Samuel Beckett

Molloy

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Presented by: Paul Stewart

Molloy was first written and published in French (1951) and then translated into English by Beckett, in association with Patrick Bowles (1955). It was quickly followed by two further novels – Malone Muerte / Malone Dies (1952 / 1956) and L'Innomable / The Unnamable (1953 / 1958) – which, together with Molloy, form a sequence of works often described as a trilogy, despite Beckett not liking the term. Beckett's reputation as one of the most important novelists of the twentieth century (aside from one of its most important playwrights) can be said to rest on these three novels which challenge the norms of the novel form, combine wry and even bawdy comedy with anguish and despair, and pose fundamental questions of what it means to be human, the individual's relation to society and the state, and the ability to express experience.

The novel consists of two first person narratives: that of Molloy as he journeys towards his mother, and that of Moran, a private detective who is sent by a mysterious agency to track down Molloy. Both men are writing their accounts and the questionable facility of writing forms a constant thread in both narratives.

Molloy, invalided and living in his mother's room (although not with his mother), is paid for the pages which are collected by an unknown man who demands some form of account of Molloy's wanderings, despite Molloy only wanting to "speak of the things that are left, say my goodbyes, finish dying" (3). In some respects, the story Molloy relates is a failed quest narrative. Hampered by a crippled leg and his crutches, Molloy sets out on a bicycle with the initial goal of finding his mother but his narrative ends with him falling into a revery in a ditch and it is only through some unknown means that he is transported to his mother's room from which he tells his tale. Molloy's state of 'not knowing' – either ignorant or uncomprehending of the events in which he finds himself involved– is almost a constant in the narrative and extends even to his own name when forced to prove his identity to the police after they detain him as an affront to public decency. This episode establishes Molloy as a vagrant and outcast who seems to elude the social definitions and relations to which he ought to adhere.

Leaving the police station, Molloy runs over and kills the dog of a woman, Lousse (or Loy), who takes him in as some form of replacement. Molloy is never sure whether Lousse was a woman or a man in disguise. He slips out of 'her' house one night and continues his journey, spending some time by the sea to set in a store of sucking stones; an occasion which entails the mathematical distribution of the sixteen stones amongst his pockets to ensure that he sucks them in sequence. This excessive reasoning leads him to finally abandon the whole sucking stone project. Molloy's final encounter is with what appears to be a charcoal-burner who lives alone in the forest. This man offers Molloy the chance of companionship and a form of home, to which Molloy responds by beating the man to death with the expert aid of his crutches. Molloy sets off again, but it is not long before he falls into a ditch and his journey comes to an end as he watches the sky and listens to the birds singing.

At first, Moran is presented through his own written narrative as the opposite of Molloy. He is a man of means: a father (his son is called Jacques, after Moran himself), a homeowner with a servant, Martha, and a regular attendee at church. His bourgeois certitude and punctiliousness are interrupted one Sunday morning when an agent, Gaber, at the behest of the head of the agency, Youdi, sets him the task of tracking down Molloy. Almost immediately, Moran's sense of certainty begins to fail when confronted with the notion of Molloy, who is at once unknown and uncannily familiar. Nevertheless, he dutifully sets off to find Molloy with his son, Jacques, in tow. Very rapidly, Moran's health begins to deteriorate, particularly his legs, and he sends Jacques to purchase a bicycle. Moran is becoming increasingly Molloy-like, both physically and mentally. He is confronted by two strangers, one of whom bears an uncanny resemblance to Moran. He beats this man to death. When the son returns, they quarrel, and Moran is left alone to pursue his quest but his health worsens to such an extent that he can barely continue.

Gaber reappears with the instruction from Youdi: "Moran, Jacques, home, instanter" (171). Decrepit as he is, it takes Moran a whole winter to return home, dragging himself through snow and mud, asking himself theological conundrums and thinking of his bees and hens at home. Once home, he finds his son gone, his bees and hens dead and resolves that "I have been a man long enough, I shall not put up with it any more, I shall not try any more" (184). A voice in his head, which he had begun to hear when he started for home, is now a little clearer to him: "I was getting to know it better now, to understand what it wanted. It did not use the words Moran had been taught […] But in the end I understood this language. I understood it, understand it, all wrong perhaps" (184). The voice tells him to write his report and the narrative closes as he begins to do so, although the final words of the novel undermine the first line of Moran's account: "I went back into the house and wrote. It is midnight. The rain is beating on the windows. It was not midnight. It was not raining" (184).

Molloy has not been viewed in a political light until relatively recently. The dominant lenses through which the novel has been viewed tended towards the philosophical, the psychological, and the religious. More historically minded recent criticism has offered readings that highlight the Irish and French contexts. The Irish context has focused on matters arising from the formation of the Irish Free State following independence from Britain and how this impacted upon the Protestant community of which Beckett was part. The French context has focused on the aftermath of the Second World War and the reconfiguration of a French polity and identity. The political ramifications of the work have also featured in the thinking of Deleuze and Guattari as a form of resistance to fascism, and in the homo-sociability of Leo Bersani. Aside from the Irish and French historical contexts, the political within Molloy can be traced on a fundamental level: How does one become identified as a subject by the state and society? Can this identification and subjectification be avoided? In the figure of Molloy, this can be seen as repeated refusals to be identified or to enter into social relations. In the figure of Moran, one can see how a bourgeois identity – buttressed by home, possessions and socially-sanctioned positions – is dismantled, leaving Moran to wonder if, in his final decrepit state, he is not in fact more free than he was before.

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Article

Paul Stewart: Fundamental operations of the political in Beckett's Molloy

By: Paul Stewart