In contrast with Beckett’s own dissident writing, criticism about him is comfortably consensual. Most critics who write on Beckett treat his works as ideal units, assuming that each of them, and perhaps the entire set too, proposes a metaphysical statement about the human condition. Virtually all critics insist on Beckett’s antitraditionalist writing and gloomy worldview. Early reviews of *Molloy* exemplify this tendency well. “Beckett settles us in the world of Nothing where some nothings which are men move about for nothing,” Maurice Nadeau writes shortly after the publication of the novel.¹ At the end of an enthusiastic article, Georges Bataille strikes a similar chord: “Thus, *literature* gnaws away at existence and the world, reducing to *nothing* (but this *nothing* is horror) these steps by which we go along confidently from one result to another, from one success to another.”² Later academic criticism belabored these themes at great length. To take only two better known examples: Wolfgang Iser defined Beckett’s art as representing subjectivity in the act of canceling itself,³ that is, as dealing not with events, but with interpretations, and dubious interpretations at that; Leo Bersani proposed an eschatological account, arguing

---

¹ I wish to thank James Phelan, Peter Rabinowitz, and Donald Brown for their generous criticism of an earlier version of this paper.
Naturalizing Molloy

that Beckett brings about the end of literature. I would call such views the “apocalyptic” approach.

Taken as an evocation of the Beckettian atmosphere, the apocalyptic view is certainly on target: not only do Beckett’s characters make us think of figures in Callot or Goya, but the former’s dereliction is somehow deeper than the latter’s, in fact deeper than anyone else’s since the Book of Job. But at the same time, the efforts to describe Beckett’s art with the help of totalizing concepts such as “the death of the author,” “the end of literature,” or “the deconstruction of subjectivity” paradoxically go against what Beckett, the prose writer, quite obviously tries to do on every page of his novels: to tell us stunningly concrete stories, which capture the real before and outside its subordination to conventional thought categories. Totalizing concepts like “the end of literature” and “the deconstruction of subjectivity” certainly address questions Beckett’s narrations themselves seem to address, especially when examined in isolation from other literary texts. Yet, it is equally true that Beckett’s stories are, above all, prose narratives embedded in a long generic tradition, without reference to which their complicated games cannot be fully grasped.

The interpretation of Beckett’s narratives thus raises two larger issues: first, the contrast between hermeneutics and poetics; second, the relation between tradition and innovation. The apocalyptic reading of Beckett’s narratives assumes that each of these texts incorporates a kernel of wisdom that the critic must recover by attentive contemplation of the text in its unicity. A poetological reading, in contrast, assumes that placing the text within its particular family of literary artefacts precedes and helps interpretation. Placing a literary text within, say, a group of generic and thematic relatives highlights not only their common generic features, but also the specificity of the text under consideration. In particular, placing a text helps us get a clearer sense of what is innovative and what is traditional. Since innovation depends as much on following some established codes as it does on breaking some others, a completely revolutionary text is simply unthinkable. It follows that even texts like Beckett’s narratives, which have been hailed as

· 179 ·
radically innovative, might in fact depend on well-established
generic and thematic traditions.

Interpretations of Beckett's prose which link it to the European
narrative tradition have occasionally been defended. Christine
Brooke-Rose and John Fletcher, who hold a moderate historicist
view, see Beckett's prose as belonging to a lineage of antinovelists
that includes Cervantes, Furetière, Swift, Sterne, and Diderot. For
Hugh Kenner, Beckett is a "stoic comedian" belonging to the same
lineage as Flaubert and Joyce. Other critics, balancing the apoca­
lyptic and the historicist view of Beckett, relate his work to a
pessimistic tradition going from Schopenhauer to Proust. Indeed,
Beckett quotes somewhere a revealing passage of Schopenhauer,
who defines art as "the contemplation of the world independently
of the principle of reason."

The present paper will defend a poetological view of Molloy, and
attempt to position this text within a set of related literary texts. I
will analyze Molloy's monologue, arguing that thematically Molloy
relies on Beckett's immediate French predecessors, in particular on
Sartre's existentialism, while generically it incorporates many ele­
ments of quest-romances and ordeal narratives. In contrast with
the apocalyptic view, I will conclude that Molloy presents a spirited
defense of human dignity.

Like most of the "nouveaux romanciers" of his generation,
Natalie Sarraute, Michel Butor, Alain Robbe-Grillet, Claude Simon
(all discovered and promoted as a group in the early and mid-1950s
by Jérôme Lindon at the Editions de Minuit), Beckett writes in a
style which challenges both existing narrative conventions and
conceptual thought. The peculiar punch of his and his fellows' prose
comes from blending two powerful modern traditions: the
vitalist and existentialist affirmation of human reality as irreduc­
able to concepts, a favorite theme throughout twentieth-century
French philosophy and prose; and the modernist narrative, brought
to prominence by Virginia Woolf, James Joyce, and William Faulkner.

In France, the suspicion expressed by philosophy and art toward
conceptual thought originates in the wave of vitalist and anti-
intellectualist trends at the turn of the century. Their most successful proponent, Henri Bergson, defended instinct against intelligence and creative energy against rational analysis. Under his influence, Marcel Proust’s *Remembrance of Things Past* painstakingly showed how conceptual knowledge hinders both artistic and emotional experience. After World War I, following the example of Søren Kierkegaard, Karl Jaspers, and Martin Heidegger, the French existentialist thinkers Gabriel Marcel and Jean-Paul Sartre built sophisticated anticonceptual stands. They certainly did not dispense with concepts entirely, since one cannot advocate anticonceptualism without relying on some concepts. Yet their writings emphasized the freedom and immediacy of human consciousness, in direct opposition to the neo-Kantian and Hegelian interest in abstract concepts. As a novelist, Sartre was fascinated by the same theme. His early novel *Nausea* narrates the struggle of a young historian, Antoine Roquentin, to get rid of the inherited conceptual—and, by implication, social—system and grasp existence in its dazzling concreteness.

Proust and Sartre both wrote first person narratives, narratives of consciousness. But with all its opposition to conceptual knowledge, Proust’s *Remembrance of Things Past* is stylistically rooted in French classicism as well as in nineteenth-century realism. Likewise, with all its modernist rage against the intellectual and moral status quo, against conventional thought and bourgeois society, Sartre’s *Nausea* is told in a perfectly conventional, even bourgeois style: transparent, realist, sensitive, often sentimental. And while Proust’s character turns in the end to art, Sartre’s rejection of abstract ideas in favor of concrete existence does not free his character, Roquentin, from dependence on abstract categories: after experiencing a quasi-mystic state, during which he becomes one with viscous, incomprehensible reality, Sartre’s character comes back to conceptual thought as usual, or almost. To be sure, in his existentialist despair he casts off his daily routine, stops writing history, and dives into the unknown. But when, at the end of the novel, he believes he has found a ray of hope, it consists in a piece of music written, he tells us, by a “Jew” and sung by a “Negress”: no
individual names given, just social concepts. Could it have been otherwise? As long as we use language, can we ever escape abstraction? In a powerful critique of Sartre’s philosophy, Brice Parain argued in 1945 that individual consciousness never frees itself from the spell of language and, through it, from the power of universality.\(^\text{10}\)

Dependence on language notwithstanding, Beckett’s prose represents a further step in the resistance to conceptual thought.\(^\text{11}\) Only that instead of *talking* against general categories and abstract concepts, instead of *pleading* for concrete existence, Beckett’s prose *enacts* the flight from abstract concepts and the immersion into immediacy. Not that Beckett would eliminate from his prose all reference to socially accepted categories. Full rebellion against concepts can only lead to silence, a silence which Beckett, as a modern disciple of Geulincx, approaches to some degree.\(^\text{12}\) Some categories are present in Beckett’s prose, but the narrators never use them in a uniform, reliable way. Moreover, resistance to concepts inevitably breeds hostility to social institutions. Beckett’s characters not only doubt the stability and universality of language; like Sartre’s Roquentin, they also turn their backs to the world of social conventions.

Take as an instance of the meeting point between language and social stability, identification by profession in *Molloy*. Some characters have a clear profession, but no name: thus the various policemen who haunt the first part of the novel. Others have both a name and a profession: Father Ambrose, for instance, in Moran’s monologue. Yet others, endowed with a name, are involved in unclear, ambiguous professions: Gaber, we are told, is a messenger, working for Youdi, the head of a mysterious agency. The nature of the agency is never made explicit: Gaber and Youdi could be either private detectives or members of a sect or a secret society. Moran, the narrator of the second part, works as one of Youdi’s agents, yet rather than give us any clue about the aims of the agency, he gradually turns away from his professional duties, and ends up as a vagabond.

The same mischievous play with categorical borders occurs elsewhere in the story, and Molloy’s relation with his mother is a
Naturalizing Molloy

telling example. Nothing should be easier to define conceptually, it would seem, than the kinship between mother and son. But in Molloy's case, the relation is blurred by several factors. One is the leveling effect of the protagonists' age: "we were like a couple of old cronies, sexless, unrelated, with the same memories, the same rancours, the same expectations" (17). Mixed with the ensuing indifference, there lurks an enduring hostility. Molloy, for one, could not bear to be addressed as "son." His mother, in turn, calls him Dan, which is not his name, but, perhaps, his father's. In Molloy's terms, "I took her for my mother, she took me for my father." The relation thus rests on a false symmetry between two people who half-forget who they are, and resent the half they still remember. Appropriately, Molloy calls his mother Mag: Ma for Mother, and the guttural g sound canceling the sweet syllable Ma.

To communicate with his mother, Molloy uses a simple, though not elegant, semiotic system: "I got into communication with her by knocking on her skull. One knock meant yes, two no, three I don't know, four money, five goodbye" (18). Even these minimal conceptual distinctions are too difficult for the two characters to remember: "That she should confuse yes, no, I don't know, and goodbye, was all the same to me, I confused them myself." Only requests for money are important—four knocks, yet the mother "seemed to have lost, if not absolutely all notion of mensuration, at least the faculty of counting beyond two." Since by the time Molloy reaches his third knock, his mother has already forgotten the first two, she interprets a request for money as a two-knock message, which, as Molloy noted earlier, can be indifferently understood as yes, no, I don't know, and goodbye. To be more effective, Molloy replaces "the four knocks of my index-knuckle by one or more (according to my needs) thumps of the fist on her skull." Communication gives way to violence: "That she understood." Notice, in passing, the irony of "according to my needs": these could well be financial, but might also be understood as the need to be violent, to act out one's rage and resentment, a capricious resentment which is sometimes satisfied with one thump and sometimes requires more.
Endowed with an uncertain professional status and muddled family links, Beckett's characters seem to lack, or gradually lose, any features that define them as members of an organized community. Their country and cities have no names, their lives have little or no symbolic consistency. Instead the text highlights physical traits and events: the fragility of the flesh, illness, invalidity. In the mother's episode, we learn that, being deaf, she lacks the ability for symbolic interaction. Her vision is barely functioning: "Not that seeing matters, but it's something to go on with," Molloy comments, emphasizing how little humanity was left in his mother. (The French version adds an ironic touch: "Non pas qu'il importe de voir, mais c'est un petit commencement"; a "little beginning," as if at his mother's age one could still care about beginnings.) Among bodily functions, her aged body is best at excreting. She recognizes Molloy by his odor, the least codified, least symbolic of all senses, and feels an animal joy: "She knew it was me, by my smell. Her shrunken hairy old face lit up, she was happy to smell me" (17).

To the same polemic against concepts and conventions we can attribute the contrast between Molloy's obsession with his body and Moran's obsession with duty, profession, manners, and external appearance. Endlessly, happily, Molloy speaks about his legs, his declining knees, his vision, his testicles, his anus. Moran, in contrast, is a compulsive respecter of status, duty, and manners. He judges Father Ambrose severely for flattering himself "with being a man of the world and knowing its ways" (100). By implication, Moran knows these ways better. Strict with his son and servant, Moran has at his disposal a rich moral vocabulary. On the priest's face, Moran notices "how shall I say, a lack of nobility" (102). Later, he advises his son: "There is something . . . more important in life than punctuality, and that is decorum. Repeat." He describes with precision the clothes his son must take for their common journey: the school suit, his toiletry, one shirt, one pair of socks, and seven pairs of drawers. Notice the worry for anal cleanliness, a compulsive feature in Moran and a relaxed one in Molloy.

Moran's obsessiveness is far from making him happy. At home before embarking upon the journey to find Molloy, Moran com-
Naturalizing Molloy

plains about virtually every detail of his domestic life: “The stew was a great disappointment. Where are the onions? I cried. Gone to nothing, replied Martha. I rushed into the kitchen, to look for the onion I suspected her of having removed from the pot, because she knew how much I liked them. I even rummaged in the bin. Nothing. She watched me mockingly” (102). It is as if a rule-governed life, a life which respects norms, conventions, and social symbols inevitably leads to bickering about their fulfillment. Wherever there is a norm, there also is the probability that it will be infringed. To live by the concept means permanently to witness its neglect. Moreover, what if the rules are themselves mistaken? “Thus to my son I gave precise instructions. But were they the right ones? Would they stand by second thoughts? Would I not be impelled, in a very short time, to cancel them?” (103). In contrast, Molloy’s invalidity, by keeping him close to his own body and far from the rule-governed world, makes him a more dignified, even happier character. Neither Molloy nor Moran ever complain about their growing infirmities. The decay of the body (decay of function and structure) is perceived as a liberation.

We certainly are a long way from the subtle vitalism of Bergson and Proust, as well as from the overtly articulated Angst of Sartre’s Roquentin. Nevertheless, the same suspicion toward concepts that informs Proust’s and Sartre’s narratives gives Molloy its bite. The difference between the latter and the former is that while in Proust and Sartre the message is safely conveyed in the crystal-clear language of representational narrative, Beckett speaks a more recent and disturbing idiom.

Born as a reaction against conventional narrative techniques, the modernist narrative counters the objectivist bias of these techniques and their insensitivity to the spontaneous, meandering stream of the individual consciousness. The creators of modernist prose felt that conventional narratives fail to challenge the sophisticated modern reader; in contrast, texts which use the numerous varieties of modernist techniques make a special effort to puzzle the reader. In opposition to realist and naturalist prose, modernist
writing resists naturalizing. Autonomous monologues, for instance, do not bother to depict the outside world too faithfully. Technical details such as lack of paragraph division and punctuation suggest the free flow of thoughts and images and force the reader to pay much more attention to every twist and turn of the text. Hence the reputation for difficulty of many modern texts, Molloy included.

Yet just as the most difficult of Faulkner's novels can be analyzed in components involving scenes, dialogue, memories, and impressions, Molloy's monologue doesn't forever resist naturalization. It can, for instance, be divided into three parts, each made up of small narrative episodes, and each involving a journey (successful or not) to the city. The episodes, about fifteen, none shorter than two pages and none longer than ten pages, narrate a long quest, and are permeated by the main theme of the story, resistance to the world of concepts. Once the disorienting effect of typographical innovation (continuous printing) is dispelled, some of the episodes begin to sound surprisingly close to the tone of traditional quest-romances and ordeal narratives.

The beginning, for instance, with its gloomy irony and its allusion to bodily decay, is strikingly modernist. Yet looked at more closely, it appears to follow an age-old framing technique, and achieves an effect comparable to the beginning of, say, Defoe's Moll Flanders or Emily Brontë's Wuthering Heights. Compare "I am in my mother's room. It's I who live there now" with "My true name is so well known in the records, or registers, at Newgate and in the Old Bailey ... that it is not to be expected that I should set my name or the account of my family to this work" (Moll Flanders), and with "1801.—I have just returned from a visit to my landlord—the solitary neighbour that I shall be troubled with" (Wuthering Heights). Beckett's and Brontë's narrators start by naming the place where they are or have just been, Defoe's by warning the reader that she shall hide her true name. The simplest and most matter of fact of all is Molloy. His lines look like a conventional autobiography, narrated by a character who, after a life of adventure and sin, has reached a haven of peace.
Naturalizing Molloy

The three major sections making up the body of the story are: first, Molloy's adventures before he meets Lousse, a sequence of six short episodes; second, his sojourn at Lousse's house, another six episodes; finally, his wanderings toward the beach and back to the city, wanderings which become more and more arduous as his infirmities worsen dramatically. Each section narrates a part of Molloy's quest, shedding new light on his idiosyncrasies and phobias, in particular on his distrust of human communities and their conventions, linguistic or social. And while the monologue certainly cannot be reduced to a mere replay of traditional techniques, we should not neglect the features which emphasize the readability of Molloy.

The episodes containing Molloy's initial journey between open country and the city begin with Molloy watching two vague characters, called A and C (modernist innovation? Moll Flanders too was stingy with her names) walking toward each other. Next, Molloy meets one of the two characters, a gentleman with a cigar, sandshoes, and a dog. Molloy expresses his doubts about the world of appearances and the words depicting them: "But was not perhaps in reality the cigar a cutty, and were not the sandshoes boots, hobnailed, dust-whitened, and what prevented the dog from being one of those stray dogs that you pick up and take in your arms . . ." (12). Soon the character disappears, and Molloy, alone, reflects on how his infirmity prevents him from getting closer to the man, checking his cigar, his shoes, finding out whether these objects correspond to Molloy's impressions about them. He then takes off his hat, wisely attached at his buttonhole by a long lace and sighs: "I am still alive then. That may come in useful" (14; in French: "Je vis donc toujours. C'est bon à savoir.").\(^{17}\) as if his own existence were somehow open to doubt.

A short transition, ironically presented as a pause during a musical performance ("An instant of silence, as when the conductor taps on his stand, raises his arms, before the unanswerable clamour" [15]), leads to Molloy's visit to his mother, a good opportunity for the character to show his contempt for rational planning of action: "I needed, before resolving to go and see that woman, reasons of an urgent nature, and with such reasons, since I did not
THOMAS G. PAVEL

know what to do, or where to go, it was child’s play for me, the play of an only child, to fill my mind until it was rid of all other preoccupation 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). Is this conscious self-deception? Is it a parody of moral reasoning, with the choice being made first, and the deliberation simulated later? As adverse to conventional moral hypocrisy as Proust’s narrator and Sartre’s Roquentin, Molloy does not trust his own impulses either, albeit he never quite resists them, as we shall see. Such quirky deliberations make the reader doubt the transparency of the story, increasing its resistance to naturalization.

Leaving his mother’s place, Molloy gets in trouble with the police and the law (fourth episode). He alludes in vain to his invalidity and learns (or pretends to learn) from the policeman that in the threatening world of social abstractions, there are not two laws, “one for the healthy, another for the sick, but one only, to which all must bow, rich and poor, young and old, happy and sad.” The policeman’s rhetoric being lost on Molloy (“I pointed out that I was not sad”), the representative of authority turns hostile. “That was a mistake. Your papers, he said” (20). While enjoying the policeman’s speech (“He was eloquent”), Molloy is unable to grasp the part that specifically refers to him (“there are not two laws, one for the healthy, another for the sick”), presumably because the second part of the policeman’s sentence (“but one only to which all must bow . . .”) omits to refer again to health and sickness. Like his mother, Molloy has a limited memory for abstract terms; moreover, he has trouble in seeing himself, the concrete, real Molloy, as the instantiation of a general concept. The request for papers reinforces the gap between social abstraction and Molloy’s humble, bodily worries. While by “papers” the policeman refers to something as exalted as identity papers, Molloy takes the word in its everyday sense, as meaning any piece of paper. And since “the only papers I carry with me are bits of newspapers to wipe myself, you understand, when I have a stool,” the idea of papers as symbolic of social identity is in comic contrast with Molloy’s interest in the cleanliness of his anus.18
More opposition to social symbols occurs in the next episode, during which Molloy is taken to the police station. Scared by authority, Molloy is unable to answer questions: "I am so little used to being asked anything, that when I am asked something, I take some time to know what. And the mistake I make is this, that instead of quietly reflecting on what I have just heard, . . . I hasten to answer blindly, fearing perhaps lest my silence fan their anger to fury" (21–22). His life is so remote from rules, symbols, and concepts that he fails to remember the most routine information, his own family name and his mother's address. His knowledge is bodily, nonverbal: "As to her address, I was in the dark, but knew how to get there, even in the dark" (22). And when society comes to him in the form of well-organized benevolence, Molloy not only rejects it violently, but also warns his reader against society's intrusions into some of the most intimate bodily acts, swooning and vomiting: "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" (23–24).

Happiness comes back only when, free again, Molloy rides his bicycle to the open country (sixth episode). "Inside me too, someone was laughing" (26). He sucks one of his pebbles to find peace: "A little pebble in your mouth, round and smooth, appeases, soothes, makes you forget your hunger, forget your thirst" (26). Thus Molloy's first attempt to find his mother, and the first section of his monologue, comes to an end: lying in the ditch "at full stretch, with outspread arms," Molloy, appeased, plays with the grass.

But not for long. In the next episode, the character is on the move again. Molloy's second journey opens with a rural prelude: out of his ditch, he sees a shepherd and his dog, hears the sheep bleating, muses about the countryside, confesses his love for the northern climate, counts his farts. In winter, he tells us, under his greatcoat he wraps his body in swathes of newspaper. "The Times Literary Supplement was admirably adapted to this purpose, of a neverfailing toughness and impermeability" (30). The terms "neverfailing
toughness and impermeability," which the author undoubtedly intends as an ironic description of the journal’s intellectual faults, become physical advantages in Molloy’s world.

Back in the city, Molloy has trouble identifying its name. Yet he is well aware that in his province there is only one town, his native town, “the only one I knew, having never set foot in any other” (31). Although he claims to be clumsy with words, Molloy’s aphasia extends to proper names: “I had been living so far from words so long, you understand, that it was enough for me to see my town, to be unable, you understand” (31). He has doubts about all words, to be sure: “even my sense of identity was wrapped in a namelessness often hard to penetrate,” because between words and things, the links fade too easily: “there could be no things but nameless things, no names but thingless names.” But saying is not inventing either, for “You invent nothing, you think you are inventing, you think you are escaping, and all you do is stammer out your lesson” (32). Although Roquentin’s flight from routine is mirrored in Molloy’s antisocial nature, the Sartrean hero’s self-righteousness would have made no sense to Molloy.

The core of the second part of Molloy’s story is his strange, initially incomprehensible, affair with Lousse, a woman whose dog he kills by running over it with his bicycle (eighth episode). Showing no anger, Lousse asks him to help her carry the dog home and bury it. He complies, although his sarcastic tone suggests he is quite aware of the dangers of Lousse’s benevolence: “that she found me likeable enough in spite of my hideous appearance and would be happy to hold out to me a helping hand, and so on, I’ve forgotten the half of it. Ah yes, I too needed her, it seemed” (34). But Molloy, with his customary dignity, makes “no bones about telling her I needed neither her nor anyone.” Which, he scrupulously adds, “was perhaps a slight exaggeration, for I must have needed my mother,” (34) toward whom, as it becomes clear toward the end of his monologue, he is pushed by an irresistible impulse.

At this point, Molloy inserts one of his affable commentaries about his problematic relation with language: “I always say either too much or too little, which is a terrible thing for a man with a
Naturalizing Molloy

passion for truth like mine." He again sounds like an eighteenth-century narrator, pondering the tact and transparency of his delivery: "And I shall not abandon this subject [notice the decorous tone], . . . without making this curious observation, that it often happened to me, before I gave up speaking for good, to think I had said too little when in fact I had said too much and in fact to have said too little when I thought I had said too much." The tone is classicist in the first half of the sentence, only to turn Molloyan—that is, dry and punctilious—in the second half. The modern themes: inexpressibility, the gap between intention and utterance, between subjectivity and conventions, are couched in a style that mixes conventional elegance with modernist flatness. None of Faulkner’s self-indulgent narrators display such irony and self-control.

The next few episodes, which take place at Lousse’s house, humorously narrate Molloy’s captivity. Because of his infirmity, proudly recounted, Molloy cannot help Lousse bury the dog; his uselessness leads him to considerations about his leg and his testicles, "dangling at mid-thigh," and from which "there was nothing to be squeezed" (34). After the dog’s funeral, Lousse feeds him good things—a gesture which, like the policeman’s eloquence, is lost on Molloy, for the sour visitor doesn’t "much care for good things to eat" (37). In the living room the parrot—an ugly mirror of human speech—from time to time utters "Fuck the son of a bitch!" and "Putain de merde," perhaps as an indication about Lousse’s habits of speech and the reasons for her attraction to Molloy. (Generously, he thinks that the parrot must have belonged to French and American sailors before being acquired by Lousse.)

Next morning, Molloy wakes up in a bed, naked: "They had carried their impertinence to the point of washing me, to judge by the smell I gave off, no longer gave off" (38). The room is locked. The episode, perhaps intended as a parody of Proust’s La Prisonnière, reiterates Molloy’s revulsion for civilized life. His interminable musings on various topics include an irreverent spoof on the beginning of Goethe’s Faust: "yes, I once took an interest in astronomy, I don’t deny it. Then it was geology that killed a few years for
me. The next pain in the balls was anthropology and the other disciplines, such as psychiatry . . . Oh I've tried everything. In the end it was magic that had the honour of my ruins" (39). Needless to say, Molloy inherits Faust's disgust with acquired knowledge but shares none of his enthusiasm for public works.

The clash with Lousse becomes inevitable when Molloy is told, in the next episode, that his clothes have been burned. As he takes revenge by hitting the furniture with his crutches the clothes are brought back, with only his hat's lace and the pebbles missing. Lousse attempts to keep him in the house, but Molloy does not even listen carefully. Convinced that his benefactor is slowly poisoning him, Molloy, after a long meditation on true love, leaves Lousse's house and hides in the city. To be again free, again alone on his crutches, gives Molloy a sense of rapture: "There is rapture, or there should be [ever prudent Molloy!], in the motion crutches give. It is a series of little flights skimming the ground. You take off, you land, through the thronging sound in wind and limb" (64).

Freedom and joy at the end of the second stage of Molloy's quest bring back the zany theme of the pebbles, as if the intimate contact with the mineral realm would protect Molloy from the attempts of humankind to take him prisoner. The long section on sucking stones (69–74) is the happiest of the entire monologue: it represents Molloy's peak of calm, maturity, effectiveness, and humor. Systematic reason, the episode seems to say, is at its best when taken away from human purposes and put in the service of pure futility.

Again, however, solitary happiness (this time in a cave on the seashore outside the city) cannot last: Molloy embarks on his third journey to the city. By now both his legs are paralyzed, though not in a strictly symmetrical way: "For the old pain, do you follow me, I had got used to it, in a way, yes in a kind of way. Whereas the new pain, though of the same family exactly, I had not time yet to get adjusted to it" (77). Molloy's detailed, compulsive description of his paralysis harbors no complaint. Molloy speaks about his body in an affectionate, yet detached way, as if the discomfort of pain were fully atoned for by the pleasure of being alone with one's own organism. Molloy suffers decorously, because his body, suffering
Naturalizing Molloy

included, is his only source of dignity: like Iphigenia on the altar modestly covering her body before death, Molloy wraps his head in his coat “to stifle the obscene noise of choking” (79). Under an impulse that comes from his muse (Molloy *dixit*, 79), he interprets his anus as “the true portal of our being,” as an exalting image of rebellious autonomy: “Almost everything revolts it that comes from without and what comes from within does not seem to receive a very warm welcome either” (80).

His advance gradually becomes more arduous, with the image of the Calvary in the background: “I was therefore obliged to stop more and more often, I shall never weary of repeating it, and to lie down, in defiance of the rules” (82). A brief encounter with a charcoal-burner who offers Molloy his hut to share turns sour: the ever independent Molloy hits the stranger with a crutch, leaving him for dead. In the two concluding episodes of his last sortie, Molloy crawls through the woods at a rate of barely fifteen paces a day, turning in circles, vainly trying to catch forest murmurs. At times he would prefer to stay in the forest, for “physically nothing could have been easier” (86). But Molloy turns out to be a moral creature: “I was not purely physical, I lacked something, and I would have had the feeling, if I had stayed in the forest, of going against an imperative, at least I had that impression.” The “imperatives,” only now explicitly mentioned, are the only things Molloy submits to: different from the conventional symbols he despises so much, Molloy’s imperatives come from inside, nearly all bearing “on the same question, that of my relations with my mother, and on the importance of bringing as soon as possible some light to bear on these and even on the kind of light that should be brought and the most effective means of doing so” (86).

Thus, once the resistance of the text to naturalization is overcome, Molloy’s journeys to the city turn out to be a series of attempts to break out of his loneliness and establish intelligible relations with another human being. Yet strong as the imperatives initially are, their fulfillment always falters: they soon go silent, “leaving me there like a fool who neither knows where he is going, nor why he is going there” (86–87). It is not only the rule-governed
world of policemen, social workers, and intrusive altruists that prevents Molloy from achieving his quest: his own inner impulse goes astray. With this realization, his quest comes to an end. At the ridge of the forest, unable to move forward, he detaches himself from all longing: "There seemed to be rain, then sunshine, turn about. Real spring weather. I longed to go back into the forest. Oh no real longing. Molloy could stay, where he happened to be” (91).

The plot of Molloy (part I) thus involves the hero’s quest for some form of transparent relations with his mother, a quest that ends, as it were, in failure and transfiguration. As a coda to my reading, I would like to add that the story’s rigorous spatial structure highlights the hero’s predicament. Molloy meanders through two kinds of spaces: the outdoors and the city.\(^{19}\) Freedom is to be found outdoors, in the open space, for even the woods are too crowded for Molloy. Yet Molloy cannot stay forever in the open, because his “imperatives” force him back to his quest: he must go back to his mother, in the city. But he cannot stay for a long time in the city either: his oppressors (the police) as well as his unbearable benefactors (the social worker, Lousse) subject him to various ordeals, from which he escapes only thanks to his unabashed misanthropy.

The population of characters is neatly divided into homogeneous sets of individuals who behave in similar ways.\(^{20}\) Only Molloy crosses the boundary between the city and the open spaces. The others are confined either to the city or to the open country. In the city Molloy interacts quite peacefully, if brutally, with his mother, a character who appears to be helpful from the financial point of view, but entirely insensitive otherwise. The representatives of order (the policemen) terrify Molloy, while the intrusive helpers (the social worker, Lousse) merely repel him, encouraging him to behave deviously. The open country is not free of intrusive helpers either (a group of women on the beach, the charcoal-burner), but it at least contains a few characters who pay no attention to Molloy and his troubles: the two travelers (A and C) at the beginning, and the shepherd in the third part.
The above analysis supports John Fletcher's view that Molloy displays a remarkable "firmness of structure" (Novels of Samuel Beckett 135). The monologue narrates Molloy's three journeys to his mother's house in the midst of a dangerous city and, on the way, the hero's efforts to protect himself from both oppression and intrusive help. It tells us how the hero's infirmities invariably bring him trouble from the police—an openly hostile group—as well as from aggressive well-wishers. Molloy finds peace only far from society, in loneliness and open spaces. This story embodies something of an ordeal novel and of a quest-romance. A traveler between opposite worlds, Molloy goes through severe tests and cyclic adventures. Those who want to harm him miss, and those who want to help can only harm him: Moran's failure to reach Molloy, in the second part, is in a sense the best way to find him.

Molloy's first person narrative patiently recounts the character's opposition to the world of conventions as well as his move away from and back to happiness. It reveals Molloy's variegated inner life, his failed quest, and, foremost, his self-sufficiency. The alliance between the theme of resistance to concepts and the modernist narrative technique gives new life to an old topos: the solitary hero, struggling to maintain his sense of dignity.

Notes

1. Maurice Nadeau (Combat, 1951), in Lawrence Graver and Raymond Federman, 53.
2. Georges Bataille (Critique, 1951), in Lawrence Graver and Raymond Federman, 63.
3. Wolfgang Iser, "Subjectivity as the Autogenous Cancellation of Its Own Manifestations" in Bloom.
5. I borrow the notion of placement from Jurij Striedter, Literary Structure, 166.
11. Among the critics who describe the affinity between Sartre and Beckett's struggle with subjectivity and language, see Olga Bernal, *Langage et fiction dans le roman de Beckett*, the section “Les Mots et le Je”; and Edith Kern, *Existential Thought and Fictional Technique*.
13. This category, introduced by Dorrit Cohn in chapter 6 of *Transparent Minds: Narrative Modes*, emphasizes the differences between realist first person narratives and modernist monologues.
14. John Fletcher, *Novels of Samuel Beckett*, rightly argues that “Only a superficial reading leads one to think that Molloy is a rambling monologue leading nowhere in particular; only such a reading can have given rise to the unhelpful, but often-proffered opinion that this is a stream-of-consciousness novel.” And he adds: “We blunt our terms by thus misusing them: Molloy is no more a stream-of-consciousness novel than is Mauriac's *Noeud de vipères*; in both cases we are confronted with a hard, clear, uncompromisingly honest self-description. A book needs more than a first-person narrator talking to and for himself before it can be bracketed with the last episode of *Ulysses*” (135). Presumably for Fletcher a genuine stream-of-consciousness narrative must convey the sense that the speaker's mind is invaded by unsolicited thoughts and images. In contrast with Faulkner's Quentin (in the second section of *The Sound and the Fury*), Molloy seems to control his thoughts quite well. For the expressive potential of the autonomous monologue, see Dorrit Cohn, 232 ff.
15. Accordingly, I disagree with those critics who read Beckett's *Trilogy* as a set of nonchronological texts. Charlotte Renner (“The Self-Multiplying Narrators” in Bloom) argues that “the trilogy is not only, like most multivoal fictions, nonchronological; it is in fact anti-chronological. In other words, it reverses the traditional order of artistic composition. In most fictions, the implied author is understood to be the prerequisite to the invention of narrating characters... in Beckett's trilogy, however, the 'author'... has no existence prior to inventing its mutable incarnations” (99). But since in first person narratives the existence of the implied author is, as the term “implied” indicates, only inferred from the text, it is difficult to determine whether or not it preexists the narrating characters. For a lucid analysis of Molloy's use of first person narration, see Dina Sherzer, 115–22.
16. Bernal, 44–45, compares the beginning of Molloy with that of
Naturalizing Molloy

several nineteenth- and twentieth-century novels. In a short memoir about his first meeting with Beckett, his publisher remembers the spellbinding effect of Molloy’s first sentence: Jérôme Lindon, “Première rencontre.”


18. This interest is more indicative of personal dignity than of hygiene, as Molloy rushes to make clear: “Oh I don’t say I wipe myself every time I have a stool, no, but I like to be in a position to do so, if I have to” (20). For a study of Beckett’s comic vein, see Ruby Cohn, Samuel Beckett: The Comic Gamut.

19. For the remarks on Beckettian space, I am indebted to Michael Sheringham, Beckett: Molloy, and to Ludovic Janvier, “Place of Narration/Narration of Place” in Ruby Cohn, Samuel Beckett: A Collection of Criticism.

20. In “Narrative Domains,” I argue that narratives can be divided into domains of characters who act or react together.

Bibliography


