

BEYOND THE MAP: KINETICS AND CARTOGRAPHIES IN JOHN MUCKLE'S FICTIONAL WORLD

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ABSTRACT:

This paper examines how motion, geography, and spatial consciousness shape the fictional landscapes of British writer John Muckle. His work, often rooted in working-class environments and marginal spaces, is deeply invested in the idea of movement—both physical and social—as a means of navigating fractured identities and dislocated lives. The title “Beyond the Map” gestures toward Muckle’s resistance to fixed geographies, instead privileging kinetic narratives and emotional cartographies that chart subjective experiences over formal topographies. Drawing on key texts including *London Brakes*, *My Pale Tulip*, and *Cyclomotors*, this study analyzes the ways in which Muckle constructs space through mobility, drift, and disconnection, thereby producing a dynamic literary cartography that captures the uncertainty, restlessness, and socio-economic fluidity of late 20th-century Britain. Ultimately, Muckle’s fiction subverts traditional narrative and geographic structures, offering an alternative map of post-industrial life marked by flux, transience, and political edge.

INTRODUCTION:

John Muckle’s fiction occupies a unique position within contemporary British literature—rooted in realism yet shaped by a dissonant energy that disrupts conventional narratives of place and belonging. His protagonists frequently traverse marginal spaces: suburban estates, industrial fringes, inner-city corridors, and derelict railways. These are not simply

backdrops but dynamic terrains through which identity, class, and experience are refracted. Muckle’s commitment to exploring movement—literal and figurative—frames his work within a broader literary and cultural discourse around mobility, dislocation, and spatial politics.

The metaphor of mapping is particularly potent in Muckle’s writing. His narratives often resist static representations of place in favor of routes, journeys, and emotional geographies. Drawing upon theories from spatial literary criticism, postmodern cartography, and psychogeography, this paper situates Muckle’s fiction as a form of narrative cartography—one that prioritizes motion, fragmentation, and subjectivity over empirical mapping. This is especially evident in the way his characters navigate constrained social realities through forms of escape, wandering, and imaginative drift.

By engaging deeply with the aesthetics of movement—through rhythm, pacing, and structural digression—Muckle reveals how mobility is both a response to and a symptom of socio-economic instability. His fiction, therefore, is not merely about place, but about the pressures of living in transit: in jobs, in identities, in cities that are always transforming. This paper will explore how Muckle’s kinetic prose constructs a unique literary geography—one that exists beyond the map, in the

overlapping spaces of memory, resistance, and wandering.

The current interest in the study of mobility has brought about increased interdisciplinarity. Geographers have drawn extensively on novels and poems to explore practices of mobility. Conversely, there has also been significant interest by literature scholars in studies of mobility and how they can inform our understanding of literary texts.¹⁰ Increasingly, mobile subjects and objects, it is argued, have produced new and different forms of narrative and poetic forms in order to reflect the changes in patterns of living and the different perspectives increased mobility provides.¹¹ Within narratives however, popular and everyday understandings of motion and mobility are often normalized and go unexamined, and their influence on ways of thinking appears unrealized despite their origins in classical Western philosophy. For Aristotle, for example, movement occurs in order to fulfil potential, while the world, for Heraclitus, is like 'an everflowing stream' in which 'nothing is at rest'.¹² 'Flow' is a basis for human experience in Heraclitus and means 'you cannot step twice in the same river, for fresh waters are ever flowing in upon you.'¹³ Although the image in Heraclitus' work is of a human figure subject to the flow of the river, it is only a small further step to imagine a context in which the human subject is also moving, creating infinite possibilities for engagement between the 'flow' and the 'figure'. Movement and motion can also be analytical, conceptual, and abstract. In the preface to the first edition of *Capital* Volume 1, Karl Marx says 'it is the ultimate aim of this work to reveal the economic law of motion of modern society',¹⁴ while David Harvey in his introduction to his commentary on *Capital*

speaks of 'a Marx who is always talking about movement and motion'.

A more recent study, *Marx in Motion*, by the philosopher Thomas Niall develops a theory of 'kinetic materialism' and the notion of *pedesis*: 'a kind of physical motion that is neither strictly necessary nor strictly random'.¹⁶ For Niall '*Pedetic* motion has no teleological end goal' but is a form of *praxis*, a theory in practice. *Pedesis*, as a form of movement, is a process of becoming, more directed than the *de'rive*, but still permitting some of its creativity.

More importantly, it identifies motion as not just the mobile human figure moving through a static landscape, but a human figure moving through a world in which matter itself is active and creative. The human figure is not, therefore, responsible for the production of space, but part of an interaction. 'For Marx' Niall says, 'all beings are sensuous objects ... continually produced because matter flows ... Objects are not merely passive suffering things ... [but are] producing and consuming at the same time'.¹⁷ Crucially for Niall it is 'movement that is primary, not capitalism'.¹⁸ The role of capitalism is not to initiate movement, but to change it.

For a literary critic therefore, examining the movement and mobility of characters in a novel, movement does not occur because of, for example, particular personal, social, cultural, environmental or economic pressures or actions within the narrative. Rather motion is always and already present. It is not enough to say that movement has occurred because of this or that, nor can an analysis of motion be derived teleologically, pulled toward the end of the novel by the plot. To be effective therefore, critical reading must pay attention to moments (collisions) in the narrative where there are changes in

the volume, range, and type of motion. One way to classify changes in movement is to use the classical triumvirate of motion which identifies three ways that matter moves. These are: in a straight line, in a deviation from that straight line (by a swerve perhaps), and by repulsion from other bodies. Marx's contribution, (see Niall) is to demonstrate that these three qualities of movement are coterminous.¹⁹ This coincident combination of changes in movement produces a 'rational or materialistic dialectic [that is] pedetic, folded and open ended'.²⁰ It is the 'movement and motion of the materialist dialectic that gives it its properly critical and revolutionary character ... dialectical and historical materialism, then is not about identifying universal and deterministic laws of motion but rather regional patterns of motion that already are immanent features of the present that they condition.'²¹ By the full consideration of moments of change and collisions within the novels, different types of movement form a complex intersection, allowing the work to ask questions and develop ideas about the kinds of change and their consequences that happen in very particular circumstances.

Applying these ideas to Muckle's novels demonstrates that his characters and the objects in the novels are not initiated into movement by economic necessity within a capitalist system or forced into migration through war. They do not begin to move from a position of stasis but rather change the quality of movement and its rate and direction. This has implications for our understanding of the ways we read aestheticized literary language and appreciate its forms; the idea of beginning and end becomes blurred; the action is always in the middle of things and in process. Similarly, form can be imagined as being always in motion and always in

the process of deflection from its continuity in a straight line. In a previous article, 'The Mobility of Form', I talked about the ways that poetic form was not static, but always mobile.²² This mobility produces an artwork (a poem) that is not only distinguished from the different contexts it finds itself in by its aesthetic form, but it is a form that is always differently apprehended. It is the form that makes the poem stand out from its linguistic context but changes with the particulars of each encounter. This notion of a mobile form, that is one that can move between contexts but in doing so changes, can take account of the 'pedetic' nature of the movements of people and things in Muckle's novels without reducing them to determined products of capitalism. The form of an artwork (in this case the novel), or its apparent lack of form, can be apprehended through the application of these ideas.

In Muckle's early novella *Cyclomotors*, the main character, a teenage boy called Geoffrey, plans to save enough money buy a 'cyclomotor' of the title and convert his bicycle into a machine that can help him 'fly' from the abusive household of his parents.²³ In the end, through a series of jobs that the narrative describes, he saves enough for a deposit, and by signing away his future income has the 40 cc two-stroke petrol engine 'mounted on an axle attached to the rear wheel spindle'.²⁴ The 'Bantamoto' will liberate him not only from his intolerable family environment, but also from the fate of his father, whose work at the start of the story involves renovating the engines of an ocean-going cruiser.

While both the objects, the cyclomotor of the title and the cruiser, are built to move themselves and people, they do so in very different ways. The cruiser, which was to

liberate Geoffrey's family from the routine poverty of working-class life, finally becomes the way class authority is asserted. It was bought by two RAF officers just after the second world war with the intention of operating a luxury cross-channel ferry, feeding into the desire for travel by a middle class hungry for experience of the 'continent'. It would, they believed, keep Frank, Geoff's father, and Geoff, in work for the rest of their lives, and the increase in mobility for the anticipated passengers would increase the potential of the social mobility for Geoff's family. Their position in the operation as the mechanics who worked behind the scenes to keep the show on the road was confirmed when on the maiden and only voyage of the Aloha, while the owners and their guests drank champagne and ate canapes, Frank and Geoff are in the 'cramped engine room ... crouched either side of the Merlins' with a 'single porthole [that] showed nothing but darkness'.²⁵ After some time in the engine room they are visited by the owners, who bring them a drink and a plate of canapes and a promise of the leftovers to take home. Frank's obsequious gratitude makes him, in Geoff's eyes, 'a drivelling idiot, or worse', and he is only able to reclaim some dignity when, after they have left, he forbids his son from eating the canapes and describes them as 'muck' that would only make him sick. The episode in their lives ends when Frank is paid off with thirty shillings redundancy money after one of the owners dies following a reckless flying escapade, and the remaining owner surreptitiously sells the boat. In terms of the narrative, the contradiction is between the perpetual motion they were offered, although not without a cost to their human dignity as the collision between the characters in the engine room

demonstrates, and the abrupt halt that was brought about by the flying accident.

The boat, after all its potential to lift Frank and Geoff into another world full of the promise of (at least) the proximity of luxury and the exotic nature of France only becomes another route back to the limitations of post-war working-class life. The route out of that way of life for Geoff was not the perpetual motion of going back and forth across the channel, enhancing the mobility of the middle and upper classes although not his own, but through his own determination to save enough for a cyclomotor that when on his bike, meant that his limited world soon became 'blurred and distant' and 'When he rode away it was as though he'd released himself into the air'.²⁶ This moment, reminiscent of Icarus and ET, suggests the possibility of an infinite journey of escape, but it is a possibility overshadowed by the knowledge that such journeys often bring the traveller crashing down to earth. The abrupt halt to the movement of the boat does not, for Geoff, mean that movement has ceased, but has been transformed into a more risky venture as a search for self-fulfilment.

In London Brakes, the main character Tony is going nowhere in his job as a motorcycle courier.²⁷ Unable to break away from a past that keeps following him round he tries to make sense of what is happening through a gnostic text, written by a friend who is now dead, that he tries to decipher. The final form of movement in London Brakes is the opposite of that in Cyclomotors. Where Geoff finally achieves escape, however risky, Tony Guest can only say, at the start of the last paragraph of the novel: 'But I know I'll never leave this town.'²⁸ Just prior to that he has returned on a whim to old haunts and is 'so absolutely sure that my past was

going to shrivel and drop off like an alien leech that's contracted the common cold that I eased off slightly ...'.²⁹ The sentence continues, following his trip back through the past as Tony Guest rides 'the crown of the road, whistling past them all down to the Chiswick roundabout'.³⁰ And that is perhaps where the story might have ended, inconclusively, with Tony Guest accelerating into and away from a roundabout, always between places, but it is a moment that can only return him to the realization that he is here to stay, waiting for Bob to turn up again.

If Geoff in *Cyclomotors* and Lee, Will and Charley in *My Pale Tulip* are trying to achieve a shift in the quality of movement from the finitude of their historicized lives by leaving that history behind, however imperfectly, for the infinity of the trip outwards that provides endless possibilities of change, then Tony Guest has another relationship to his history. Infinity for Tony Guest is endless repetition and circulation, like a planet that has to keep moving round the sun. As he turns corners there might be a tangential pull to take him out of the circle, a swerve, but he keeps returning, turning and returning. He ends up as happy as he could be with Marie, clearing out his flat and taking the detritus to a car boot sale to pass on to others. When Marie wants to start up a house clearance business and says 'you want to get out of the courier game, you know damned well you do' he reflects internally that 'the truth was I didn't mind it that much ... didn't really have much of a problem with despatching'.

Tony Guest's earlier dreams of escape, of a way out of the roads that only end in a roundabout to take you back where you came from, of a way out of the determining cycle of work and the inclinations of his own personality, are

through his relationship with Bob. This is in part through the manuscript of a work written by Bob that Tony Guest tries to interpret throughout the novel. It is most evident, however, through what was to be their last meeting. After a dispiriting and desultory conversation, Tony Guest finally rides away from him on his motorcycle after Bob urges him to 'Go home ... just go home to your own life':

I straddled the Yamaha, started her up – the motor was instantly there, a big triple ticking over, a circular argument with the power I thought to take me as far as I wanted to go. Far, far away. That was the promise it made and in those days I believed in such things against all evidence, all those stories of how things were, really for others. I manoeuvred my bike onto the road, friendly under my touch, much friendlier than anything else I'd found up to that point. Bob stepped into the light of the door. He watched my leaving. I couldn't read his look but that made it important in a way I couldn't get. I lifted my glove up in a last wave and rode away into my own future.

Finally, of course, that future was not to be very far in terms of distance, and the friendly promise of the motorbike will potentially be exchanged for a van to take objects back and forth to car boot sales, but the movement away from Bob, who ends up pushing Tony away, is what makes this final return possible. The multiple timelines of the novel and the mystery plot with implications of fraud all combine to provide a narrative that lacks teleology, just as the many trips of Tony Guest never do more than promise an answer to anything. The narrative structure is in some ways circular, but the circle is always pushed into a slightly different shape, consisting of a series of swerves and attempts to get back on the right path.

Each return leaves the subjects different, knowing a little more, even if it is only knowing what they don't know. It is a complex of movements that can only exist within the very particular pressures of a personal history whose details may appear unexceptional but are highly significant within the context of the novel

In *My Pale Tulip*, the three main teenage characters, Lee, Will, and Charley, steal a car and cross the North Sea to Holland. In so doing they free themselves from their dysfunctional families and the vicious bullying of neighbours. Their lives in the temporary homes of Jaywick, an ex-holiday camp in Essex made up of chalets that are periodically burnt down, with mothers who smoke weed and go for interviews for jobs they never get, seem to have little meaning for them and an unpredictable future. By escaping in a stolen car and taking the ferry to Holland with a bag full of stolen money they experience different towns and languages, and a life that seems some distance from the England they live in.

Their range of movement is the opposite of the endless circulation of Tony in *London Brakes*. They head straight out with no way of getting back, although as they get further away their courage starts to fail them. The car breaks down, symbolically imitating the breakdowns of the characters, and they begin a meandering route that is in the direction of home. Like Geoffrey in *Cyclomotors* their ambition is to fly away, but unlike him they know they will have to face the consequences of their actions, and particularly Lee's murder of a boy in Delft with a gun they found in the stolen car. As Tony Guest experiences love with Marie, he feels like as if he can go on with courier work forever, tracing and retracing the same routes. He transcends the entropy of friction, achieving a kind of heavenly

movement. Lee, Will, and Charley, however, grind to a halt at the side of the road in Holland, their motor seized from a lack of oil and water, and while Lee manages to get it working again, they only limp back towards capture. Their search for infinity and a place outside time, like that of Geoff, becomes hubristic and must result in a crash-landing that itself leads on to further movement. Their planned straight line out from home, a trip that was to change them irrevocably and help them achieve a new potential, becomes full of swerves, half completed movements, and encounters with others that result in violent and deadly change

The impetus for their trip was Lee's confrontations with Warren, a violent peer who is planning revenge on Lee, and who ultimately turns out to be his half-brother. The genetic link locks Lee into his fate, producing an intertwined family tree from which there is no escape. It is however foreshadowed by a time when Lee and Will sit by the sea, staring into the sky. As they sit looking at the stars, they have a discussion about the nature of objects they see in the night sky, trying to identify them. After discounting satellites and weather balloons, the objects are finally described as 'three bright high up moving stars'.³³ Lee, Will, and Charley are to achieve something of the same distance, albeit by travelling horizontally across the surface of the earth, in order to transcend the realities of everyday life in Jaywick. Their trip, however, unlike the movement of the stars as they follow their track across the sky, is unplanned; there has been no discussion between the participants as to where they are going or for how long. Waiting for the ferry across to Holland, Charlie goes shopping with the stolen money in order to buy clothes. Will reminds her that 'We're not going to the North Pole ... only over to the Hook'.³⁴ It

is the first time there has been any discussion beyond an understanding they are taking the ferry across the North Sea, and Lee expresses an ambition that hasn't previously been evident.

'We won't be staying long' I said. 'Soon as we get there we're going to be driving like fuck.' 'Where to?' Will asked. I didn't have no answer on the tip of my tongue right that minute. 'You don't know where we might end up,' Charley said.

This lack of certainty, its pedetic motion, was both the trip's potential and finally its undoing. Their destination becomes Roermond, a kind of no man's land where three countries meet, and from there they have a vague plan to get work, and to stay away forever, but all three are unable to imagine that. After Lee shoots 'Yop', a Dutch boy they meet who sleeps with Charlie and physically assaults her, they leave Utrecht and head for Roermond, although all the time feeling Jaywick 'pulling on your leash'.³⁶ Irritable and bad-tempered, they take a wrong turning before the car breaks down. Lee is left to walk to a garage for oil and water, getting a lift with a mother and her son in a battered 2CV that is more farm machinery than car. It is a connection that brings a moment of peace for Lee, secure in what is a kind of family environment in the back of the car and half asleep, even though he has no language in common with those giving him the lift. The journey of Lee, Will and Charley is not to continue much longer, and they are captured by the police and sent back to the UK. Charged with murder and then extradited to Holland to stand trial, Lee hangs himself, and, we understand we are being told the story by his ghost, a spirit that can't be contained in the prison but can 'slide under the door'. He has become a figure that can walk free, and who can confidently say 'Iron bars

couldn't hold me'.³⁷ The end of the trip is not an end to movement, the novel tells us, but is a change to a different form of materiality and a different form of mobility..

If *My Pale Tulip* is a search for freedom and a new life outside of the boundaries of home, then *Falling Through* is a very different account of movement. It describes the life of a personal tutor in London, travelling to different parts of the city to teach the children of immigrants the ways to pass GCSE English or helping people through their driving test. Like the dispatch rider in *London Brakes*, it is an apparently aimless existence, that involves tracing and re-tracing the same journeys, but this time ending up in the sitting rooms and bedrooms of his tutees, sharing their experiences. The work is not without its cost and Graham, like the roads he travels, is worn down, and through the increasingly degraded surface of his consciousness his past emerges.

The tutor, Graham, when not teaching is often found rooting through the detritus of a charity shop or lying on his bed listening to music from his youth. His memories do not anchor him to any spot in London, and there is no sense of him having any attachment to a place apart from somewhere as transitory as an internet cafe that subsequently closes down. If the novel is about mobility, it is only partly about physical mobility through the fantasy of the 'glider', a symbol I will return to. It is also about class mobility. Graham, the tutor, has to sustain a sense of his own middle-class credentials with the tutees and the parents who pay him. His props include his shoulder bag, stuffed full of texts and papers, a head full of exercises to drag writing out of even the most reluctant pupil, and his inexhaustible knowledge of language and literature. Outside of the

teaching however he soon finds himself more comfortable amongst the working class of London, or even those who are too new to know where they might fit in. The novel further develops Muckle's critical work on class in his study of British fiction in the 1950s and 60s, *Little White Bull*. Here Muckle describes the shift from the 'good old working class' of post-war Britain, to very different representations of working-class life in Alan Sillitoe, Nell Dunn, and B S Johnson. While Muckle's fiction in general, and *Falling Through* in particular, differs from both the realism of the former writers and the more experimental approach of Johnson, it does take forward a discussion of social class into the new millennium through the figure of Graham and his performance of a class role as a tutor, and the new arrivals to Britain that are unlocated within the class structure. It is further exacerbated by the connections, or lack of them, that Graham makes outside the classroom amongst the different ethnic communities of which London is now composed. It builds on, but further confuses the 'them' and 'us' which is at the heart of Samuel Selvon's *Lone Londoners*; in *Falling Through* there is no them and no us but a diverse community impossible to define by any long-standing notion of historical and geographical reference, as exemplified by the shifting spaces and geographies Graham travels through on his tutoring assignments. Objects and their actual and symbolic movements are thematically important to the novels. In *Falling Through* it is the glider, or at least its shadow, that appears in the opening paragraph of the novel:

John Muckle's novels and stories are not, of course, 'about' mobility, but offer or prompt new ways of reading that are alert to its conditions. If the work can be ascribed any kind of metanarrative, it is probably about material histories and the

ways that memory shifts and accumulates through various objects, whether the motorcycle, the car or the glider. I am suggesting that there is another less visible but very significant undercurrent, which is that of the increasing movements of the characters, and that giving attention to the qualities of that movement provides ways of reading the narratives. They become novels in which the mobility of the characters, and the movements or their lack of movement, become key elements in the construction of the narratives. Attention to these elements provides new ways of reading the novels, confirming mobility and movement not only as geographical but also as ways of understanding movements between social class, the ways that mobility is gendered and the characters submit to, and challenge, the limitations of their lives. Mobility is not new, nor is it new to the construction of narrative, but its ready availability to a much broader range of the population, and its increase since the second half of the twentieth-century, has led to an ability for subjects to liberate themselves from the geographical, social and domestic restrictions their circumstances might place them in, and 'fly' to a potential freedom in ways that change the course of narratives. Muckle's novels contain characters who do just that, but also characters who lack the means or the motivation and can only observe the movements of others while they remain stuck.

Sometimes the results of that increased mobility are banal, as Tony Guest continues to circulate in London on the same routes. At other times they can be catastrophic, when Lee, Will, and Charlie search for an infinity within a finitude their material conditions construct. Whether it is running out of money, the car breaking down or the consequences of Lee's

murder, the end of the trip is always in sight and the only potential future is through a dematerialization. For Graham in *Falling Through* hope lies in the students he teaches and the optimism and energy they bring, an optimism that can result in riot. His own heroic fantasy of riding through the riot torn streets on a liberated speedway bike is absorbed into the shadow of the glider on his ceiling. In *Late Driver*, the positive changes that the characters have found through automobility, whether in trips to the 'continent' or through the ability to work, have disappeared to leave behind a stasis that is symbolized by the uncompleted motorcycles rusting in their garages. The fictions, for all the possibilities that mobility might bring, never let a reader forget that the desire for movement intersects with the materiality of social class and the abilities of the body. Perhaps, for all the emphasis on automobility and the cars and motorcycles that appear in the novels, the most haunting encounter is that between Rich Mudie and Judy in her wheelchair, an encounter that is characterized not by empathy or even by sympathy but by blank incomprehension on Mudie's part. Judy, the story is telling us, might only be able to move of her own volition in the smallest of ways, but is still full of life. Rich Mudie, despite his ability to move mountains and his Jaguar cars, understands far less of people or of things, locked into an oversized body that repels whoever he meets.

CONCLUSION

John Muckle's fictional world resists containment within traditional literary geographies. His work pushes beyond mapped boundaries, tracing the shifting contours of marginal lives through a language of movement and instability. By centering motion—of bodies, thoughts,

and class positions—Muckle crafts a literary cartography where space is not fixed but constantly negotiated. His use of drift, fragmentation, and spatial dissonance becomes a powerful means of representing the lived realities of post-industrial Britain: its decaying infrastructures, its uncertain futures, its overlooked people.

The emphasis on kinetics in Muckle's work challenges readers to rethink how we understand place—not as a static point on a map, but as a site of experience, tension, and potential escape. In this sense, his fiction offers not only a critique of socio-economic systems but also a poetics of resistance. It maps an uncharted territory of emotion, memory, and marginality, affirming that literature can serve as both a compass and a vessel for navigating the restless landscapes of contemporary life.

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