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### **Samuel Beckett's *Molloy*: Some Things Still "Affirmative"**

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Raymond Federman, in his frequently quoted work on Beckett, *Journey to Chaos: Samuel Beckett's Early Fiction* dated 1965, makes a rather totalising beginning as follows:

The novels of Samuel Beckett seem to defy all classification, evade all possible definition. By their unorthodox form, their lack of elements essential to the nature of fiction, their deceptive use of language, their apparent incoherence, and above all their ambiguous suggestiveness, they lead to contradictory interpretations . . . [Beckett's people's journey] is a journey without beginning or end. (3-4)

It is impossible to disagree with the idea that a Beckett novel lacks unity and coherence in plot and that traditionally speaking there is no organization at all. This generalising approach of the critic evaluates Beckett's novels also as works "progress[ing] . . . toward

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apparent chaos and meaninglessness" (Federman 4). Taking into consideration the situation of the protagonist narrators of the novel, Molloy and Moran, who quite consciously reflect upon their chaotic, but subjectively meaningful worlds, it can be observed that those characters fabricate their own physically limited but psychologically mobile conditions within the limits of their own circumstances. The other crucial remark Federman makes, this time on the style of the work, is that his fiction is "an affirmation of the negative" (6) and this remark illustrates the fact that Beckett creates illusory and confusing scenes and moments that only look real. Although most of the comments and assumptions made by the protagonist narrators in *Molloy* are negated, even nullified by themselves immediately after they are uttered, it would be too simplistic to assume that the whole novel is based on negativity. However, Federman's remark can be interpreted, in the context of this study, as a signal pointing at an affirmation of both mental and physical movements oscillating between backward and forward physical and narrative gestures rather than a pure chaotic position.

In his comprehensive work on Beckett, Anthony Cronin generalizes the plight of Beckett's characters who "are free to attain a degree of universality," and they "are meant to be different from each other, but the success of many one-man stage performers in amalgamating them into a single character shows that there is a 'Beckett man'" (379). For Cronin, the Beckett man, whose features are rendered more obvious in stage performances, is not ambitious and is never dominant on other figures around him; nevertheless he enjoys "physical suffering and the degradations of the body" (381). This pleasure associated with incapability is another affirmation although it sounds paradoxical.

Likewise, Wolfgang Iser highlights the problem of lack of affirmation in his essay entitled "When Is the End Not the End? The Idea of Fiction in Beckett" by stating that,

In fact, Beckett's work offers nothing affirmative, and for this reason it has often been regarded as simply the image of an existence characterised

– in the words of Georg Lukács – by the ‘most fundamental pathological debasement of man’ . . .  
. If one looks for affirmation in Beckett, all one will find is the deformation of man – and even this is only half the story, for his characters frequently behave as if they were no longer concerned in their own misery. . . (46)

All these questions of lack of affirmation or “affirmation of the negative,” both in theme and the narrators’ attitude in Beckett’s *Molloy* as in his other works, guided my approach to the text since there is still some motif targeting an attempt toward an achievement that is, at least, positively affirmative in the novel.

*Molloy*, published in 1951, is the first novel of the trilogy which also includes *Malone Dies* and *The Unnamable*. For John Fletcher, it is “the first of any of his books to bring him fame” (119). The novel is quite suggestive in style, asking several questions about the quest of the modern individual for constructing his/her meaning, the possibilities of narrowing the gap between silence and voice, alternative means of creating a novel as a genre, the potency of the subjective voice working on his own fiction and many other questions including the self-reflexivity of the text and self-consciousness of the characters. More problematic than these questions is the use of an autobiographical narrator who struggles to establish his own image of a unified self which gives the novel a progressive but often repetitive and rhythmic pace echoing and promising a teleological process from the very beginning. The text is composed in such a way that one feels like there will be a resolution after the gradual physical decomposition, mental disorientation and overt discontent of the protagonist-narrator.

Most of the seminal readings of *Molloy* highlight the negative, fragmented and desperate position of the individual representing a realistic situation. For example, for George Bataille, *Molloy* is “repellent splendor incarnate” (131), for John Fletcher “he is completely indifferent to his own situation” (139), for Maurice Blanchot “[t]here is certainly a troublesome principle of disintegration in the story of *Molloy*” (142), for

Hugh Kenner the body, in *Molloy*, is "subject to loss and decay" (19), and finally for Rabinovitz "Moran goes from an autocycle to a bicycle; Molloy starts with a bicycle and ends with crutches" (51). Interpreting the novel only as a projection of the failure of self-fulfilment, the physical and mental disintegration of the modern man or reading the text as a criticism of its own writing would weaken its dynamic appeal. For Wasser, these readings of *Molloy* as "a kind of critical allegory for its own undoing – or as governed by what we might call an 'aesthetic of failure' – might be appealing, but they are ultimately unsatisfactory" (246). *Molloy* is not only about "the aesthetic aims of writing" (Wasser 246), but it demonstrates the active, but not futile, struggle of the subject which stands for the despair of many people like Molloy and Moran, and ceaselessly asks various questions dealing with the possibility of post-traumatic survival. Furthermore, the traditional readings of the subject position of the narrator in the novel as fragmented and of the form of the novel as loose and disconnected, neglect the constructive operating system in the whole text through which I believe the original aesthetics of the work is in fact fabricated.

The novel comprises two stories narrated by two characters, Molloy and Moran. The first part of the novel is about Molloy's quest for his mother. As it is a retrospective narrative, the temporal gap between the narrator's past and present is immediately felt at the beginning. Molloy, the protagonist narrating his own story, wakes up in his mother's room. So, he has already reached his mother and already fulfilled a finality, a resolution, or at least this is what one might assume. The novel starts with this already completed and affirmed deed. Similarly, he affirms that his story is teleological, moving towards a finality which is death. Despite his serious memory problem, he wants "to speak of the things that are left, say [his] goodbyes, finish dying" (7). Molloy's narrative is basically about his effort to fulfil the task of writing. He encodes a temporal paradox on the first page which is never decoded in the text, simultaneously clarifying that not writing means death but it is not clear if he feels compelled to die or if he is really willing to die. He does not know exactly why he is writing; similarly we do not know why he wants to die. Despite this ambiguity,

what is made clear is the “disjunction between the time of narrative and the time of dying” (Critchley 117). The time of the narrative is the past, the act of dying looks like it is happening at the present moment of the novel. He says he does not work for money but still keeps writing. Although Molloy’s style consists of negations, it is not thoroughly about negativities. As he depicts himself in the narration of his past, it is observed that Molloy, though obsessed, is one of the most hardworking, wilful and determined characters in the modernist tradition of the British novel in his vigour to narrate. Just before he begins, he makes an explanation as follows, “Here’s my beginning. Because they are keeping it apparently. I took a lot of trouble with it. Here it is. It gave me a lot of trouble . . . It must mean something, or they wouldn’t keep it” (8). He is expected to write some meaningful account, maybe a report, the reason of which is not indicated. What appears on the surface is that his quest narrative is filled with many struggles to survive.

He first narrates the story of two travellers, A and C; then they make him feel so isolated that he “craves for a fellow” (15) and he decides to leave with the prospect of seeing them again and starts to seek his mother: “to fill my mind until it was rid of all other preoccupations and I seized with a trembling at the mere idea of being hindered from going there, I mean to my mother, there and then” (15). He is constantly motivated to move and this motivation is affirmed by the possibility of reaching her. When he is arrested by the police, his mind moves freely and ceaselessly in a disorganised manner. After being released, he runs over a lady’s dog with his bicycle. The lady keeps him in her house as a substitute for her dog. He is kept there for a while by Lousse or Sophie, whom he confuses with his mother, until he can escape on his crutches despite his stiff legs.

Quite early in the novel, thematic and stylistic concordance is vividly portrayed in Molloy’s mobility in action and thought, and the rhythm of the narrative. Iser’s words would be relevant at this point: “[t]he tendency, however, is not toward a consolidation of meaning, as one might normally expect from the development of a text, so much as toward a more or less complete contradiction of whatever has been

stated" (54). In Molloy's account, fragmented thoughts are not in harmony, however while reflecting upon his state of mind, he can still rejoice in his condition: "For 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 it, to the soul of the incurious seeker" (64). Aesthetics of epistemology might fail in *Molloy*, but Molloy himself, knowing the limits of his decaying body, does not fail. There is one specific thing for Molloy that he can be affirmative about, and it is "giving [himself] in to the evidence, to a very strong probability rather . . ." (64). Even hearing the voice made by his crutches, and later the chirping of the birds (91), is something affirmative. Other senses besides hearing, most emphatically touch and sight, are what motivate him to move on. If the process of the narrative did not aim at any affirmation, he would not have said ". . . these are reasonings, based on analysis" (64). These ideas might be his assumptions but it is evident that Molloy enjoys deciphering his life, at least trying to make it understandable and delaying non-existence in the process of writing. He knows that he needs to hurry up to reach his mother since he is running out of time, but ironically enough he needs words, meaningless or meaningful. Therefore his negation itself is the very affirmative action of the novel.

Situated in his wasteland, he comments on his own action of writing pages that create a part of the body of the novel. He has to submit these pages about his preoccupations, obsessions and adventures on the way to his mother's place to a man coming to see her. To be able to submit something, he has to write although he mostly thwarts what he writes previously: "And truly it little matters what I say, this, this or that or any other thing. Saying is inventing. Wrong, very rightly wrong. You invent nothing, you think you are inventing, you think you are escaping, and all you do is stammer out your lesson . . ." (31-32). This and other affirmations alike, mostly metafictional, do not seem to correspond to his peaceful state of mind, in the sense of what is generally understood from the word 'peace.' He knows what he does not know and this makes him feel peaceful sometimes. However, he writes progressively because he is obliged to, regardless of the

meaning of the words he uses: “I don’t know what that means but it’s the word I mean to use, free to do what, to do nothing . . . to obliterate texts than to blacken margins, to fill in the holes of the words till all is blank and flat and the whole ghastly business looks like what is, senseless, speechless, issueless misery” (13). At the beginning he expresses his unwillingness to continue to write because he wants to die. He is not much worried about the essence and the context of his account. Being obliged to make up narrative solutions to produce more words for “verbal survival” (Blanchot 144) seems alien to the humane concerns of the novel; nevertheless he is narrating his mind out, basically his thoughts, speculations and negations: “For my part I willingly asked myself questions, one after the other, just for the sake of looking at them. No, not willingly, wisely, so that I might believe I was still there . . . Yes, the words I heard, and heard distinctly . . . free of all meaning, and this is probably one of the reasons why conversation was unspeakably painful to me . . .” (49-50).

Since Molloy’s emotions do not seem to be compatible with the artificial urge that makes the narrative move on, the need to survive is only partially related to Molloy’s body and mind, but it reiterates the affirmative technical pulse in the narration. He lies and also confesses that he is lying. About his stay in Lousse’s place, he had explained that his body got worse but later he explains that it did not happen in the way he had put it: “But there was kindled no new seat of suffering or infection, except of course those arising from the spread of existing plethoras and deficiencies . . . the loss of my toes of my left foot, no I am wrong, my right foot . . . So all I can say, and I do my best to say no more, is that during my stay with Lousse no more new symptoms appeared . . .” (55). He is obedient yet rebellious because of the information denied him; he is willing yet unwilling to continue; he feels both free and trapped; he is sane enough to judge his own account and be analytical about it and yet insane enough to suck stones and comment on it for pages.

As Anthony Uhlmann points out,

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In Molloy's narrative, however, ignorance, chaos, has the upper hand. Molloy's narrative is short on physical events – the events themselves are often lost within sensations and meandering mental processes as his story lurches from one digression to the next in a free association of ideas . . . Opposed to the notions of surveillance and power in Beckett is the notion of freedom, and this notion is closely tied to the questions of freedom, ignorance and failure. (53)

It is possible to talk about failure only as a result of his resistance to subject himself to any specific cause other than writing in the present temporality of his account. He wants to see himself both as the subject and the object of the narrative; we can make this differentiation but he cannot. This dilemma becomes obvious in his words: "I had forgotten who I was (excusably) and spoken of myself as I would have of another" (42).

Negations in Molloy's account do not cancel affirmations. In his progressive but chaotic narrative, he still wants to be comprehended: "Yes, my progress reduced me to stopping more and more often, it was the only way to progress, to stop" (72). The juxtaposition of progress and physical deterioration sounds rather paradoxical. Likewise, forward movement at the end signals another beginning along with its negation. Not Molloy, but his narrative yearns to achieve cyclic endlessness in the finale of part one with another affirmation as follows: "Real spring weather. I longed to go back into the forest. Oh not a real longing. Molloy could stay, where he happened to be" (91).

Moran is the protagonist-narrator of the second part of the novel. Similar narrative strategies and thematic concerns dominate this section. As an agent, Moran is obliged to find Molloy and write a report on him. He receives orders from Gaber, Youdi's messenger, to find Molloy. His narrative project is to a great extent similar to Molloy's. He ceaselessly talks about his task and comments on it and



on Molloy's identity as an unknown person about whom he has to work very hard. Moran himself, at the beginning, states that his narrative and thus his search of Molloy will be progressive and affirmative: "And though this examination prove unprofitable and of no utility for the execution of my orders, I should nevertheless have established a kind of connexion, and one not necessarily false. For the falsity of the terms does not necessarily imply that of the relation, so far as I know" (111). The important thing is totally irrelevant to both knowing and not knowing the object, but it is related to getting to know him and writing about him: "I knew then about Molloy, without however knowing much about him. I shall say briefly what little I did know about him. I shall also draw attention, in my knowledge of Molloy, to the most striking lacunae" (113). He might have invented this figure in his mind. This is another perspective to explain his situation, but he has to find Molloy or Mollose and write a report, no matter who he is and what he is called.

Moran and his son Jacques, set off on their journey to find Molloy. Moran's narrative is more complicated and digressive compared to Molloy's. Interestingly enough, he makes sure that his narrative is neither consistent nor obedient to the succession of events. He deliberately affirms the indeterminacy of his account. It takes him a while to remember his task when he tries to answer the questions in his mind about his real destination. These continuous questions create an unreliable narrator with a very bad memory. He asks, "What was I looking for exactly? It is hard to say. I was looking for what was wanting to make Gaber's statement complete. I felt he must have told me what to do with Molloy once he was found" (136). Here my focus is on Moran's intentions. It seems that for Moran, the narrator, the content does not matter as long as he finds something to look for and write a report about. In a quite affirmative tone he makes it clear that he is not doing anything for Molloy, he does not do anything for himself, either. He prefers to call his task "anonymous" (114). Nevertheless, he studiously makes calculations about the number of Molloys he can talk and think about. Since he thinks that "the party is big enough" (115) he stops increasing this number. Previously he found someone

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called Yerk on the third day of his search. Nobody asked him if he could find him or not, "my word was enough . . . Sometimes I was asked for a report" (136). It is obvious that he is trying to fill in a void with words and with someone like Molloy or Yerk to be meaningful. He seems to remember things correctly earlier, however his negations start to appear as his memory gets worse and his narrative progresses after he begins his quest for Molloy. Just like him, Moran needs time to remember his mission, to remember what he has already planned to do with Molloy. He is hopeful for the future although it looks that it will be repetitively fragmented.

Moran knows what he is supposed to do but he can not guarantee any chronological order in his report on Molloy. In the metafictional sense he is quite aware that this confusion is due to the temporal gap between experiencing an event and narrating the same event; this awareness somehow separates the Moran as detective and the Moran as narrator: "I am too old to lose all this, and begin again, I am too old! Quiet, Moran, quiet. No emotion, please" (132). The narrator Moran sounds more like the one who affirms the negative. He gives the hints of his acknowledging this difference by both parodying the myth of Sisyphus and affirming the negative:

And it would not surprise me if I deviated, in the pages to follow, from the true and exact succession of events. But I don't think that Sisyphus is required to scratch himself, or to groan, or to rejoice, as the fashion is now, always at the same appointed places . . . And perhaps he thinks each journey is the first. This would keep hope alive, would it not, hellish hope. (133)

The detective Moran is more naïve compared to the narrator Moran; the former is more enthusiastic (if one is to look for a trace of enthusiasm) for recording the information about Molloy, though it is hypothetical. On the other hand, the latter sounds happy and even

eager to find accurate words for the things he wants to explain for the readers of his record about Molloy. For instance, according to Moran, Bally or Ballyba is where Molloy lives and this place is like a “commune, or a canton, I forget, but there exists with us no abstract and generic term for such territorial subdivisions ...” (133-34). As alternatives, he offers the words Bally, Ballyba and Ballybaba to make definitions of the land. This is an epistemologically constructive struggle; however on the ontological level negations continue to dominate the narrative more: “I could not determine therefore how I was to deal with Molloy, once I had found him. The directions ... had gone clean out of my head. That is what came of wasting the whole of that Sunday on stupidities” (137). Time is wasted throughout the narrative, hope is wasted too. In the extract quoted above, the repetitive action of Sisyphus trying to roll a big boulder up a hill as a punishment is related to his probable loss of memory. For Moran, due to his amnesia he might be hopeful about reaching the top of the hill each time he pushes the rock up the hill. This example illustrates the affirmation of the repetitively positive action, which sheds light upon the plight of the modern man who moves forward either through physical action or through the narrative although it aims at no specific reason.

For Thomas Cousineau, “... repetition of classical prototypes in *Molloy* tends to weaken our sense of its narrators as possessing essentialised identities; we see them more as disguised reincarnations of characters from classical myth” (83). In fact, within the context of the argument of this study, it can be observed that the reference to the classical prototypes affirms the pitiable role of the narrators in making this journey meaningless but the act of writing quite meaningful.

The most striking part of Moran’s narrative is the last part which I would still call the resolution, where he realises that he is gradually getting more familiar with the discourse that asked him to write a report about Molloy. Moran claims that he understands this discourse even if it is wrong and is determined to find out if this knowledge brings him freedom or not (176). At the end, the text goes back to its beginning as follows, “Does this mean I am freer now than I was? I do not know. I shall learn. Then 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" (176). Moran can defy what he had stated at the beginning of his story, but it is obvious that he has a more assertive voice now.

Comparing Molloy and Moran's objectives, Uhlmann posits a significant point: "Moran wants to be who he is, but can only be 'freed' if he ceases to be a man, if he ceases to be Moran . . . Molloy on the other hand is familiar with the sensation of not being himself or anyone . . ." (55). Nevertheless, in both situations there is neither dissolution, nor disintegration in the way the subject perceives his function through the process of his own narrative. Despite their physical immobility, they are struggling to write, understand and finish their account, composing it with all its minuteness, which is quite an affirmative deed, indeed.

Both Molloy and Moran submit themselves to their duties at the beginning of their journeys, the former to settle his problem with his mother, the latter to find Molloy and then to deserve Youdi's applause. However at the end of their arduous journeys or at the beginning of their accounts, they sound rather reluctant to their duties given to them. The parallelism between Molloy and Moran derives from "the disinterestedness and disaffection of the relation each protagonist maintains to his writing" (Critchley 117). They decide to acknowledge and affirm the authority of their own voices. For Cousineau, this is "an achievement serv[ing] . . . as a form of fulfilment that signifies the conversion of the narrators from the alternatively sadistic and masochistic compulsions to which they had formerly been bound" (87). Molloy does not want to talk more about Lousse's house; instead of giving it in full detail, he prefers changing the topic and continuing with how they buried Lousse's dog: "Human nature. Marvellous thing. The house where Lousse lived. Must I describe it? I don't think so. I won't, that's all I know, for the moment" (35). He also is not pleased with the schedule that has been presumably prepared for him beforehand: "For I always say either too much or too little, which is a terrible thing for a man with a passion for truth like mine. And I shall not abandon this subject, to which I shall probably never have occasion to return . .

.” (34). Molloy satisfies his passion for truth by describing at length his attachment to his bicycle, his sucking the stones in his pocket, some of his particular bodily functions, and his stiff leg. He can be quite assertive too, if he does not want to continue, by stating, “But I would rather not affirm anything on this subject” (64).

Moran too, seems to be rebelling against the expectations of his employer by refusing to discuss the “obstacles” (157) on his way to Molloy. He explains his feelings as, “It was my intention, almost my desire, to tell of all these things . . . Now the intention is dead, the moment is come and the desire is gone . . .” (157). Now he is not much worried about pleasing Youdi by narrating interesting and appealing episodes of his adventures for his readers, but he is more interested in prioritising his own preferences. He is determined not to “dwell upon this journey home, its furies and treacheries” (166); he will only touch upon the miseries “in obedience to Youdi’s command” (166). Furthermore, as he wishes, he forms his narrative by listing his theological preoccupations. For example, he thinks that Eve might be sprung from a tumour in the fat of Adam’s leg, not from his rib, he wonders what God was doing before he created Heaven and Earth, also how much longer do people have to wait for the antichrist, would it be appropriate to read the mass for the dead over the living? (167). In the middle of his narration Moran openly states that he will organise his plot in his own way: “I have no intention of relating the various adventures which befell us, me and my son, together and singly, before we came to the Molloy country . . . But this is not what stops me . . . I shall conduct it in my own way” (131). The strength of an independent voice weakens the authority giving orders to him. As Moran puts, “I have spoken of a voice giving me orders, or rather advice. It was on the way home I heard it for the first time, I paid no attention to it” (169-170).

Both Molloy and Moran challenge the command and guidance of their employers (bosses) on their ways to reach their aims, all the negations throughout their accounts propose a newly attained authority rather than an attempt to deconstruct an argument which has already been stated. Finally, I can say that despite the impossibility to predict

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the narrators' full plan in both Molloy's and Moran's narratives and the value of their motifs, the narrators' tones are symmetrically affirmative both in the way they challenge their employers and in constructing their own story between the lines. It is unknown whether they fulfil their task or not at the end (Does Molloy finish dying? Can Moran find Molloy?), but it is still conspicuous that there is an active urge encouraging them to write more and to learn more, not in accordance with the expectations of the authorities but with their free will.

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