsa, “I like the roofscape” (Del-Rivo 82). At another point the narrative compares him, with only partial irony, to “a god surveying his territory” (Del-Rivo 153).

Beckett’s relationship to his furnished room fluctuates during the novel. Near the start of the narrative, he finds it an oppressive space. Its “heaviness,” a sense of its physical and psychological weight, contributes to the sense of unreality and passivity he frequently experiences. He wants to straighten the rumpled blankets of his bed but cannot bring himself to do so “because they existed more strongly than he did” (Del-Rivo 8). This is the room as a place of paralysis and inertia, as in *Oblomov*. The room

can also, however, be the site of intense experiences, epiphanies or privileged moments, which seem to intimate a richer, fuller, more visionary world. On one occasion, music is responsible for this, in the form of a recorded concert playing Vivaldi's *Four Seasons* on a second-hand radio he has bought for his room:

The music possessed him. He was immobile and relaxed, like the drowsiness after drinking wine. On the window ledge above his head was a jam jar containing a branch of chestnut leaves. The leaves lifted against the window. The music and the leaves seemed so miraculously beautiful that he wondered how, if God had not made the world, it was so wonderful. He wanted the music to go on for ever. When it ended he felt cleansed and blessed and slightly dazed. (Del-Rivo 105)

Here the aesthetic experiences of hearing the music and seeing the chestnut leaves rise into a kind of mystical vision and come close to a religious affirmation, although Beckett stops short of linking it to any definite belief. As he tries to retain the peace the experience brought, he feels he has won a victory over the confining and rigid space of the room. "It was one round to him in his battle with the four walls" (Del-Rivo 105). But there is a sense in which the room, with its enclosing four walls, its bed and its radio, might have been said to facilitate the experience, providing a safe physical space in which the music can possess him emotionally.

Later in the novel, Beckett, now jobless, ill-nourished and increasingly short of money even for subsistence, is in his room when he has "an alteration of vision," "as if the mechanism of his sight had been sharply jolted into a clearer and truer focus" (Del-Rivo 169). Although expressed in the metaphor of a "mechanism," this has links with William Blake's image, cited earlier, of cleansing "the doors of perception" (Blake 154). Blake's image is also a mechanical metaphor (doors are hung on hinges). Soon afterwards, Beckett himself will use a further mechanical metaphor when he speaks of "shutters on the human senses and capacity for experience" (170). This extra intensity of vision is revealed in his way of seeing the mundane, everyday objects on his washstand. "The rose-patterned china bowl, the empty milk-bottles, his tooth things and the ball of socks to be washed, all existed more intensely. They no longer looked

like their names” (169). The objects within the space of the room have been transformed, defamiliarized. This moment of heightened perception is cut short, however, by the unexpected arrival of his mother who invades the private space of his room, and effectively brings back into it, if only for a time, the family, suburban home and Church that he has fled.

In *The Furnished Room*, interior spaces, and some exterior ones, are sometimes rendered in terms of the way they smell, which is on several occasions the first sensory impression that is evoked. At one point, the novel calls such smells “the chemicals of evocation” (196). The other key furnished room in the novel besides Beckett’s is that of the elderly, reclusive eccentric Gash, who lives nearby. This room is first of all rendered in olfactory terms. “Gash’s room smelled fetid. There was the yellowish smell of insanity that Beckett had noticed in mental wards” (44). To evoke the odour that helps to define this particular space, the description here employs synesthesia, in which an impression upon one sense is described in terms of another. In this case, sight substitutes for smell, in the adjective “yellowish.” The description also moves into abstraction by identifying the odour as that of “insanity” rather than an emission from a specific material object. A similar shift into abstraction occurs a little later when Beckett is disgusted by the “stale smell of mania in the room” (46). These abstractions contrast with the olfactory impression the room of Gash’s respectable landlady makes on Beckett. This room “smelled of furniture polish and soup” (48). If we translate these odours into abstract terms, they can connote cleanliness and nourishment. They can also, however, connote, especially to Beckett, the entrapment of respectability, as the suburban home of his parents does. Even as he is repelled by the smell of Gash’s room, he also respects the extremism that made Gash reject the privileged existence he once enjoyed, as a “wealthy socialite” with “a brilliant career, many talents, popularity, good looks,” a “beautiful wife” and a child (Del-Rivo 71). Instead, Gash entered the marginal, precarious spaces of the small religious sect, the mental hospital and the lodging house. It is also rumoured that he has been in prison for molesting small girls, but he denies this to Beckett. Beckett himself, however, does not start from a position of social privilege. To earn money, he has to work at tedious

clerical jobs in offices. The office is another key interior space in Del-Rivo's novel.

Office

The prime space for paid work in *The Furnished Room* is the office. In relation to that space, Beckett follows the same pattern of behaviour as he does to the space of the furnished room. He moves from one office to another, as he moves from one furnished room to another, without settling down in any of them and often leaving them on bad terms. His work record is poor. He has been repeatedly sacked for lateness, unable to conform to the temporal demands of working in office spaces.

The particular office in which Beckett works in the early chapters of the novel is "Messrs Union Cartons & Packaging (Great Britain) Ltd" (Del-Rivo 37). This is a firm that provides small-scale spaces (cartons and packages) for the storage and transport of commodities. The name of the firm, "Union," and the parenthetical invocation, in the rest of its name, of Great Britain, are followed by "Ltd," the standard abbreviation at the time for a "limited liability company." This name allows us to suggest that this office, without trying to make it bear too large a symbolic load, could stand for Britain itself in the postwar era. It could represent a Britain that was no longer "Great" in the sense of being a major imperialist power, but that was unable fully to adjust itself to this new reality. It was also a Britain that could be perceived as politically, socially and culturally "limited," constricted and constricting. Indeed, it was against this constriction that the "Angry Young Men" of the 1950s, with some of whom Del-Rivo was associated, were seen as rebelling. We can see Joe Beckett as rebelling against this too, although he regards his rebellion in philosophical and quasi-religious rather than cultural and social terms, regarding it as a search for a fuller existential and experiential intensity.

Like his furnished room Beckett's office has a generic quality for the period. This is first evoked in olfactory terms. It "smelled of dust, radiators, disinfectant, and tea" (Del-Rivo 37). It has a rigid geometry, with its departmental manager partitioned in a corner and "green steel desks," over which metal-shaded lights hang, for its eight clerks. It

contains the typical items in a catalogue of office stationery of the time. These include files, folders, invoices and statements, and a pin-up calendar and other calendars advertising firms with which Union Cartons trades. From the next room comes the “clack” of typewriters (Del-Rivo 38). The typewriter was an essential item in the pre-computer office for most of the twentieth century. Two elements compound the constricting quality of this working space. Its frosted or grimed windows combine with the folders and files stored on their sills to reduce severely the ingress of natural light from outside, and its location beneath the bathrooms of the hotel above means that hot-water pipes run visibly through it and make it “hot as a desert noon” (Del-Rivo 38). It is thus doubly dissociated from the outside air in terms of both light and temperature. Later in the novel, Beckett will quit his job in this office and not take another.

An alternative to the spaces of room and office is offered by the cafés Beckett frequents.

Café

A kind of interior urban space that offers relative freedom is represented by Mick’s café in Charlotte Street in “Fitzrovia.” This was the bohemian area that lay on the northern perimeter of Soho, across Oxford Street, and that probably gained its name from the pub called the Fitzroy Tavern that still stands in Charlotte Street today. As with some of the other interior and exterior spaces in the novel, the description of the café initially focuses on the olfactory impression it makes when Beckett enters it. It “smelled of frying oil, cats, and dead cigarette smoke” (Del-Rivo 54). Mick’s stands for all the cafés Beckett goes to in Soho and Notting Hill in the novel, where he can find, not community, with its potential constriction, but a network that allows him to associate with others while keeping a certain distance, thus helping him both to construct and maintain his singularity:

He had continued to frequent the cafés because the oddly assorted clientele had one thing in common: they were all misfits of one sort or another. Because of this fact, Baroness Tania, who drank methylated spirit, could share a table with Tom, who was a porter and wore British Railways

uniform, with Dutchie, whose face bore the scar of a razor slash, and with an ageing young man named Flora who wore make-up and had tinted hair. And because they were all misfits they had not questioned Beckett. (Del-Rivo 54-55)

Such cafés represent an urban social space in which people can achieve singularity, where they will not be questioned or expected or pressured to conform to constricting conventions, but where they can also congregate when they wish: this sense of a shared non-discriminatory space is modelled in the very prose of the passage, with its long sentence that runs on for 51 words and consists mainly of a series of subordinate clauses, starting successively “who,” “who,” “whose” and “who,” which brings these diverse figures together and could be expanded to include others. Thus, the grammatical structure of this sentence itself performs a kind of networking, which does not entail joining a community that could prove constraining but involves entering into a series of loose associations, of networks, which allow a degree of freedom, of singularity.

Beckett is not content, however, to continue like this. He has rejected subtopia, but does not embrace “bohtopia.” “Bohtopia” is the supposed utopia of bohemian life, imagined as free of bourgeois constraints with “[e]veryone making love and going shares,” as Philip Larkin ironically puts it [Larkin 54, line 6]. Beckett feels that the bohemian world the cafés typify is also a place of self-deception and failure. Out in the streets, he can escape his furnished room, his office, and the bohtopia for which Mick’s café is a metonymy. Pacing the pavements, he becomes a *flâneur* moving non-purposively across exterior urban space, not confined to room, office or café, open to experience and epiphany.

Street

The opportunities for experience and epiphany that movement through the exterior urban space of the street offers are evoked in an interesting scene in which Beckett does not actually get outside but imagines himself doing so. One night, in bed in her flat with his other girlfriend, Georgia, he feels trapped and visualizes an escape into nocturnal perambulation:

Already in his mind he was out walking the streets, where at every corner there might be something which would make him feel pleased inside. It might be a building with a street light shining on it, or a man eating chips from a newspaper in a doorway, or a match briefly illuminating a face. Whatever it was, he wanted to be out, seeing it. He wanted to smell the adventure in the night air. (Del-Rivo 131-32)

Here the urban streets at night are imagined as an exterior space that can provide pleasures and adventures that are both aesthetic and existential. The pleasures and adventures consist of brief visual glimpses that offer the eye a kind of chiaroscuro, a play of light and shade, which takes on a quality like that of a painting, photograph, or movie shot, and which can also suggest moments in human lives, fragments of stories (who is the chip eater, whose the briefly lit face?). These are the pleasures and the adventures of the *flâneur* which, characteristically, slide into the more dubious gratifications of the voyeur. This is, however, a voyeurism of the glance rather than the gaze. In his imaginary walk, Beckett is not stopping to stare, not looking obsessively while keeping himself hidden, not seeking the visual possession of an object, scene or person. Rather, he is giving fleeting but not furtive glances as he passes through. In a sense, this is another form of networking, which does not involve talking to other people or staying in their company but operates through casual, non-appropriative glimpses into their lives that create an awareness of the multiplicity of human activities in the city and across the world. On a global scale, at any given moment, there will be multitudes eating in the street, striking matches, or engaging in a myriad other activities.

When Beckett is actually on the streets, he can have intense epiphanic experiences. One happens on the day when he throws up his office job. "Walking with the rush-hour crowds towards the Tube, he saw the broken glass. It lay like a crystal fortune in the gutter. The wonder of it took him aback. He wanted to shout aloud the miracle of a broken milk-bottle" (Del-Rivo 94).

Beckett cannot maintain this level of intensity, however. In the streets he also encounters what we could call anti-epiphanies. These are moments when the harsh reality of the world bumps up against him. This happens one evening as he walks through Notting Hill. As with some of

the interiors he enters in the novel, his first impression on that walk is olfactory but not aromatic. “The air smelled of gas from the Kensal Green gasometer” (Del-Rivo 106). Visual impressions then strike him. “He passed a fence sloganed BAN THE BOMB,” reminding him of both the risk of nuclear annihilation and the possibility, although it does not attract him, of political action. In this era, CND, the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament, was making itself felt in the UK through marches and demonstrations. Beckett next sees “a block of Peabody Buildings” (Del-Rivo 106). The name “Peabody” refers to a real organization, the Peabody Trust, originally founded as the Peabody Donation Fund in 1862 and now called simply “Peabody.” It is one of London’s most enduring and extensive housing associations, one of a range of not-for-profit organizations that offer relatively low-cost “social housing,” as it is now called, for people who could not otherwise afford to buy or rent their own homes. In other words, it is to some extent a philanthropic use of urban space. But this block of Peabody Buildings, as Beckett perceives it, has “tiled entrances like public conveniences” (Del-Rivo 106). Its aesthetics, at least in this respect, are unattractive and thereby seem to disrespect those who live there, making the entrances to their dwellings resemble another kind of urban interior, that of the public toilet.

As Beckett moves further along the street, he perceives people who have emerged from their interior spaces into the liminal zones between house and pavement, the window-sills and front door steps. In one bizarre, quasi-surrealist moment of perception, human beings appear to resemble clothes. “The people leaning out of the windows looked like laundry” (Del-Rivo 106). Other people venture out a little further and sit on their steps, creating a relaxed frontier zone between interior and exterior. Sound also emerges from the house interiors into the exterior space. “All the radios seemed to be turned on: a programme could be heard continuously by walking down the street” (Del-Rivo 106). But other, more sinister sounds, transmitted and amplified through loudspeakers, start to drown out the radios. These are the words of an agitator on a platform at the end of the street who is advocating the removal of West Indian immigrants from Notting Hill. He is thus asserting that they have no right to that particular urban space. In historical actuality, there were serious incidents

of urban unrest in Notting Hill in August and September 1958. These were called “race riots” at the time but were primarily attacks by whites upon people of colour. Notting Hill became a place of conflict over who had the right to live or even to walk there. The first words from the loudspeakers that the narrative renders in direct speech are “they take our houses” (Del-Rivo 106).

Among the crowd listening to the speaker Beckett sees his acquaintance, Reg Wainwright. A Communist who wants to explain the agitation in rational political terms, Wainwright looks forward to white and coloured labour uniting against capitalism. Beckett sees the agitation, however, as offering a channel for the instinctive capacity for hate within each person. “Hatred can be summoned up with appalling ease, and directed against West Indians or Jews, or Catholics, or any other minority group you care to name. Hatred gets more following than the housing problem” (Del-Rivo 107). But at this point the hatred is focused on the disposition of urban space.

Tension mounts when three West Indians move boldly though not aggressively across the space the crowd occupies. “They did not cringe or look afraid” (Del-Rivo 107). Although they are perfectly entitled to move across such a space, Beckett is aware that their insistence on doing so in this situation, particularly with such *sang-froid*, is dangerous, creating a flashpoint. “A ripple, like a snarl, broke out in the ranks of the whites. It only needed someone to make the first move and the three men would have been mobbed” (Del-Rivo 108). No one does make a move and the moment of maximum danger passes. It has, however, made Beckett realize that, although he is “theoretically ... opposed to prejudice and race hatred,” “he himself, like the others, had tensed like a dog ready to spring. Like the others, he had shared in the mob hatred at the cool effrontery of the West Indians” (Del-Rivo 108). This is the dark, potentially violent side of community. It manifests itself in a physical and psychological massing against those perceived as other, as outside the community and threatening its existence and its right to territory. It is significant that at this point the supposed threat becomes most concrete, most likely to provoke physical violence, when the otherness is embodied in those moving through exterior space to which they supposedly have no right.

If exterior urban space here is a site of tension and simmering violence, it can elsewhere be experienced as a site of relaxation and indeed of epiphany. At one stage the novel evokes “a timeless Sunday” in which the “thousands who lived alone in bedsitters had nothing to do. Some read the papers, others strolled round the block, more sat in pubs or coffee-bars” (Del-Rivo 136). Beckett himself goes for a walk and enjoys an epiphanic moment when he hears a gramophone from an attic window playing a blues number sung by a woman in “an adult, disillusioned voice” (Del-Rivo 136). He imagines her as a person of colour, “sitting on a bar stool facing a desert of empty glasses, singing the blues to the disillusioned dawn. She sang straight and honestly, without gimmicks.” The song seems to permeate the atmosphere. “The music hung like the summer sky over Tewkesbury Road” (Del-Rivo 136). Intertextually, this epiphany generated by a recorded song links with the moment in Sartre’s *La nausée* when the protagonist, Antoine Roquentin, hears a recording in a café of a woman of colour singing “Some of These Days” and experiences a sense of happiness and peace: “Je suis ému, je sens mon corps comme une machine de précision au repos” (Sartre 1985: 41).^{iv} For Beckett, the song from the gramophone combines with a moment of visual pleasure to release him momentarily from his existential angst, his sense of absurdity, boredom and futility, and to produce a transient sense of joy and peace. “The combination of the sunshine, a tree against a house, and the music, touched Beckett, making him feel happy. It was as if the music formed a centre, and everything fell into place around it. He was suddenly rested and at peace, giving his consent” (Del-Rivo 136). Characteristically, however, Beckett cannot retain this sense of peace or revive his sense of purpose.

Nexus

Beckett’s sense of purpose stirs again, however, when Dick Dyce re-enters the narrative. Dyce’s surname is a homophone for “dice.” He is what would later be called a “chancer” and who, in Britain in the later 1940s and the 1960s, might have been dubbed a “spiv.” The “spiv” was a well-dressed man engaged in shady dealings, originally in the wartime

black market. On one level, Dyce is a familiar figure in British fiction, drama, film and life in that era.^v *The Furnished Room* associates him with a particular kind of social and commercial space – the roadhouse – which appeared along the arterial roads that had developed in the 1930s, as car and truck traffic increased. Dyce is “[t]he fake major in the Tudor roadhouse who slaps you on the back and asks you to cash his cheque” (Del-Rivo 23). If you were so incautious as to do so, the cheque would of course bounce. The bank would return it stamped with the customary phrase of the time, “Refer to drawer,” and you would be unlikely to see its signatory again or to get your money back.

In *The Furnished Room*, however, Dyce becomes a deeper and more dynamic figure than a mere con-man, embracing a quasi-mystical, quasi-Nietzschean exaltation of money that anticipates the frenetic pursuit of lucre from the 1980s and into the twenty-first century. As he says, “I look at life through money-coloured spectacles. I see the money like the ether, permeating everything. Collecting in pockets here, banks there, financing industry, changing into power like matter changing into energy. And obtained by wits, work, or violence” (Del-Rivo 144). This indicates another form of networking, indeed a form that, to adapt Dyce’s phrase, permeates everything in twenty-first-century society. The network of money, now accelerated and globalized by digital technology, criss-crosses the earth globe almost instantaneously, in a sense abolishing both space and time. In the nineteenth century, the “Victorian sage” Thomas Carlyle had famously observed, in *Chartism* (1840), that: “Cash Payment has become the sole nexus [connection] of man to man!” (38). If we discount the gender bias and the predigital stress on “Cash,” we could adapt it to say “Payment has become the sole nexus of person to person.” This is a more dubious form of networking since, as Carlyle pointed out, it can lead to a situation in which money becomes the only linkage between people, and this is a very fragile basis for society. As he put it, “if she [Society] ever, by cruel chance, did come to exist only for protection of breeches-pocket property [i.e. money], she would lose very soon the gift of protecting even that, and find her career in our lower world on the point of terminating” (Carlyle 38). In other words, society would reach the verge of collapse.

Beckett does not share Dyce's mysticism of money. Rather, the younger man sees it as a means, in the immediate future, of "buying off his guilt-feelings towards his mother" (Del-Rivo 192) by taking her on a pilgrimage to Lourdes as she has terminal leukaemia, even though he expects no miracle cure. In the longer term, money offers a way to free himself from the constricting work space of offices. Nonetheless, he lets himself get caught up in Dyce's money-mystique. On the one hand, the fragility of social bonds based solely on money is symbolized in what happens to Beckett under the influence of Dyce. He tries to join the money network, but this is the wrong kind of networking for him to pursue. It is too far removed from those non-possessive human links that exist between, say, the customers in Mick's café. On the other hand, the relationship with Dyce plunges Beckett back into a quasi-familial net, rather than a network. Without pressing the analogy too far or engaging in simplified and superficial psychoanalysis, we could see Dyce and Beckett as enacting a surrogate father/ son relationship. Beckett's own father, unlike his manipulative mother, is largely absent from the text and Dyce partly fills that gap.

Thus a physically and psychologically weakened Beckett abandons his singularity and his solo quest for greater intensity and exchanges the kind of networking that would give him a measure of freedom for a situation that combines, somewhat contradictorily, two forms of entrapment. One form is the impersonal and existentially impoverished network of money. The other form is that of a relationship that reproduces some of the more oppressive elements of family life. Dyce wants his wealthy aunt killed so he can inherit her fortune, and he eventually persuades Beckett to break into her house and murder her in return for a share in her legacy. When Beckett confronts his intended victim, however, she dies of a heart attack before he can fire his gun. He inwardly acknowledges the irony. "The crime, intended to dynamite the way to freedom, had instead been the ultimate unreality, the concentration of all the previous unreality into a sickening unreal nightmare" (Del-Rivo 228). He also realizes that he has inadvertently left a clue that will enable the police to trace him. As the novel nears its end, he expects that he will soon enter another and even more constricting kind of room – not a monastic

cell, but a prison cell, in which access to exterior space, in the shape of the prison yard, will be severely curtailed.

Conclusion

In the penultimate paragraph of the novel, Beckett walks along Tewkesbury Road back to his old lodging house. His main girlfriend, Ilsa, emerges from the front door, sees him, and hails him by name, thus inadvertently identifying him to a plainclothes policeman nearby who starts to move towards him, presumably to hold him for questioning. Significantly, the narrative leaves Beckett at that point and he goes unmentioned in the final paragraph of the novel:

The children were wheeling and shouting as always; their screams ricocheted from the buildings. Two women walked along the pavement, pushing their shopping in wheeled baskets. A front door banged, a radio played. The sky was London grey over Tewkesbury Road on a Saturday morning. (244)

Here there is a corrective shift from the self-made extremity of the existentialist male protagonist to children and women going about their everyday activities. This conclusion reminds readers that this urban space is for women and children as well as for Beckett and that they, or their like, will continue to traverse it in his absence, to construct singularities for themselves and to engage in networking, and even to experience epiphanies.

Notes:

¹ Laura Del-Rivo was born in 1934 into a middle-class Catholic family in North Cheam. Her father, a bank employee, was of mixed Italian and Irish descent. Del-Rivo went to school at Holy Cross College, New Malden, but left at 16 to work at a range of jobs in central London. She was an assistant in Foyles bookshop, a counter hand in a J. Lyons's tearoom, an art-school model, an office clerk, a messenger and a char. In her spare time, she frequented Soho cafés, where would-be writers exchanged manuscripts. There she met another aspiring writer, Colin Wilson, who shot to brief fame in 1956, with the publication of his popular philosophical book, *The Outsider*. *The Furnished Room* was filmed in 1963 as *West 11*, directed by Michael Winner. Del-Rivo published two more novels –

Daffodil on the Pavement (1967; republished as *Animals*, 1970) and *Speedy and Queen Kong* (2004). Her short story collection, *Where Is My Mask of an Honest Man?*, appeared in 2013. She still lives in an attic room in Notting Hill, where for many years she ran a clothing stall in the Portobello Road Market.

ⁱⁱ “If the doors of perception were cleansed every thing would appear to man as it is, infinite” (Blake 154).

ⁱⁱⁱ We can mention here two other titles of the period that include the word “room.” One is John Braine’s novel *Room at the Top* (1957). This title refers both to the room the protagonist, Joe Lampton, takes in the middle-class area at the physical and social “top” of the town of Warley where he works, and to the idea that there is room at the “top” of society for a person from a humble background who is sufficiently ambitious, clever and ruthless. The other title of the period that includes “room” is that of the satirical play *The Bedsitting Room* (full version first performed 1963) by John Antrobus and Spike Milligan, set after a nuclear war, in which one of the characters, Lord Fortnum, is mutating into a bedsitting room.

^{iv} “I am moved, I feel my body like a precision tool at rest” (Sartre, *Nausea* 39).

^v In his study of novels by Laura Del-Rivo, Colin Wilson and Bill Hopkins, Paul Newman likens Dyce to “the false major in [Terence Rattigan’s play] *Separate Tables* [1955]” (Newman 17).

Works Cited

- Arnold, Matthew. “To Marguerite – Continued.” Poem 5 of “Switzerland.” *Poetical Works of Matthew Arnold*. London: Macmillan, 1898. 197-98.
- Baudelaire, Charles. *The Flowers of Evil* [A new translation with parallel French text]. Trans. James McGowan. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1998.
- Blake, William. *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* (c.1790-93). *Complete Writings with Variant Readings*. Ed. Geoffrey Keynes. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1974. 148-60.
- Carlyle, Thomas. *Chartism, Sartor Resartus, Lectures on Heroes, Chartism, Past and Present*. The Shilling Edition of Thomas Carlyle’s Works. London: Chapman and Hall, 1892. 1-68.
- Del-Rivo, Laura. *The Furnished Room*. 1961. New London Editions: Beats, Bums & Bohemians series. Five Leaves Publications, 2011.
- Eliot, T.S. “Preludes.” *The Complete Poems and Plays*. London: Faber, 1977. 22-23.
- Harvey, David. *The Condition of Postmodernity: An Enquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change*. 1989. Oxford: Blackwell, 1990.
- Jephcott, E.F.N. *Proust and Rilke: The Literature of Expanded Consciousness*. London: Chatto, 1972.
- Joyce, James. *Stephen Hero: Part of the First Draft of “A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man.”* Ed. Theodore Spencer. London: Cape, 1956.
- Larkin, Philip. “For Sidney Bechet.” *The Complete Poems*. Ed. Archie Burnett. London: Faber, 2014. 54.

- Marvell, Andrew. "To his Coy Mistress." *The Poems and Letters of Andrew Marvell*. Ed. H.M. Margoliouth. 2 vols. Vol. 1: *Poems*. Oxford: Clarendon P, 1927. 26-27.
- Newman, Paul. *Murder as an Antidote for Boredom: The Novels of Laura Del-Rivo, Colin Wilson and Bill Hopkins*. Colin Wilson Studies, no. 7. London: Paupers' P, 1996.
- Raban, Jonathan. *Soft City*. London: Hamilton, 1974.
- Sartre, Jean-Paul. *Nausea*. Trans. Robert Baldick. London: Penguin, 1972.
- . *La nausée*. 1938. Paris: Gallimard, 1985.
- Tredell, Nicolas. "Laura Del-Rivo." *The Literary Encyclopedia*. Web. 7 Mar. 2020.
- . "The Furnished Room". *The Literary Encyclopedia*. Web. 7 Mar. 2020.
- . "Laura Del-Rivo: 'The Furnished Room' – 1961." *London Fictions*. Web. 7 Mar. 2020.
- . "Laura Del-Rivo's *The Furnished Room*." *Girl Gangs, Biker Boys, and Real Cool Cats: Pulp Fiction and Youth Culture, 1950 to 1980*. Ed. Iain McIntyre and Andrew Nette. Oakland, CA: PM P, 2017. 122-25.
- . *Novels to Some Purpose: The Fiction of Colin Wilson*. Colin Wilson Studies, no. 25. Nottingham: Paupers' P, 2015.
- Williams, Raymond. *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society*. Rev. ed. London: Fontana, 1988.