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MOLLOY: BECKETT'S "NOURISHING AND ECONOMICAL IRISH STEW"

by Keith Cushman

My text is taken from *Molloy*. Early in his narrative Moran goes to the kitchen to find out what's for supper: "Irish stew. A nourishing and economical dish, if a little indigestible. All honour to the land it has brought before the world." (98).¹ Moran then goes to church and takes communion. His "soul appeased," he is "ravenous" and eager to "return home as quickly as possible and stuff [himself] with stew" (101). The stew, however, proves to be a "great disappointment" (102), for it lacks onions.

In this essay I propose to discuss Moran's stew as paradigm for the novel *Molloy*. After all, as Beckett had learned from Joyce, "the more carrots you chop, the more turnips you slit, the more murphies you peel, the more onions you cry over, the more bullbeef you butcher, the more mutton you crackerhack, the more potherbs you pound, the fiercer the fire and the longer your spoon and the harder you gruel with more grease to your elbow the merrier fumes your new Irish stew."² Beckett had of course already peeled a *Murphy*. In *Molloy* he creates a concoction that fumes merrily in its own right and that is also nourishing, economical, and a little indigestible. What matters most, though, is that Beckett's Irish stew is nourishing, and that is what I will be devoting most of my argument to.

Beckett's stew of a novel is made up of such diverse ingredients as bicycles, hats, injured legs, a foul-mouthed parrot, sucking-stones, and a stamp collection. Although he originally wrote the novel in French, the sensibility and imagination remain Irish. After all, few novels can compete with *Molloy* when it comes to the gift for gab and the love of blarney.

No one will deny that this difficult novel, like Moran's stew, is "a little indigestible." It is also "economical" because of all the doubling going on: every serious reader of the novel has his lengthy list of the details from Molloy's narrative that also show up in Moran's.

The Irish stew passage in *Finnegans Wake*, which is obviously a description of *Finnegans Wake*, makes me believe that Moran's Irish stew had indeed found its way into *Molloy* as a comment on Beckett's novel. But the really important aspect of the stew, as it pertains to the novel, is the fact that it is "nourishing." For the rest of this essay I will be discussing just how *Molloy* is a nourishing work of fiction. I offer this reading with the full understanding that Beckett is also talking about his novel when he has Moran comment "with rapture" about the dance of his bees: "Here is something I can study all my life, and never understand" (169). I don't mean to be trying to pin *Molloy* down to a single meaning. But the nourishing aspect of Moran's stew points to a rarely observed quality of the novel that needs to be emphasized.

Of course it is difficult to resist the temptation to become bleak and metaphysical when talking about a novel in which the world is "collapsing endlessly, a frozen world" (40). Molloy and Moran are aware of "the silence of

which the universe is made," and their attempt to fill that silence with "icy words" (31) fails to make any sense of existence. They set out on their quests for reasons that are not comprehensible; neither finds the person he is seeking, and both suffer physical collapse. As Pozzo has it, "That's how it is on this bitch of an earth."³

Nevertheless, even though Beckett has obsessively conjured up this emptied-out world over and over again all his career, his writings are not reducible to Pozzo's gloomy apothegm. In *Molloy* we enter Beckett's typical world in dissolution, but we are also introduced to two characters whose lot it is to deal with such unpleasant circumstances. Given the severely limited possibilities, they don't do such a bad job.

Mind you, Molloy's unsuccessful journey to find his mother leaves him with ample reason to be despondent. He begins on crutches and concludes helpless in a ditch. He is arrested and interrogated because of the way he leans against his bicycle, the vehicle he is so proud of and that he subsequently misplaces. His liaison with Lousse, the "woman of an extraordinary flatness" (56) who takes him in, ends when he suspects she is trying to drug or poison him. Shortly afterwards he settles in a blind alley and desultorily attempts suicide. As his legs shorten and stiffen, he describes his progress as "a veritable calvary, with no limit to its stations and no hope of crucifixion" (78).

Nor is the coarse, scurrilous Molloy any sort of paragon. He is physically repulsive and morally dubious. The relationship with the mother he searches for is ugly and tormented. He steals "from Lousse a little silver, oh nothing much, massive teaspoons for the most part" (63). In the forest he brutally beats an old man and then gives "him a few warm kicks in the ribs" (84). But like so many rogues in Western literature, Molloy is both entertaining and rather likable. The reasons why, in spite of himself, we find ourselves drawn to him are worth exploring.

The key to our response is the fact that Molloy, despite all his assorted misery, is not a person who kicks against the pricks. As in Stephen Crane's "The Open Boat," this is a universe in which anyone who wishes to throw bricks at the temple swiftly discovers "that there are no bricks and no temples."⁴ Distress about the conditions of earthly existence is not a functional emotion, for, after all, there is nothing to be done. Accepting things as they are without illusion or pretense doesn't improve the situation. But the evidence from *Molloy* strongly suggests that it makes life more endurable. As Molloy puts it, "to decompose is to live too" (25). Molloy's shambling, easy-going nature tells us something about how to get along, and when Moran deteriorates in the direction of Molloy, he is making progress (and he knows it). It is this aspect of *Molloy* that makes it a nourishing work of fiction.

While Moran begins his narrative as a good bourgeois, Molloy is vaguely a tramp. One of the books Beckett is playing with in his narrative is *The Pilgrim's Progress*. Molloy with his vanities, his infirmities, his absurdities, is well qualified to play the part of Everyman, and so are we. We are all, sooner or later, physically repulsive and morally dubious. The response of pilgrim Molloy to his life and hard times is instructive.

Despite all his difficulties and confusion, Molloy is notably tranquil. All he requires is a little gentleness: "refrain from hitting me, and I seldom fail to give satisfaction in the long run" (22). He is a man who can "stomach any mess" (30),

and looking on the bright side, he realizes that “you think you have your belly full but you seldom have it really” (39). And if it is the same muck that doesn’t matter, it’s good to have a change of muck” (41). Molloy recognizes his lack of a coherent identity, but he regards his inner division with acceptance: “For in me there have always been two fools, among others, one asking nothing better than to stay where he is and the other imagining that life might be slightly less horrible a little further on” (48).

Molloy’s liaison with Lousse has its unsavory features, but it should not be forgotten that she makes him a generous proposition, one that would be difficult for any man to turn down:

I would help in the garden, in the house, when I wished, if I wished. I would not go out in the street, for once out I would never find my way in again. I would adopt the rhythm of life which best suited me, getting up, going to bed and taking my meals at whatsoever hours I pleased. If I did not choose to be clean, to wear nice clothes, to wash and so on, I need not. She would be grieved, but what was her grief, compared to my grief? All she asked was to feel me near her, with her, and the right to contemplate from time to time this extraordinary body both at rest and in motion. (47)

Though, Circe-like, Lousse drugs or poisons him, he bears her no “ill-feeling” (53). The time with Lousse brings back memories of an earlier liaison: “Our commerce was not without tenderness, with trembling hands she cut my toenails and I rubbed her rump with winter cream” (57). As Barbara Hardy has said, “rank as love is, for Beckett’s people, it behaves remarkably like love: suffers like love, consoles like love, and is not exempt from dirtiness, ugliness, smelliness, sickness and death.”⁵

The most famous episode in all the trilogy is the sucking-stone passage in *Molloy*. The problem Molloy sets himself is how to be sure he is sucking his sixteen stones in sequence as he circulates them among his four pockets. This episode is another that dramatizes Molloy’s accepting nature. Though the solution he arrives at isn’t perfect, he feels “easy in [his] mind, at least as easy as one can be.” He refuses to become distressed over the shortcomings of his system. Instead he reports: “I preferred to make the best of the comparative peace of mind I enjoyed” (73). Indeed on the surface the sucking-stone episode in its quest for order seems uncharacteristic of the sloppy Molloy. But he works at his system-making in a non-compulsive manner: “deep down it was all the same to me whether I sucked a different stone each time or always the same stone, until the end of time. For they all tasted exactly the same.” And why worry about order anyway: “the solution to which I rallied in the end was to throw away all the stones but one, which I kept now in one pocket, now in another, and which of course I soon lost, or threw away, or gave away, or swallowed” (74). The order he briefly achieves is at best provisional, but he perceives that none of the order-making matters. He is comfortable enough with the chaos and confusion.

The loss of his bicycle and his continuing physical deterioration impede Molloy’s progress. His legs shorten and stiffen, but as he points out, “when the two legs shorten at the same time, and at the same speed, then all is not lost” (76-7). Later on, flat on his face in the forest gloom under a “leadens winter sky,” he is not downcast; instead he experiences a moment of illumination: “Christ, there’s

crawling" (89). Instead of bemoaning his situation, he reflects on the "advantage of this mode of locomotion," for "even the very movement is a kind of rest" (90). He winds up in the ditch, waiting to be rescued, and refusing to "fret." He looks forward to the help he is about to receive, for, as he says, "I suppose you have to try everything once, succour included, to get a complete picture of the resources of the planet." His longing to "go back into the forest" is "not a real longing." Instead he reflects, "Molloy could stay, where he happened to be" (91).

Perhaps it is no accident that Molloy's good Irish name brings to mind Homer's moly, for in his own dreadful way Molloy seems to lead a charmed life. The secret of his contentment is his self-acceptance, even his optimism: "And what I have, what I am, is enough, was always enough for me, and as far as my dear little sweet future is concerned I have no qualms, I have a good time coming" (46). *Molloy* is a nourishing work of fiction precisely because of Molloy's accepting nature, his "willingness, pliancy, frankness and tolerance."⁶ As he points out, "perfection is not of this world" (90).

Moran is "a petty-minded, precise individual, given to a refined and sadistic cruelty towards his son, whereas Molloy... is more humane and sympathetic altogether."⁷ At the beginning of his section Moran is egocentric, smug, punctilious, and utterly without a sense of humor. While Molloy takes the confusion as it comes, Moran complains: "vagueness I abhor" (99). He is unresponsive to anything pleasurable: his neighbors the Elsnor sisters "made a little too much music" (105). When he finds his son admiring his stamp collection, he locks the albums away, proud that he "had spared [his] son a grave temptation" (109). Moran keeps "the most rigorous accounts when away on business and was in a position to justify [his] expenditure down to the last penny" (142). He is something of a humors character, his tightness and meanness so extreme that he is comic.

Moran's bourgeois narrowness represents another attempted strategy of coping with life, a strategy in sharp contrast with Molloy's. Molloy is open to experience, and even if the experience is brutal and perplexing, at least he's better off for being able to roll with the punches. Moran lives within a narrow, tight, self-constructed order. He tries to close himself in and close life out. The "principles" (104) Moran insistently lives by are pure illusion, and they help make his life and his son's life miserable. In contrast Molloy staggers on, muttering, "if I speak of principles, when there are none, I can't help it, there must be some somewhere" (46).

But the Moran who returns from his failed mission has drastically changed. The differences between the bourgeois Moran and the tramplike Molloy "dissolve in the forest where Moran comes to resemble Molloy."⁸ Physically wrecked, his bees and hens killed, his house dark and abandoned, he has somehow moved beyond his need for social identity. Alone in the forest, he finds that the illusory protection he has built for himself falls away. The destruction of this fragile bourgeois selfhood is a kind of liberation.

Moran is aware of — and fascinated by — his changing self. Anyone as set in his ways as Moran is would certainly be struck by such a radical transformation. "And on myself too I pored, on me so changed from what I was" (148)

Cushman, *James M. Mollay*, *Beckett's "Nourishing and Economical Irish Stew"*
 all that had always protected me from all I was always condemned to be. Or it was like a kind of clawing towards a light and countenance I could not name, that I had once known and long denied. (148)

As Ludovic Janvier has expressed it, "the voyage goes from the exterior to the interior: it leads to the center of the self."⁹ That is the progression of the trilogy and within *Molloy* too.

The light and countenance Moran claws toward is his buried self, the self the good bourgeois has denied, a self so stripped down that selfhood seems very like the obliteration of self. Moran speaks "of the great changes [he] had suffered," and in the next breath he mentions his "growing resignation to being dispossessed of self" (149). The boundaries of ego are breaking down. Moran becomes more at one with how it is; that is also the direction Molloy is taking as he proceeds first by bicycle, then on foot, then on hands and knees, until at last he lies immobile. This experience for Moran is one of "discovery" (149).

Shortly afterwards Moran meets a man dressed like the parody of a bourgeois in "a thick navy-blue suit (double-breasted) of hideous cut and a pair of outrageously wide black shoes" (150). The man's face vaguely resembles Moran's until Moran clubs him to death. "He no longer resembled me," Moran reports, and he realizes that his leg is again "bending normally" (151), at least temporarily. This scene carries the unmistakable suggestion that in the forest Moran has killed his false self.

The rest of the novel completes Moran's transformation. "Changed and ... still changing" (154), he encounters a shepherd. The Moran who longs "to say, Take me with you, I will serve you faithfully, just for a place to lie and a little food" (159) is not the smug, egocentric Moran who set out. Growing "weaker and weaker and more and more content" (162), he now thinks about his son and Molloy in terms that are contrite and sympathetic: "I dallied with the hopes that spring eternal, childish hopes, as for example that my son, his anger spent, would have pity on me and come back to me! Or that Molloy, whose country this was, would come to me, who had not been able to go to him, and grow to be a friend, and like a father to me, and help me do what I had to do" (161-62). Moran's nastiness and punctiliousness are gone. As Michael Robinson has put it, "Moran ceases to oppose his double and in renouncing his own limited 'I'... he gains a broader and more human dimension."¹⁰ The previously humorless Moran crawls "out in the evening to have a good laugh at the lights of Bally" (162). He feels "extraordinarily content, content with [himself], almost elated" (162-63).

Moran discovers himself only when he realizes and accepts that, like all of us, he is vulnerable and "exiled" (169). He now has the inner strength to ignore the voice that gives him orders. He observes that he is no longer the same person: "physically speaking it seemed to me I was now becoming rapidly unrecognizable. And when I passed my hands over my face, in a characteristic and now more than ever pardonable gesture, the face my hands felt was not my face any more, and the hands my face felt were my hands no longer." But the change is for the better: "I not only knew who I was, but I had a sharper and clearer sense of my identity than ever before, in spite of its deep lesions and the wounds with which it was covered" (170). The lesions and wounds are inevitable, and he is stronger for learning to accept them. Before he reaches

home he has University of Dayton Review, Vol. 15, No. 3 (1982), Art. 9
forked animal.

The changed Moran has learned to accept the circumstances we must live with. Although he seems to feel guilty that he has “deserted” (174) his bees and hens, he takes in stride the discovery that they have been killed, for there is nothing to be done about it. The electric company which “had cut off the light,” has “offered to let [him] have it back.” But the darkness is now good enough for Moran. As he says, “that is the kind of man I have become.” His son has returned and is well. When Father Ambrose stopped by to visit and “began to talk,” Moran realizes that “he was right,” but then, “who is not right?” Moran has enjoyed long, lovely days living in the garden, and the wild birds even “seemed to recognize” (17) him. Perhaps that is because he no longer uses “the words that Moran had been taught when he was little and that he in his turn had taught to his little one” (176). He looks toward the vague future of continuing transformation with something like anticipation:

I am clearing out. Perhaps I shall meet Molloy. My knee is no better.
It is no worse either. I have crutches now. I shall go faster, all will go
faster. They will be happy days. I shall learn. All there was to sell I
have sold. But I had heavy debts. I have been a man long enough. (175)

As Molloy understands full well, “to know nothing is nothing, not to want to know anything likewise, but to be beyond knowing anything, to know you are beyond knowing anything, that is when peace enters in, to the soul of the incurious seeker” (64). *Molloy* is thus “an epic of the search for one’s real self.” The search is completed when Moran is “reconciled with Molloy, ... with the hated, abandoned, courageous, recalcitrant outcast that he was commanded to hunt down.”¹¹

Our situation may be sorry, but if we confront the misery openly and without illusion, it will be more easily endurable. The guarded consolation I perceive in *Molloy* is not available in the other two novels of the trilogy. Moran has his nourishing and economical Irish stew, but Malone has two confusing pots, one for soup and one for excrement. It is only in *Molloy* that the Irish stew offers a useful paradigm, and as Moran says near the end of his narrative, “Let us be content with paradigms” (172).

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- ¹My page references cite the edition of *Molloy* in the Black Cat paperback of Beckett's *Three Novels* (New York: Grove Press, 1965).
- ²James Joyce, *Finnegans Wake* (New York: Viking Compass paperback, 1959), p. 190.
- ³*Waiting for Godot* (New York: Grove Press, 1954), p. 25.
- ⁴"The Open Boat," Section VI.
- ⁵Barbara Hardy, "Dubious Consolations in Beckett's Fiction" in Katharine Worth, ed., *Beckett the Shape Changer* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1975), p. 123.
- ⁶Hardy, "Dubious Consolations," p. 122.
- ⁷John Fletcher, *The Novels of Samuel Beckett* (New York: Barnes & Noble, 1964), p. 128.
- ⁸Ruby Cohn, *Back to Beckett* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1973), p. 90.
- ⁹Ludovic Janvier, "Molloy" in J.D. O'Hara, ed., *Twentieth Century Interpretations of Molloy, Malone Dies, The Unnamable* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1970), p. 48.
- ¹⁰Michael Robinson, *The Long Sonata of the Dead* (London: Rupert Hart-Davis, 1969), p. 163.
- ¹¹Fletcher, *Novels*, p. 149.

