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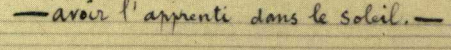
# INTERPRETATIONS

Edited and with an Introduction by HAROLD BLOOM

## Samuel Beckett's Molloy, Malone Dies, The Unnamable



*Modern Critical Interpretations*

# Samuel Beckett's
# Molloy, Malone Dies, The Unnamable

*Edited and with an introduction by*

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# Editor's Note

This book gathers together a representative selection of the best critical interpretations available of Samuel Beckett's trilogy: *Molloy, Malone Dies,* and *The Unnamable*. The critical essays are reprinted in the chronological order of their original publication. I am grateful to Kathryn Ascheim for her aid in editing this volume.

My introduction centers upon the Gnostic element in Beckett's personal vision, which is colored by Schopenhauer's related sense of our catastrophic condition. Georges Bataille, novelist and essayist of the erotic abyss, begins the chronological sequence of criticism with his early account of how *Molloy* gnaws away at existence and the world.

Equally renowned as critic and experimental novelist, Maurice Blanchot finds in the trilogy the timelessness of an endless dying. A very different critic, the Poundian Hugh Kenner gives us a valuable overview of the trilogy, emphasizing its perpetual liveliness even where it works at representing deathliness.

Leo Bersani wittily expresses the struggle of Beckett's fictive characters not to be confused with the voice of their estranged but eloquent author. This struggle is akin to the cancellation of subjectivity by subjectivity, explored by Wolfgang Iser as Beckett's mode of the self endlessly discovering the self, even as a nothingness.

Leslie Hill sees the same problematic process as one in which writing takes the place of the self, a substitution also analyzed by Charlotte Renner, who traces how the trilogy's different narrators merge into one another, and are then usurped by the Unnamable. For Roch C. Smith, this and parallel usurpations combine to make the trilogy into a deliberately failed narrative.

*Malone Dies* is read as intercalated but certainly not failed narrative by H. Porter Abbott, who recalls us to a sense of Beckett's genre, extreme as Beckett is within that convention. In this book's final essay, Edouard Morot-Sir finds the linguistic lesson of *The Unnamable* to be its discovery of the primitive energy of language in a text that neither begins nor concludes.

# Contents

# Introduction

## I

Jonathan Swift, so much the strongest ironist in the language as to have no rivals, wrote the prose masterpiece of the language in *A Tale of a Tub*. Samuel Beckett, as much the legitimate descendant of Swift as he is of his friend James Joyce, has written the prose masterpieces of the language in this century, sometimes as translations from his own French originals. Such an assertion does not discount the baroque splendors of *Ulysses* and *Finnegans Wake*, but prefers to them the purity of *Murphy* and *Watt*, and of Beckett's renderings into English of *Malone Dies, The Unnamable* and *How It Is*. Unlike Swift and Joyce, Beckett is only secondarily an ironist and, despite his brilliance at tragicomedy, is something other than a comic writer. His Cartesian dualism seems to me less fundamental than his profoundly Schopenhauerian vision. Perhaps Swift, had he read and tolerated Schopenhauer, might have turned into Beckett.

A remarkable number of the greatest novelists have found Schopenhauer more than congenial: one thinks of Turgenev, Tolstoy, Zola, Hardy, Conrad, Thomas Mann, even of Proust. As those seven novelists have in common only the activity of writing novels, we may suspect that Schopenhauer's really horrifying system helps a novelist to do his work. This is not to discount the intellectual and spiritual persuasiveness of Schopenhauer. A philosopher who so deeply affected Wagner, Nietzsche, Wittgenstein and (despite his denials) Freud, hardly can be regarded only as a convenient aid to storytellers and storytelling. Nevertheless, Schopenhauer evidently stimulated the arts of fiction; but why? Certain it is that we cannot read *The World as Will and Representation* as a work of fiction. Who could bear it as fiction? Supplementing his book, Schopenhauer characterizes the Will to live:

> Here also life presents itself by no means as a gift for enjoyment,

> but as a task, a drudgery to be performed; and in accordance with this we see, in great and small, universal need, ceaseless cares, constant pressure, endless strife, compulsory activity, with extreme exertion of all the powers of body and mind. . . . All strive, some planning, others acting; the tumult is indescribable. But the ultimate aim of it all, what is it? To sustain ephemeral and tormented individuals through a short span of time in the most fortunate case with endurable want and comparative freedom from pain, which, however, is at once attended with ennui; then the reproduction of this race and its striving. In this evident disproportion between the trouble and the reward, the will to live appears to us from this point of view, if taken objectively, as a fool, or subjectively, as a delusion, seized by which everything living works with the utmost exertion of its strength for something that is of no value. But when we consider it more closely, we shall find here also that it is rather a blind pressure, a tendency entirely without ground or motive.

Hugh Kenner suggests that Beckett reads Descartes as fiction. Beckett's fiction suggests that Beckett reads Schopenhauer as truth. Descartes as a precursor is safely distant; Joyce was much too close, and *Murphy* and even *Watt* are Joycean books. Doubtless, Beckett turned to French in *Molloy* so as to exorcise Joyce, and certainly, from *Malone Dies* on, the prose when translated back into English has ceased to be Joycean. Joyce is to Beckett as Milton was to Wordsworth. *Finnegans Wake*, like *Paradise Lost*, is a triumph demanding study; Beckett's trilogy, like *The Prelude*, internalizes the triumph by way of the compensatory imagination, in which experience and loss become one. Study does little to unriddle Beckett or Wordsworth. The Old Cumberland Beggar, Michael, Margaret of *The Ruined Cottage*; these resist analysis as do Molloy, Malone, and the Unnamable. Place my namesake, the sublime Poldy, in *Murphy* and he might fit, though he would explode the book. Place him in *Watt*? It cannot be done, and Poldy (or even Earwicker) in the trilogy would be like Milton (or Satan) perambulating about in *The Prelude*.

The fashion (largely derived from French misreaders of German thought) of denying a fixed, stable ego is a shibboleth of current criticism. But such a denial is precisely like each literary generation's assertion that it truly writes the common language rather than a poetic diction. Both stances define modernism, and modernism is as old as Hellenistic Alexandria. Callimachus is as modernist as Joyce, and Aristarchus, like Hugh Kenner, is an antiquarian modernist or modernist antiquarian. Schopenhauer dismissed the ego as an

illusion, life as torment, and the universe as nothing, and he rightly credited these insights to that great modernist, the Buddha. Beckett too is as modernist as the Buddha, or as Schopenhauer, who disputes with Hume the position of the best writer among philosophers since Plato. I laugh sometimes in reading Schopenhauer, but the laughter is defensive. Beckett provokes laughter, as Falstaff does, or in the mode of Shakespeare's clowns.

## II

In his early monograph, *Proust*, Beckett cites Schopenhauer's definition of the artistic procedure as "the contemplation of the world independently of the principle of reason." Such more-than-rational contemplation gives Proust those Ruskinian or Paterian privileged moments that are "epiphanies" in Joyce but which Beckett mordantly calls "fetishes" in Proust. Transcendental bursts of radiance necessarily are no part of Beckett's cosmos, which resembles, if anything at all, the Demiurge's creation in ancient Gnosticism. Basilides or Valentinus, Alexandrian heresiarchs, would have recognized instantly the world of the trilogy and of the major plays: *Waiting for Godot, Endgame, Krapp's Last Tape*. It is the world ruled by the Archons, the *kenoma*, non-place of emptiness. Beckett's enigmatic spirituality quests, though sporadically, for a void that is a fulness, the Abyss or *pleroma* that the Gnostics called both forefather and foremother. Call this a natural rather than a revealed Gnosticism in Beckett's case, but Gnosticism it is nevertheless. Schopenhauer's quietism is at last not Beckett's, which is to say that for Beckett, as for Blake and for the Gnostics, the Creation and the Fall were the same event.

The young Beckett, bitterly reviewing a translation of Rilke into English, memorably rejected Rilke's transcendental self-deceptions, where the poet mistook his own tropes as spiritual evidences:

> Such a turmoil of self-deception and naif discontent gains nothing in dignity from that prime article of the Rilkean faith, which provides for the interchangeability of Rilke and God. . . . He has the fidgets, a disorder which may very well give rise, as it did with Rilke on occasion, to poetry of a high order. But why call the fidgets God, Ego, Orpheus and the rest?

In 1938, the year that *Murphy* was belatedly published, Beckett declared his double impatience with the language of transcendence and with the transcendence of language, while intimating also the imminence of the swerve away from Joyce in the composition of *Watt* (1942–44):

> At first it can only be a matter of somehow finding a method

> by which we can represent this mocking attitude towards the word, through words. In this dissonance between the means and their use it will perhaps become possible to feel a whisper of that final music or that silence that underlies All.
>
> With such a program, in my opinion, the latest work of Joyce has nothing whatever to do. There it seems rather to be a matter of an apotheosis of the word. Unless perhaps Ascension to Heaven and Descent to Hell are somehow one and the same.

As a Gnostic imagination, Beckett's way is Descent, in what cannot be called a hope to liberate the sparks imprisoned in words. Hope is alien to Beckett's mature fiction, so that we can say its images are Gnostic but not its program, since it lacks all program. A Gnosticism without potential transcendence is the most negative of all possible negative stances, and doubtless accounts for the sympathetic reader's sense that every crucial work by Beckett necessarily must be his last. Yet the grand paradox is that lessness never ends in Beckett.

## III

"Nothing is got for nothing." That is the later version of Emerson's law of Compensation, in the essay "Power" of *The Conduct of Life*. Nothing is got for nothing even in Beckett, this greatest master of nothing. In the progression from *Murphy* through *Watt* and the trilogy on to *How It Is* and the briefer fictions of recent years, there is loss for the reader as well as gain. The same is true of the movement from *Godot, Endgame* and *Krapp's Last Tape* down to the short plays of Beckett's current and perhaps final phase. A wild humor abandons Beckett, or is transformed into a comedy for which we seem not to be ready. Even an uncommon reader can long for those marvelous Pythagoreans, Wylie and Neary, who are the delight of *Murphy*, or for the sense of the picturesque that makes a last stand in *Molloy*. Though the mode was Joyce's, the music of Wylie and Neary is Beckett's alone:

> "These are dark sayings," said Wylie.
>
> Neary turned his cup upside down.
>
> "Needle," he said, "as it is with the love of the body, so with the friendship of the mind, the full is only reached by admittance to the most retired places. Here are the pudenda of my psyche."
>
> "Cathleen," cried Wylie.
>
> "But betray me," said Neary, "and you go the way of Hippasos."
>
> "The Adkousmatic, I presume," said Wylie. "His retribution slips my mind."

"Drowned in a puddle," said Neary, "for having divulged the incommensurability of side and diagonal."

"So perish all babblers," said Wylie. . . .

"Do not quibble," said Neary harshly. "You saved my life. Now palliate it."

"I greatly fear," said Wylie, "that the syndrome known as life is too diffuse to admit of palliation. For every symptom that is eased, another is made worse. The horse leech's daughter is a closed system. Her quantum of wantum cannot vary."

"Very prettily put," said Neary.

One can be forgiven for missing this, even as one surrenders these easier pleasures for the more difficult pleasures of *How It Is*:

> my life above what I did in my life above a little of everything tried everything then gave up no worse always a hole a ruin always a crust never any good at anything not made for that farrago too complicated crawl about in corners and sleep all I wanted I got it nothing left but go to heaven

The Sublime mode, according to a great theorist, Angus Fletcher, has "the direct and serious function of destroying the slavery of pleasure." Beckett is certainly the strongest Western author living in the year 1987, the last survivor of the sequence that includes Proust, Kafka and Joyce. It seems odd to name Beckett, most astonishing of minimalists, as a representative of the Sublime mode, but the isolation and terror of the High Sublime return in the catastrophe creations of Beckett, in that vision Fletcher calls "catastrophe as a gradual grinding down and slowing to a dead stop." A Sublime that moves towards silence necessarily relies upon a rhetoric of waning lyricism, in which the entire scale of effects is transformed, as John Hollander notes:

> Sentences, phrases, images even, are the veritable arias in the plays and the later fiction. The magnificent rising of the kite at the end of *Murphy* occurs in a guarded but positive surge of ceremonial song, to which he will never return.

Kafka's Hunter Gracchus, who had been glad to live and was glad to die, tells us that "I slipped into my winding sheet like a girl into her marriage dress. I lay and waited. Then came the mishap." The mishap, a moment's error on the part of the death-ship's pilot, moves Gracchus from the heroic world of romance to the world of Kafka and of Beckett, where one is neither alive nor dead. It is Beckett's peculiar triumph that he disputes

with Kafka the dark eminence of being the Dante of that world. Only Kafka, or Beckett, could have written the sentence in which Gracchus sums up the dreadfulness of his condition: "The thought of helping me is an illness that has to be cured by taking to one's bed." Murphy might have said that; Malone is beyond saying anything so merely expressionistic. The "beyond" is where Beckett's later fictions and plays reside. Call it the silence, or the abyss, or the reality beyond the pleasure principle, or the metaphysical or spiritual reality of our existence at last exposed, beyond further illusion. Beckett cannot or will not name it, but he has worked through to the art of representing it more persuasively than anyone else.

## IV

"Dante and the Lobster," written in 1932, is the first story in Beckett's collection, *More Pricks Than Kicks* (1934). Its first paragraph is a true starting-point for Beckett's achievement in prose fiction, of which the crown is the trilogy: *Molloy, Malone Meurt,* and *L'Innommable*, all written from 1946 to 1950, and published 1951–53. Belacqua's epiphany, in his story's initial paragraph, is achieved as much against Dante as through him:

> It was morning and Belacqua was stuck in the first of the canti in the moon. He was so bogged that he could move neither backward nor forward. Blissful Beatrice was there, Dante also, and she explained the spots on the moon to him. She shewed him in the first place where he was at fault, then she put up her own explanation. She had it from God, therefore he could rely on its being accurate in every particular. All he had to do was to follow her step by step. Part one, the refutation, was plain sailing. She made her point clearly, she said what she had to say without fuss or loss of time. But part two, the demonstration, was so dense that Belacqua could not make head or tail of it. The disproof, the reproof, that was patent. But then came the proof, a rapid shorthand of the real facts, and Belacqua was bogged indeed. Bored also, impatient to get on to Piccarda. Still he pored over the enigma, he would not concede himself conquered, he would understand at least the meanings of the words, the order in which they were spoken and the nature of the satisfaction that they conferred on the misinformed poet, so that when they were ended he was refreshed and could raise his heavy head, intending to return thanks and make formal retraction of his old opinion.

Belacqua, in Dante, is a long way from Beatrice, being one of the indolent who rest in the shade of a great boulder, in Canto IV of the *Purgatorio*. In Beckett's favorite posture, Belacqua "sat clasping his knees and holding his face low down between them." Dante, recognizing an old acquaintance, is charmed into a smile and asks Belacqua why he remains seated. The reply is Beckett's credo, or a central part of it.

> O brother, why go up, since God's angel who sits in the gateway would not let me pass on to the sufferings? First the heavens must wheel about me, while I wait outside, as long as they did in my lifetime, because until the very end I postponed any good sighs. Unless I am aided first by prayer rising from a heart living in grace, since other prayers are not heard in Heaven.

Belacqua is Beckett, but not yet a Gnostic Beckett, who is to come as Molloy, Malone, and the Unnamable. Eventually Belacqua will get up the mountain, whereas Molloy and the others will not, since they know nothing of Purgatory. Beckett's trilogy, like *Waiting for Godot*, takes place in the *kenoma*, an emptied-out cosmos, where Molloy survives by means of his sucking-stones:

> But don't imagine my region ended at the coast, that would be a grave mistake. For it was this sea too, its reefs and distant islands, and its hidden depths. And I too once went forth on it, in a sort of oarless skiff, but I paddled with an old bit of driftwood. And I sometimes wonder if I ever came back, from that voyage. For if I see myself putting to sea, and the long hours without landfall, I do not see the return, the tossing on the breakers, and I do not hear the frail keel grating on the shore. I took advantage of being at the seaside to lay in a store of sucking-stones. They were pebbles but I call them stones. Yes, on this occasion I laid in a considerable store. I distributed them equally among my four pockets, and sucked them turn and turn about. This raised a problem which I first solved in the following way. I had say sixteen stones, four in each of my four pockets these being the two pockets of my trousers and the two pockets of my greatcoat. Taking a stone from the right pocket of my greatcoat, and putting it in my mouth, I replaced it in the right pocket of my greatcoat by a stone from the right pocket of my trousers, which I replaced by a stone from the left pocket of my trousers, which I replaced by a stone from the left pocket of my greatcoat, which I re-

placed by the stone which was in my mouth, as soon as I had finished sucking it. Thus there were still four stones in each of my four pockets, but not quite the same stones. And when the desire to suck took hold of me again, I drew again on the right pocket of my greatcoat, certain of not taking the same stone as the last time. And while I sucked it I rearranged the other stones in the way I have just described. And so on. But this solution did not satisfy me fully. For it did not escape me that, by an extraordinary hazard, the four stones circulating thus might always be the same four. In which case, far from sucking the sixteen stones turn and turn about, I was really only sucking four, always the same, turn and turn about. But I shuffled them well in my pockets, before I began to suck, and again, while I sucked, before transferring them, in the hope of obtaining a more general circulation of the stones from pocket to pocket. But this was only a makeshift that could not long content a man like me. So I began to look for something else. And the first thing I hit upon was that I might do better to transfer the stones four by four, instead of one by one, that is to say, during the sucking, to take the three stones remaining in the right pocket of my greatcoat and replace them by the four in the right pocket of my trousers, and these by the four in the left pocket of my trousers, and these by the four in the left pocket of my greatcoat, and finally these by the three from the right pocket of my greatcoat, plus the one, as soon as I had finished sucking it, which was in my mouth. Yes, it seemed to me at first that by so doing I would arrive at a better result. But on further reflection I had to change my mind and confess that the circulation of the stones four by four came to exactly the same thing as their circulation one by one. For if I was certain of finding each time, in the right pocket of my greatcoat, four stones totally different from their immediate predecessors, the possibility nevertheless remained of my always chancing on the same stone, within each group of four, and consequently of my sucking, not the sixteen turn and turn about as I wished, but in fact four only, always the same, turn and turn about. So I had to seek elsewhere than in the mode of circulation. For no matter how I caused the stones to circulate, I always ran the same risk. It was obvious that by increasing the number of my pockets I was bound to increase my chances of enjoying my stones in the way I planned, that is to say one after the other until their number was exhausted. Had I had eight pockets, for example, instead of the four I did

> have, then even the most diabolical hazard could not have prevented me from sucking at least eight of my sixteen stones, turn and turn about. The truth is I should have needed sixteen pockets in order to be quite easy in my mind.

These stones presumably could not be turned into bread by Christ, since the Gnostic Christ never became flesh, and so dwelt among us only as a phantom. But that is how all of us dwell upon earth in the trilogy; there has been a *kenosis* of the ego, and the sucking-stones afford all the communion we could hope to sustain. The word "trim" sings within us like a verse of the prophets because the principle of trimming gets us beyond the impossible necessity of having sixteen pockets. Like Molloy, we can divide our sucking-stones into four groups of four each, or follow any other private ritual as Gnostic trimmers. What we cannot do is represent either ourselves or anyone else, no matter how negative the representation. Molloy, like Murphy, is still a version of Beckett, however attenuated, yet this is not a version of a consciousness, but only of a writer obsessed with the blind activity of writing. And since Moran, the quester for Molloy, in some sense writes him, we are confronted by an art that forgoes mimesis not for an antimimesis, but for a super-mimesis, in which every figure is written by another figure who is written by another endlessly in a vertigo of Gnostic (rather than Heideggerian) *thrown-ness*. All references, as Wolfgang Iser remarked, are exposed as pragmatic fictions.

Hugh Kenner, subtly baptizing Beckett's imagination, reads the trilogy as an implicit judgment upon the Cartesian dehumanization of man. Beckett seems to me far more archaic than that, as archaic as Schopenhauer. The protagonists of the trilogy are not ghosts inhabiting machines, but sparks of light uneasily flickering inside ghosts. Dehumanization, as part of Beckett's given, has nothing to do with the Enlightenment, and everything to do with a far more aboriginal catastrophe, a creation-fall brought about by a blundering Demiurge. Molloy's sucking-stones are the Gnostic version of the great Western literary trope or fiction of the leaves, perhaps by an association of stones to loaves to leaves, since Malone has pockets full of pebbles that "stand for men and their seasons." You can write an "Ode to the West Wind" or a lyric meditation like Stevens's "The Course of a Particular" in an extension of the fiction of the leaves, but what can you do with the trope of the sucking-stones? Virgil's dead souls, fluttering like leaves, stretch forth their hands out of love for the farther shore. Stones do not stretch, and few passages in modern literature frighten me as much as the conclusion of *Malone Dies*, where I would prefer Charon as boatman to Beckett's uncanny Lemuel:

> Finally she moved away again, followed by Ernest carrying the

hamper in his arms. When she had disappeared Lemuel released Macmann, went up behind Maurice who was sitting on a stone filling his pipe and killed him with the hatchet. We're getting on, getting on. The youth and the giant took no notice. The thin one broke his umbrella against the rock, a curious gesture. The Saxon cried, bending forward and slapping his thighs, Nice work, sir, nice work! A little later Ernest came back to fetch them. Going to meet him Lemuel killed him in his turn, in the same way as the other. It merely took a little longer. Two decent, quiet, harmless men, brothers-in-law into the bargain, there are billions of such brutes. Macmann's huge head. He has put his hat on again. The voice of Lady Pedal, calling. She appeared, joyous. Come along, she cried, all of you, before the tea gets cold. But at the sight of the late sailors she fainted, which caused her to fall. Smash her! screamed the Saxon. She had raised her veil and was holding in her hand a tiny sandwich. She must have broken something in her fall, her hip perhaps, old ladies often break their hips, for no sooner had she recovered her senses than she began to moan and groan, as if she were the only being on the face of the earth deserving of pity. When the sun had vanished, behind the hills, and the lights of the land began to glitter, Lemuel made Macmann and the two others get into the boat and got into it himself. Then they set out, all six, from the shore.

Gurgles of outflow.

This tangle of grey bodies is they. Silent, dim, perhaps clinging to one another, their heads buried in their cloaks, they lie together in a heap, in the night. They are far out in the bay. Lemuel has shipped his oars, the oars trail in the water. The night is strewn with absurd

absurd lights, the stars, the beacons, the buoys, the lights of earth and in the hills the faint fires of the blazing gorse. Macmann, my last, my possessions, I remember, he is there too, perhaps he sleeps. Lemuel

Lemuel is in charge, he raises his hatchet on which the blood will never dry, but not to hit anyone, he will not hit anyone, he will not hit anyone any more, he will not touch anyone any more, either with it or with it or with it or with or

or with it or with his hammer or with his stick or with his flat or in thought in dream I mean never he will never

or with his pencil or with his stick or

or light light I mean

never there he will never

never anything

there

any more

Lemuel, like all the violent in Beckett, is what the Gnostics called an Archon, one of the rulers of the darkness of this life. The Unnamable is the final dissenter in the *kenoma* of the Archons, changing all that is left of the spark's desire to go on illuminating a darkness as much the soul's as the body's:

> or it's the murmurs, the murmurs are coming, I know that well, no, not even that, you talk of murmurs, distant cries, as long as you can talk, you talk of them before and you talk of them after, more lies, it will be the silence, the one that doesn't last, spent listening, spent waiting, for it to be broken, for the voice to break it, perhaps there's no other, I don't know, it's not worth having, that's all I know, it's not I, that's all I know, it's not mine, it's the only one I ever had, that's a lie, I must have had the other, the one that lasts, but it didn't last, I don't understand, that is to say it did, it still lasts, I'm still in it, I left myself behind in it, I'm waiting for me there, no, there you don't wait, you don't listen, I don't know, perhaps it's a dream, all a dream, that would surprise me, I'll wake, in the silence, and never sleep again, it will be I, or dream, dream again, dream of a silence, a dream silence, full of murmurs, I don't know, that's all words, never wake, all words, there's nothing else, you must go on, that's all I know, they're going to stop, I know that well, I can feel it, they're going to abandon me, it will be the silence, for a moment, a good few moments, or it will be mine, the lasting one, that didn't last, that still lasts, it will be I, you must go on, I can't go on, you must go on, I'll go on, you must say words, as long as there are any, until they find me, until they say me,