

A Defense of Wretchedness: *Molloy* and Humiliation

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*Beckett warned against the neatness of identification. Yet the dangers of conflation are often courted—both in the fictional worlds themselves where suffering is at a constant, and also in the sometimes overly-familiar narratives of surrounding scholarship. Given this conflict, how does humiliation—and responses to it—define Beckett’s individual “creatures”? In *Molloy*, despite the many likenesses between the title character and his near-doppelgänger, humiliation manifests as an ontologically determining phenomenon that disallows the conflation and consolidation of private suffering. Alongside the many instances of wretchedness and abuse, the novel quietly posits humility as ethical imperative when approaching the suffering of others.*

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In July 1946, *Les Temps modernes* published part of Beckett’s short story, “Suite.” Simone de Beauvoir had not understood, nor did she particularly care, that the piece was incomplete or that its author expected the concluding segment to appear in the review’s next instalment. Naturally, Beckett was anguished by her refusal to let the story—later to be called “La Fin”—come to an end. In response, he wrote to her:

You are giving me the chance to speak only to retract it before the words have had time to mean anything. You are immobilizing an existence at the very moment at which it is about to take its definitive form. There is something nightmarish about that. I find it hard to believe that matters of presentation can justify, in the eyes of the author of *L’Invitée*, such a mutilation.

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Your view is that the fragment which appeared in your last number is a finished piece. That is not my view. I see it as no more than a major premise.

Do not be offended by this plain speaking. It is without rancour. It is simply that there exists a wretchedness [*une misère*] which must be defended to the very end, in one's own work and outside it. (*Letters 2 42*)

The situation was humiliating for reasons beyond the compromise of his artistic integrity. Beauvoir believed Beckett's attempt to submit further writing under the same title to be an act of deception, a ploy to secure publication in two consecutive issues and earn a greater fee than they had initially agreed upon. She also thought, as Knowlson points out (359), that the abounding scatology in the second part was unsuitable for the review.¹ Careful and deferential, Beckett's letter attests to an awareness of his awkward position: an *inconnu* on the French literary scene ("Suite" was his first work in French) who had now made a potentially damaging professional blunder. And yet he does not seek to redress the miscommunication or to save face, but instead pleads for the fictional character who has been "denied his rest."

The task of defending the "wretchedness" in his work was something Beckett had to face throughout his career. He refused, for instance, to capitulate to Houghton Mifflin's demands for major cuts to *Murphy*. He fought against the Lord Chamberlain's insistence that *Endgame's* infamous line, "The bastard! He doesn't exist!", be excised or replaced. And when *New World Writing* published a "horrible montage" from *Molloy* without indicating that the text was not continuous, he expressed his annoyance in a letter to Barney Rosset: "The excerpt is always unsatisfactory, but let it at least be continuous. I don't mind how short it is, or with how little beginning or end, but I refuse to be short-circuited like an ulcerous gut" (*Letters 2 432*).

These examples are not exhaustive, but they serve to reveal the opposing desires of the author and of the publishers (and censors). The two principal considerations that appear to compel editorial alterations are narrative cohesion and the moderation of obscenity. For Beckett, however, streamlining and sanitization were not processes distinct from each other. Given the anxious conclusion to "The End," the rest that Beckett felt his "creature" had been denied was not merely a question of narrative resolution. The rest also inhered in those debasing and indecent elements to which Beauvoir had objected. Bodily functions and dysfunctions—what the narrator of *How It Is* calls the "great categories of being" (9)—are part of what gives Beckett's work its "definitive form."

That famous reflection on Joyce's *Work in Progress*, "Here form *is* content, content *is* form" (*Disjecta 27*), has justifiably been applied to Beckett's own work: the words falter because the sense is faltering. Yet there was a time when Beckett was not Beckettian. This was before his realization that the "way [of his art] was in impoverishment, in lack of knowledge and in taking away, in subtracting rather than in adding" (qtd. in Knowlson 352), before the broken epiphany dramatized in *Krapp's Last Tape*. This was also the time before Beckett's widespread fame,

before critical and public opinion marked him as an artist whose concern, both in form and content, was weakness. Beauvoir's decision falls within this period. And leaving aside questions of taste and personal disgruntlement, her failure to appreciate how essential infirmities and humiliations are to "Suite" may be explained as a failure to appreciate the Beckettian "agenda."

Today the opposite complication may be at play: the Beckettian agenda is perhaps too well appreciated. This is to say that critics have identified coherence where previous interpretations saw dehiscence or distinction. One example is the collective title often applied when speaking of *Molloy*, *Malone Dies*, and *The Unnamable*: the "Trilogy." Using this term goes against the author's expressed wishes; a sin committed quite often and, for the largest part, unwittingly. The third volume of letters, published in 2014, evinces Beckett's strong opposition to this handle by which to grab three separate bundles. Though he was pleased about John Calder's decision to publish the three works together, he could not propose a general title and was against Calder's suggestion, "Trinity": "It seems to me the three titles should be enough" (187). A month later, in a tone of greater desperation, he dismissed his publisher's next proposal: "Not 'Trilogy,' I beseech you, just the three titles and nothing else" (191). As the publication date of the "three in one" approached, Beckett expressed the same apprehension to Barbara Bray about Calder's potential editorial choice: "Please God he doesn't call it a trilogy" (222).

The 1959 publication was titled *Three Novels* and not "Trilogy"—not, at least, until the Picador reprint of 1975 yoked the works together under the title, *The Beckett Trilogy*.² But to lay the blame solely at Calder's feet is to overlook that *Molloy*, *Malone Dies*, and *The Unnamable* are generally regarded as having more in common than just a single binding. Use of the term "trilogy" is pervasive in Beckett studies. V.S. Pritchett—one of *Three Novels*'s earliest reviewers—referred to the book as a "Trilogy" in the opening sentence of his review. Since then, critics as eminent as Hugh Kenner, Northrop Frye, and Harold Bloom have all applied it to these postwar novels. Even Christopher Ricks, who takes critics to task for curtailing titles, uses this substitutive word.³ In the 2014 issue of *Samuel Beckett Today/Aujourd'hui* that "revisits" the three novels, five contributors have "Trilogy" in the titles of their respective articles.

This terse survey is not intended to point out lapses in critical practice. Rather, it is to indicate how the similarity of philosophical and aesthetic landscapes across Beckett's "three novels" has shaped its subsequent cartography. Ackerley and Gontarski argue that "'trilogy' or not, the three novels...form a cohesive and extended exploration of the imaginative consciousness" (586). This is undeniable. The question is where the cohesion begins and ends, and where the borders are to be drawn. Beckett himself saw *Molloy* as the "second last of the series begun with *Murphy*, if it can be said to be a series" (*Letters* 2 71), and the stories that became *Texts for Nothing* as the "afterbirth of *L'Innommable*" (300). This is not to suggest that critics have failed to explore the commonalities that extend from *Murphy* to *Texts for Nothing* or even beyond. But thinking of *Molloy*, *Malone Dies*, and *The Unnamable* as a trilogy or even as three works more intimately related

than any other series of works in the Beckett canon—forgetting that three separate texts are collected not because of authorial design but because of publishing savvy—creates a problem not too dissimilar from the one identified in Beauvoir’s “mutilation” of “Suite.”

My concern here is not with an exclusionary effect, with the fact that the “series” Beckett conceived is amputated at both ends or that other products of the “siege in the room” (*Quatre Nouvelles*, *Mercier et Camier*, and *En Attendant Godot*) are—by dint of the definition of “trilogy”—not allowed to push this particular triangulation into a larger framework. My concern, rather, is with a surplus of correspondence that is created among these three works, with the possibility that this hyper-connection could lead to the *mobilization* of an existence beyond its definitive form. As early as 1929, Beckett warned that, for criticism, the “danger is in the neatness of identification” (*Dis* 19). But it is a danger that his works court through what appears to be their cohesive though amorphous quality. “The amoeba’s neck is not easily broken” (*Letters* 1 383),” Beckett remarked about the prospect of cutting *Murphy*. If omission in Beckett is a violation that deprives characters of a necessary stasis, over-identification beyond the distinct borders of texts might amount to the same thing.

HUMILIATING ASSOCIATIONS AND EFFACEMENTS

An equivalent over-identification emerges in *Molloy*. The two principal characters, Molloy and Moran, share a strange resemblance. So uncanny is their likeness that *The Faber Companion to Samuel Beckett* lists twenty-one similarities between them. The correspondence goes deep enough for the editors to claim not just kinship but a kind of vanishing twin syndrome:

It is not so much that Moran has become Molloy, or that the second half should precede the first, but that Molloy was always part of Moran, as were Gaber and Youdi, agents of a superego.... What the Moran section offers, and why it follows the Molloy section (and why the novel is called *Molloy*, not *Moran*), is a fiction written by Molloy of Molloy as Moran encountering Molloy. (Ackerley and Gontarski 378)

This reading may account for the abrupt change in perspective at the end of the novel where Moran is replaced as the first-person narrator; it may also suggest what Molloy’s writing contains. But it perpetrates the same kind of permeability that use of the term “trilogy” allows, and fails to appreciate the novel’s “definitive form” that realizes itself not only in parallels but also in differences.

It is telling that toward the end of the novel—the point at which Moran most closely shadows Molloy—Moran reflects on the divergence that may be found in ostensible similarities. Studying the dance of his bees, he remarks:

I first concluded that each figure [of the dance] was reinforced by means of a hum peculiar to it. But I was forced to abandon this agreeable hypothesis. For I saw the same figure (at least what I called the same figure) accompanied by very different

hums. So that I said, The purpose of the hum is not to emphasize the dance, but on the contrary to vary it. And the same figure exactly differs in meaning according to the hum that goes with it... But there was to be considered not only the figure and the hum, but also the height at which the figure was executed. And I acquired the conviction that the selfsame figure, accompanied by the selfsame hum, did not mean at all the same thing at twelve feet from the ground as it did at six. (*Three Novels* 163-64)

Moran admits that he could be wrong, that the dance could be as pointless as the “dances of the people of the West.” But he is content not to subject the phenomenon to his “cogitations” and refuses to conceive of the bees as creatures constituted by his understanding. He explains: “I would never do my bees the wrong I had done my God, to whom I had been taught to ascribe my angers, fears, desires, and even my body” (164). Where previously Moran is fastidious, authoritarian, and partial to the symmetries of accounting, he now resists the temptation to calibrate the world in familiar terms: “I could no longer be bothered with these wretched trifles which had once been my delight” (155). He does not achieve the ataraxy of Molloy, since his mind remains “avid...of the flimsiest analogy” (164). But he is ready to concede the unassimilable otherness of his bees and of God. Moran’s comment on the latter relationship throws his newfound negative capability and former audacity into relief. Early in the narrative, his church-going is established as self-serving and self-centered, a ritual that helps to “buck [him] up” (90). The above statement declares this in its reversal of Genesis 1:26 (“Let us make man in our image”), but also undoes it: Moran now recognizes the “wrong” inherent in a subject-defined, Cartesian-inflected (“cogitations”) interpretation of external reality.

The passage signals both Moran’s metamorphosis and an ethical encouragement to resist the homogenization of alterity. The two things cannot be divorced, since it is at this point that Moran—sharing so many of Molloy’s traumas and infirmities, “becoming rapidly unrecognizable” (164)—has the most lucid grasp of himself. As the different heights, hums, and figures of the bees remain beyond exact definition, so too does the exact relation between Molloy and Moran. Beckett brings Moran to the precipice of a humiliating effacement, blurring but not merging his being with Molloy’s. This does not, however, preclude our *reading* Moran out of existence. In the *Faber Companion* gloss cited above, for instance, the character suffers a dispossession of self not only within the text proper but also from outside: having been stripped of health, possessions, and his familial relations, Moran is also stripped of the subjectivity which these losses ultimately constitute. Like *The Double*’s Yakov Petrovich Golyadkin, Moran faces erasure in the presence of his doppelgänger. But where this erasure is operational in Dostoevsky’s novel, it is only a suspended potentiality in Beckett’s. The text offers an interpretive choice: to *inscribe* Moran within the consciousness of Molloy and thus to *unwrite* Moran, or to preserve Moran’s otherness in following the ethical imperative implicit in the bee passage.

Conflicting responses to alterity are also explored in some of Beckett's other works. In *Company*, for instance, the narrator reflects on his past actions and their consequences. He remembers taking "pity on a hedgehog out in the cold," placing it in a hatbox, supplying it with worms, and feeling warmly triumphal about his humane efforts (18). He further recalls that the "glow" was replaced by "uneasiness" when doubts over his intervention started crowding in (18, 19); a debilitating guilt delays his return to the hatbox by weeks. When he eventually faces the scene of his charity he is met by a "mush" and "stench" that will plague his memory thereafter (19). Laura Salisbury sees the text as an "articulation of the ethical that refuses an ethics of knowledge or judgement which might turn otherness into an object of understanding for the self. It should be thought of as part of a historical moment that reads ethical anxiety and representational crisis as strikingly imbricated" (171). The difference between the bee passage in *Molloy* and the hedgehog passage in *Company* comes down to the difference between contemplative and instrumental reason. This is why Salisbury interprets the later text as an oblique and knotted question about post-Holocaust engagement. But *Molloy* is also a post-Holocaust text. And while it does not explore the problematic ethics of acting on behalf of another to the same extent, it does present the danger of absorbing individual narratives into larger ones.

Directly after pondering the otherness of his bees, Moran reflects on himself with uncertain certainty:

And to tell the truth 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. And from this point of view I was less fortunate than my other acquaintances. I am sorry if this last phrase is not so happy as it might be. It deserved, who knows, to be without ambiguity. (164)

The passage is complex because it accommodates the anguish of self-knowledge and a tacit anxiety about its opposite. Moran regards his clear sense of identity as a source of misfortune, a painful awareness that does not afflict his "other acquaintances." In their turn, these blessed others would seem to be fading from selfhood. Whether this is due to a collective, swallowing identity (the very thing that menaces Moran in his proximity to Molloy) or to other factors is not known. What is of importance and what can be mapped, if only conditionally, is Moran's understanding of the self *as* self.

If the "[un]happy phrase" comprises the whole preceding sentence, its content and possible meanings can only be defined in terms of the first sentence where Moran's "point of view" finds expression. But taking him at his word for the time being, the last phrase ("my other acquaintances") betrays a peculiar element of his self-conception. No "acquaintance" is mentioned in this paragraph, so one cannot read the phrase as a differentiation between one particular acquaintance and other, unidentified ones. The word "other" appears to mark Moran himself, or a version of himself, as one among his familiars. In other words, his sense of identity is contingent on an apperceptive process in which subjectivity becomes

objectified: a fault line surfaces between “I” and “me.” Moran, then, becomes an object of his consciousness to the same extent that his acquaintances are objects of his consciousness. And while it may be that he has a clearer understanding of himself (than “ever before,” but also than of his acquaintances), it results from within a splintered and self-estranged subjectivity.

In the same paragraph, we read: “it seemed to me I was now becoming rapidly unrecognizable”; “the face my hands felt was not my face anymore”; “this belly I did not know remained my belly” (164). This might appear fertile ground for reclaiming Beckett as a Cartesian dualist, but that would be to miss the point that Moran himself misses or can only grasp in ambiguous terms: just as his physical features have suffered a sea change, so too has his ego. Moran’s subtle transition between reflection on the physical and reflection on the mental does, however, suggest his awareness of a metamorphic continuum. He does not separate his observations on body and mind with a dividing “but”; rather, he glissades between the two with “And.”

It should already be clear that part of the “unhappiness” in the phrase “my other acquaintances” is its tentacular, uncontained ambiguity. To find possible explanations for Moran’s idea that he is “less fortunate” than his “other acquaintances” demands that one consider the sentence in which his point of view is articulated and what, from that point of view, would make him less fortunate. Here, two possible meanings are kept in tension, which I will explore in some detail. On the one hand, Moran is less fortunate in that he has a clear sense of identity or, to state it inversely, his acquaintances are more fortunate in not having a clear sense of identity. On the other hand, he is less fortunate in that he has a clear sense of identity *in spite of* the injuries that attend his identity: that is, the lesions and wounds have not had the fortunate identity-obscuring effect they may have had on his acquaintances. Moran thus remains fully conscious of himself and—since there is a self-identifying subject to experience them—his sufferings.

The first meaning may seem an odd way of regarding self-knowledge: surely a clear sense of identity is a good thing? Good, perhaps; fortunate, no. Throughout his life, Beckett was drawn to authors who advocated a deprecated sense of self: certain pre-Socratics, numerous mystics, Thomas à Kempis, Jeremy Taylor, Blaise Pascal, Arnold Geulincx, Arthur Schopenhauer, Emil Cioran, and many others. In most of these cases, negative self-regard is rooted in an ontology of fallenness: the individual who truly knows himself also knows the true and eternal condition of humanity. For Bernard of Clairvaux, “Humility is a virtue by which a man has a low opinion of himself because he knows himself well” (30). Thomas à Kempis claimed that “He who knoweth himself well is vile in his own sight” (214). Jeremy Taylor considered humility to consist not in an external display of wretchedness, but “in hearty and real evil or mean opinion of thyself” (74). And Pascal believed that “Man’s greatness lies in his capacity to recognize his wretchedness” (136).

That Beckett himself also regarded human existence as constituted by an ontological humiliation is borne out in many of his writings. In *Proust*, he reflects on the “sin of having been born” (67). In his reading of Windelband’s *History of*

Philosophy, he notes Anaximander's "doctrine that things must perish as an expiation for injustice" and that it "presents the first dim attempt to conceive the cosmic process as ethical necessity and the shadows of transitoriness [...] as retribution for sin" ("Philosophy" n.p.). A comparable idea finds expression in *Murphy* (43), this time through a reference to Bildad the Shuhite's mocking question, "How can he be clean that is born of a woman?" (Job 24:4). *Watt's* "Addenda" include an enigmatic Latin phrase about being born "polluted" (233). In *Malone Dies*, Macmann feels, without knowing his "sin", that "living was not a sufficient atonement for it or that this atonement was in itself a sin, calling for more atonement, and so on, as if there could be anything but life, for the living" (233). In *The Unnamable*, the moment of existence is seen as coinciding with punishment: "I was given a pensum, at birth perhaps, as a punishment for having been born perhaps..." (304).

Since Geulincx is directly invoked in *Molloy*, his imperatives of self-inspection and self-disregard are most pertinent in the case of Moran's unhappy existence. It is well-known that the *Ethics* of the seventeenth-century philosopher had a major shaping influence on Beckett's creative output. In particular, Geulincx's "axiom of morals"—"*ubi nihil vales, ibi nihil velis*"—resonates throughout Beckett's work:

Wherein you have no power, therein neither should you will.... Note that this axiom includes both parts of humility...inspection and disregard. *Wherein you have no power*; we read in this the inspection of oneself...*Therein you should not will*; we read in this...disregard of oneself, or neglect of oneself across the whole human condition, and resigning ourselves into the power of His hand, in which we are, indeed, whether we like it or not.... Therefore, to will nothing concerning our condition, to leave the whole thing to Him in whose power it really is, this truly is to disregard oneself, this is to build virtue on the unshakable foundation of humility. (Geulincx 337)

In this regard, self-knowledge may well be seen as a source of misfortune. Inspection of oneself leads to a realization of powerlessness; disregard of oneself necessitates a resignation of will because of that powerlessness.

But if there is no potential to begin with, it is difficult to see how the will can come into play. *Molloy's* single explicit reference to Geulincx suggests that, although there is some room for willful ignorance, the conditions of existence are not altered by what one chooses to believe or not to believe:

I who had loved the image of old Geulincx, dead young, who left me free, on the black boat of Ulysses, to crawl towards the East, along the deck. That is a great measure of freedom, for him who has not the pioneering spirit. And from the poop, poring upon the wave, a sadly rejoicing slave, I follow with my eyes the proud and futile wake. Which, as it bears me from no fatherland away, bears me onward to no shipwreck. (*Three Novels* 46)

The passage implies Geulincx's axiom of morals and, with its nautical metaphor, directly alludes to an image from the *Ethics* that illustrates the futility of our resistance to divine will: "Just as a ship carrying a passenger with all speed towards the west in no way prevents the passenger from walking towards the east, so the

will of God, carrying all things, impelling all things with inexorable force, in no way prevents us from resisting his will" (317).

But in his conjunction of the *Ethics* and *Inferno* Canto 26, Molloy accepts neither Geulingian predestination nor Dantean ordination. And, as his sardonic tone suggests, neither does he glimpse anything more than momentary escape. Beckett's palimpsest of the transcendently directed vessel and its cosmologically ill-fated counterpart creates a context in which all individual effort is rendered futile: both that of Geulincx's east-facing rebel and of the intrepid Ulysses who is damned by Dante for pride. Molloy sees himself as a slave—a being with no rights, no status, and no worth. But he also recognizes that these privations were never anything but privations.

Beckett's manipulation of *Inferno* Canto 26 in this final sentence quoted above significantly rewrites the fate of Dante's Ulysses, whose account of his voyage opens with reference to his family and concludes with a divinely-ordained tempest. What spurs on the Dantean Ulysses to forsake his familial duties and to tempt fate is a desire for enlightenment. Encouraging his followers, he says:

Bethink you of the seed
whence ye have sprung, for ye were not created
to lead the life of stupid animals,
but manliness and knowledge to pursue. (26.116-20)

But Molloy admits to having killed the "Aegean" (that is, Ulysses) in himself who craved "heat and light" (*Three Novels* 25).⁴ He is of the same ilk as the Unnamable, who sees no common ground between himself and that other figure of humanist striving, Prometheus: "between me and that miscreant who mocked the gods, invented fire, denatured clay and domesticated the horse, in a word obliged humanity, I trust there is nothing in common" (297). Molloy's odyssey, then, has neither foundation (whether in the guise of privilege, destiny, or duty) nor a knowable *telos* (whether in the attainment of Ulysses' aims or in his destruction); his "calvary ... [has] no limits to its stations and no hope of crucifixion" (73). Humiliation, to twist T.S. Eliot's line, is endless.

Molloy's "sad rejoicing" thus emerges as an awareness of what Beckett called an "ontological indecency" (qtd. in Juliet 22). The sadness emanates from the state of powerless itself; the rejoicing is a payoff for recognizing this unchanging truth. The terms, though opposite, are not equal. If Molloy were a rejoicingly sad slave, he would be someone without worth who takes pleasure in his worthlessness, a masochist. But because his rejoicing is located in an epistemic certainty of humiliation, it remains in the shadow of ontological despair.

In this respect, Moran's "less fortunate" position seems to correspond. The ambiguity of his utterance, to consider another possible gray area, colors the very term "less fortunate." If Moran is less fortunate than his acquaintances because knowledge of his being leads to despair, he may at the same time be more fortunate in following the Delphic imperative to "know thyself," which, in its turn, occasions despair, and so on.

A comparable ouroboros of catastrophe and blessing emerges when Malone loses his stick and can contemplate its essence “shorn of all accidents” (201). A still more pertinent example of this ambivalence is found in his claim that “I would willingly attribute part of my shall I say misfortunes to this disordered sense were I not unfortunately rather inclined to look upon it as a blessing. Misfortunes, blessings, I have no time to pick my words, I am in a hurry to be done” (201).

The very last passage Beckett copied from Geulincx’s *Ethics* centers on this Janus-faced kind of happiness: “A truly humble mind, having not only submitted to, but immersed itself in its Obligations ... *beyond concern* ... is capable of Happiness” (qtd. in Geulincx 353). Such happiness—such humility—is a sad rejoicing. It is born from “obligations” that necessitate the recognition of an abased condition as well as the practice of self-abasement; it entails, in Arsene’s words to Watt, opening oneself up “to the long joys of being [oneself], like a basin to vomit” (33). The point is that such happiness (sad rejoicing or humility), dragged into the “eudemonic slop” (*Three Novels* 50), cannot result in a sense of superiority. Unlike Socrates who is the wisest man because he appreciates his lack of wisdom, Moran cannot inflect his identity with any superlatives. Rather, he resembles Kierkegaard’s Abraham, who is “great by reason of his power whose strength is impotence, great by reason of his wisdom whose secret is foolishness, great by reason of his hope whose form is madness, great by reason of the love which is hatred of oneself” (12).

There is, of course, a second possible meaning in Moran’s point of view, which intimates that his acquaintances are relieved of identity through their suffering. The key words, here, are “in spite of”: they suggest that Moran’s heightened sense of self comes as a surprise in light of its “lesions and ... wounds,” that he would expect these afflictions to have an erosive rather than solidifying effect. Again, it is pointless to speculate about the unidentified others; one cannot claim that their pains and tortures have carried them mystically beyond themselves. But what Moran does disclose is a temporal marker: his identity is clearer than “ever before.” The moment of self-realization coincides with the moment of greatest suffering. It is significant that these injuries are not physical though they are conceived in the language of bodily pain, which intimates that physical suffering may well occasion a deepened self-understanding. It is also significant that the injuries do not manifest only as part of Moran’s new and self-estranged appearance; they belong to his identity itself and are part of its make-up. So another possible meaning is kept alive in the ambiguous point of view: Moran is surer of himself not *in spite of* the lesions and wounds but *because of* them. It is a causality suggestively glossed by The Unnamable: “[M]utilate, mutilate, and perhaps some day, fifteen generations hence, you’ll succeed in beginning to look like yourself” (309).

That suffering provides access to a truer identity is a theory Beckett had propounded in *Proust*. Habit and boredom are condemned as enemies of reality because they instill a fallacious belief in the subject as self-consistent. The “suffering of being,” on the other hand, “opens a window on the Real” (18, 19). Where habit seeks to create the semblance of continuity between splintered selves,

suffering allows “perilous...dangerous, precarious, painful, mysterious and fertile [zones]” to come into focus (20). At such moments, the subject comes face to face with the division and deformity that result from its temporal existence:

There is no escape from yesterday because yesterday has deformed us, or been deformed by us. The mood is of no importance. Deformation has taken place. Yesterday is not a milestone that has been passed, but a daystone on the beaten track of the years, and irremediably part of us, within us, heavy and dangerous. We are not merely more weary because of yesterday, we are other, no longer what we were before the calamity of yesterday. (11-12)

The suffering of being or, as Shane Weller astutely calls it, “the suffering of ever-less-than-being” (4), has both advantages and disadvantages. The ego undergoes a necessary loss of security when confronted with self-estrangement and “opposed by a phenomenon that it cannot reduce to the condition of a comfortable and familiar concept” (Beckett, *Proust* 21). This counts as an advantage since it makes self-knowledge possible. But the moment that the victim of time and habit becomes an “ex-victim” is also subject to flux. The self-realization brought about in the suffering of being disappears “with a wailing and gnashing of teeth. The mortal microcosm cannot forgive the relative immortality of the macrocosm” (21). Understood in terms of our earlier discussion, the “immortal macrocosm” may be seen as a condition unchanged and unchanging. The “mortal microcosm” is the individual’s world of experience in which knowledge of the macrocosm is enabled by suffering but simultaneously deformed and distorted by time.

Moran shows some awareness of the interminable nature of this degradation:

I forged my way through [the snow], towards what I would have called my ruin if I could have conceived what I had left to be ruined. Perhaps I have conceived it since, perhaps I have not done conceiving it, it takes time, one is bound to in time, I am bound to. But on the way home, a prey to the malignancy of man and nature and my own failing flesh, I could not conceive it. (*Three Novels* 160)

Ultimately, there is no Archimedean point from which Moran can fully know his being. Knowledge of one’s being remains anchored in time and change. Here resides the tension between the vicissitudes of a cruel existence and the essential character of that existence. As with the purgatory Beckett identifies in Joyce’s work, there is no culmination, no progress, and no absolute (*Dis* 30). There can be a groping “worstward,” a *becoming* humiliated, but never a finally humiliated *being*.

Moran’s self-assessment, then, is not willfully ambivalent but unavoidably so. The ambiguity of his reflection is a product of his powerlessness. He embodies Fernando Pessoa’s beautiful formulation of the impossibility of complete self-knowledge: “We are two abysses—a well staring at the sky” (20). But that same ambiguity is also testament to a momentary humility in which Moran does not irritably reach after fact or reason even though realizing his insight “deserves” to be unambiguous. The passage represents an instance in which

powerlessness is accepted and his own untranslatable hums are left untouched by instrumental reason.

“TEARS AND LAUGHTER”: RESPONDING TO HUMILIATION

In *A Short History of Decay*, Emil Cioran writes that misery

constitutes the texture of all that breathes; but its modalities have changed course; they have composed that series of irreducible appearances which lead each of us to believe he is the first to have suffered so. The pride of such uniqueness incites us to cherish our own pain and to endure it. In a world of sufferings, each of them is a solipsist in relation to all the rest. Misery's originality is due to the verbal quality which isolates it in the sum of words and sensations. (20)

Whether or not Beckett had read these words before writing *Molloy*, his novel nonetheless achieves something of their astuteness.⁵

What differentiates the two central characters in the end is not their suffering, hardly distinguishable in paraphrase, but their respective responses to suffering. If we briefly consider the concluding moments of the first part, it is clear that Molloy resists all stasis and comfort. At the nadir of his infirmity he finds it necessary to continue on a quest which is as much a search for his mother as it is an inexhaustible self-examination. Though an opportunity for capitulation presents itself in the forest, Molloy finds an “access of vigour” in his “weakness” (79), and this allows him to realize the Beckettian ethos of “going on” despite insurmountable obstacles. Molloy is aware that no net-gain is to be hoped for, that a change of location will not mean progress. Still he allows his imperatives to wrench him from situations where, “if all was not well, all was no worse than anywhere else” (80). Still he “submits” to this ineffable force though it leaves him in ever greater doubt.

By contrast, Moran's self-insight flickers without flaming into that “burning illogicality” (qtd. in Juliet 41) and stoic uncertainty that Beckett admired in St John of the Cross and other mystics. Like the self-centered sufferer described by Cioran, Moran's egotism returns to replace the apparent surrender of a moment before. Afflictions, fulfilling an earlier Freudian slip,⁶ become affections; asceticism assumes the aspect of perverse delight. (This is far off from Simone Weil's understanding of affliction as a “state of extreme and total humiliation” [91] in which pride and self-reliance are utterly voided). Abandoning himself to the frailties of his flesh and the cruelty of the weather, he weds fresh destitution to former joys. His passion for enumeration sparks briefly in the ways his threadbare shirt can be worn; the umbrella/walking stick dilemma recalls his delight in linear logic, which trumps the primacy of bodily needs; and he prefers elemental exposure to facing a reminder of his son (or his son's raincoat) that would be brought about by building a real shelter (165-66). In short, there is a re-crystallization of preferences and prerogatives that causes the Geulingian axiom to gradually lose

its grip on Moran. He goes too far in the direction of *despicio sui* so that he oversteps what may be taken as healthy self-disregard. "Humility," Geulincx warns, "does not require anyone positively to despise himself, to defame himself, scourge himself, or treat himself badly in some way or other" (29).

Even amid his suffering, Moran rediscovers a sense of superiority: "The thought of turning for help to the villages, to the peasants, would have displeased me, if it had occurred to me" (*Three Novels* 166). Leaving aside the difficulty that the writing is reflection—an act of "decomposition" (21)—the sentence above reveals Moran's contentedness in abjection at the time. The thought of seeking help does not even occur to him, and if it did he would not turn to "peasants." Moran has relapsed, more or less fully, into the microcosm where habit and prejudice solidify identity. Because the tensile connection between self-knowledge (a state of humiliation) and acceptance of what it implies (humility) loses its equipoise, Moran's understanding of himself as "less fortunate" vanishes. Contrasted with Molloy, he stands as a rejoicingly sad slave.

Juxtaposed, the respective conclusions of Parts I and II present a tale of two cries: the "publican's whinge" and the "pharisee's taratantara"—terms from Beckett's 1934 essay, "Humanistic Quietism" (*Dis* 68) apposite to *Molloy*. The essay's implicit reference to Luke 18:9-14 establishes oppositional attitudes of desperate humility and haughty certainty, of inner compunction and observable righteousness, of self-abasement and self-aggrandizement. It is telling that Moran, caught trespassing on another's land, resorts to an invented religious justification (a pilgrimage to the "Turdy Madonna") to account for his misdemeanor (167). The lie at once saves his skin and lets him feel superior to the "yoke!" he has just duped. In his turn, the pharisee believes himself justified by the law, which is fulfilled in the advent of Christ and therefore no longer the means of redemption. Moran's "[h]umbly ask[ing] a favour" further extends the hypocrisy. He stands guilty of the "pretence of submissiveness," as La Rochefoucauld calls it—that "artifice by which pride debases itself in order to exalt itself; and though it can transform itself in a thousand ways, pride is never better disguised and more deceptive than when it is hidden behind the mask of humility" (73). Just as the pharisee's prayer is an affirmation of his superiority over others rather than an acknowledgement of his inferiority before God, Moran's manipulation is indicative of intellectual pride.

But the request, while ensuring that his brains are not knocked out, puts Moran in a position of indebtedness that undermines his cunning victory over the farmer. As evidenced in an earlier episode when an unidentified man asks him for a piece of bread, Moran regards dependency as "humiliating" (*Three Novels* 140). To tip the scales in his favor, he at once withdraws his request and reverses the dynamic by offering the farmer a florin. True to his retrospective resolve, Moran does not turn to a peasant for help. Moreover, he cements the achievement of his falsehood by keeping up appearances at all costs: "Above all nothing to eat," he declares (168), to show that he is not only a pilgrim but, like the pharisee, one who observes fasting. With satisfaction he reflects on his accomplishment: "Moran, wily as a serpent, there was never the like of old Moran" (168).

This resistance to acts of kindness recalls the attitude of the magnanimous man. Aristotle describes him in the *Nicomachean Ethics* as

the sort of person to do good, but is ashamed to be a beneficiary himself, since doing good is characteristic of a superior, receiving it of an inferior. And he will repay benefits with interest, so that his original benefactor, in addition to being paid, will have become a debtor and a beneficiary. (70)

Moran's anxiety to avoid debts of kindness offers a caricature of the above. Conceived in Beckett's own terms, it pays into the "quantum of wantum" (*Murphy* 36), the closed circuit in which suffering and happiness remain in constant equilibrium. The idea occurs as early as *Murphy* but is more famously formulated in a speech of Pozzo's in *Waiting for Godot*: "The tears of the world are a constant quantity. For each one who begins to weep, somewhere else another stops. The same is true of the laugh" (*Complete Dramatic* 33). In *Rough for Theatre I*, however, an equilibrium of charity is threatened when B tucks A's leg snugly without immediately asking a favor in return. Fearful to be indebted indefinitely, A demands to return the kindness: "you're not going to do me a service for nothing? [*Pause*] I mean unconditionally? [*Pause*] Good God!" (*Complete Dramatic* 231). It is in this vein—and with comparable pettiness or "smallness of soul"—that Moran wishes to avoid the humiliation of being done a kindness.

But Molloy, in keeping with a more consistent awareness of his weakness, seems more disposed to accept help. Toward the end of his narrative, he realizes that any further venturing will be rendered impossible without the support of "some kind person" (*Three Novels* 82). Not without irony or resignation, he remarks: "Well, I suppose you have to try everything once, succour included, to get a complete picture of the resources of their planet" (85). But there is an obvious instance where Molloy defies the "charitable gesture," which occurs during his detention for what appears to be indecent resting. Approached by a woman he takes to be a social worker, he is repulsed at the sight of her unappetizing alms. Running still deeper than his disgust with the "tottering pile of disparates" (19) is his abreaction to unsolicited aid:

Let me tell you this, when social workers offer you, free, gratis and for nothing, something to hinder you from swooning, which with them is an obsession, it is useless to recoil, they will pursue you to the ends of the earth, the vomitory in their hands. The Salvation Army is no better. Against the charitable gesture there is no defence, that I know of. You sink your head, you put out your hands all trembling and twined together and you say, Thank you, thank you lady, thank you kind lady. To him who has nothing it is forbidden not to relish filth. (19-20)

The passage is significant in light of Beckett's own charitable endeavors following the war. Having volunteered as quartermaster and interpreter for the Irish Red Cross at the small Normandy town of Saint-Lô in 1945, he was witness to a scene of complete devastation. Memories from this time would later be reworked

into the fabric of *Endgame*. Beckett's most immediate reaction to this experience was an enigmatic and vaguely philosophical report written for radio broadcast that never aired. The tone of "The Capital of Ruins" is sober: details of the destruction, hunger and squalor are presented factually rather than emotively. But there are notable instances in which Beckett moves from the journalistic to the moralistic:

What was important was not our having penicillin when they had none, nor the unregarding munificence of the French Ministry of Reconstruction (as it was then called), but the occasional glimpse obtained, by us in them and, who knows, by them in us (for they are an imaginative people), of that smile at the human conditions as little to be extinguished by bombs as to be broadened by the elixirs of *Borroughes and Welcome*,—the smile deriding, among other things, the having and the not having, the giving and the taking, the sickness and health. (*Complete Short Prose* 277)

Simon Critchley points out the proximity between this "smile" and *Watt's risus purus* (109-11). For Critchley, it may be classed with the laughter in Beckett's work that so often attends and has unhappiness as its object. The smile, Critchley is careful to remark, is not the cause of unhappiness, but rather an indication of the human capacity for greatness in spite of wretchedness, of our ability to recognize our own folly. This Pascalian view, insightful as it is, too triumphantly posits the smile as a response to suffering and sickness. However, the smile (which may well be a grimace for its skeletal, unfeeling rigidity) also cuts across prosperity and good health. It does not only deride the moribund, but falls on all alike: it plagues him that gives and him that takes.

Something of this sentiment lies behind the concluding sentences of "The Capital of Ruins":

But I think that to the end of its hospital days it will be called the Irish Hospital, and after that the huts, when they have been turned into dwellings, the Irish huts. I mention this possibility, in the hope that it will give general satisfaction. And having done so I may perhaps venture to mention another, more remote but perhaps of greater import in certain quarters, I mean the possibility that some of those who were in Saint-Lô will come home realising that they got at least as good as they gave, that they got indeed they could hardly give, a vision and sense of a time-honoured conception of humanity in ruins, and perhaps even an inkling of the terms in which our condition is to be thought again. These will have been in France. (278)

Given the pervasive accounts of Beckett's generosity and sensitivity to the needs of others, the passage should not read as an inveiglement against the Irish effort at Saint-Lô. What it does object to are the feelings of self-satisfaction that attend the charitable gesture.

This foreshadows something of the dilemma in *Company's* hedgehog episode, but it also warns against the creation of a disparity or hierarchy between the haves and the have-nots. Where *Company* recognizes the danger in universally applying a provisional standard of the good, "The Capital of Ruins" intimates that neither

fortune nor misfortune should obscure from view the fact of man's humiliated ontology, the smile that derides each station.

By the light of this short essay, Molloy's violent reaction to the social worker's offering symbolizes an effort to resist the stratification of giving and receiving. One should not forget that Molloy is placed within arm's length of the charitable gesture only because he represents a threat to normative conceptions of the good and the beautiful. His arrest and the subsequent treatment he receives, as he rightly reflects, are the result of his disconcerting presence in society, of an awful reminder of humanity in ruins:

What is certain is this, that I never rested in that way again, my feet obscenely resting on the earth, my arms on the handlebars and on my arms my head, rocking and abandoned. It is indeed a deplorable sight, a deplorable example, for the people, who so need to be encouraged, in their bitter toil, and to have before their eyes manifestations of strength only, of courage and of joy, without which they might collapse, at the end of the day, and roll on the ground. (*Three Novels* 20)

Molloy does not, cannot, like Moran, turn the tables on his benefactors. But the act of shattering the cup and saucer, deliberately and not accidentally, serves as a refusal—however small—to let a vacuous barrier rise up between the needy and the bountiful. To some extent, Molloy realizes Beckett's "dream," not only of an art, but of an existence "unresentful of its insuperable indigence and too proud for the farce of giving and receiving" (*Proust* 141).

"The End"—the eventual form taken by that story Beauvoir had so uncharitably rejected—also questions the good of goodwill. Pointing a finger at the narrator, who has resorted to begging on the street, a soapbox Marxist interrogates the passers-by: "Do you ever think? ... It never enters your head ... that your charity is a crime, an incentive to slavery, stultification and organized murder" (*Complete Short Prose* 94). The narrator, however, is unaffected by the display of pious rage. He believes that the orator must either be a religious fanatic or a fugitive madman; in any case, the discourse is "all Greek to [him]" (94). Not only do the terms of capitalism and communism mean nothing to him, but also the idea that charity can be the cause of degradation for those who receive it and a means of elevation for those who bestow it. Like Molloy, he refuses to participate in the vicious differentiation that goodwill might bring about—not obliviously, but because he recognizes that the act of giving is seldom unaccompanied by feelings of superiority. In giving no thanks to those who "stoop" to give him money, the narrator resists entering into an economy of moral debt and credit. Likewise, Molloy's shattering of the crockery disrupts a circular logic that fails to recognize that the human condition, no matter the particular material or moral station, is common to all, humiliating to all.

In the end, Molloy's is only one particular kind of reaction. Transforming the language of "The End" and admitting that "tears and laughter"—responses to humiliation and suffering—"are so much Gaelic to me" (32), he assumes a

position of uncertainty that is characteristic of Beckett's aporetic art. By counterbalancing Molloy and Moran, the publican whinge and the pharisaic tarantara, Beckett does not suggest that all responses to suffering are equally ethical or valid. Rather, through the unresolved tensions and opposing perspectives of the novel he achieves an acknowledgement of differences and a defense of wretchedness—in his work and outside it.

Notes

1. For the publishing history of "Suite" and "The End," see Van Hulle 73-82.
2. For the publishing history, see McDonald 153-170.
3. See Ricks 112 and 116 on using the full title of "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock."
4. Beckett on the conjunction of Geulinx and Dante: "I imagine a member of the crew who does not share the adventurous spirit of Ulysses and is at least at liberty to crawl homewards... along the brief deck" (*Letters* 2 458). For another discussion of Geulinx in *Molloy*, see Tucker 119-22.
5. In a 1956 letter, Beckett expresses his wish to reread *Précis de décomposition*, first published in 1949 (*Letters* 2 678).
6. "I was succumbing to other affections, that is not the word, intestinal for the most part" (*Three Novels* 160).

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