

The International Journal for Field-Being

Buddhist Motives in the Prose of Samuel Beckett

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IJFB, Vol. 1(1), Part 2, Article No. 6, 2001.

Citation URL: <http://www.iifb.org/ijfb/AShansky-2-6>

¶1. Beckett's novels are not novels in the usual sense of the word. They do not speak of human experience, rather about the experience of being human. They do not contain aesthetic satisfaction, well-developed characterization, plot, or literary refinement. They appear to pursue what seems to be nothing in particular with the intensity of a madman. Exasperation usually follow the reader, and the novels are often dismissed as absurd. This term has been frequently employed in the past by critics, either in denunciation or to describe a form of literary entertainment. In truth there is nothing absurd about Beckett, and his work is not simple entertainment. These elements of absurdity and entertainment, found in his work, are in fact a guise for the expression of the deepest spiritual anguish. This anguish reveals problems of an ontological nature which expose the depth of Beckett's feeling. These feelings in Beckett's work are based on observations generally described as "religious". They are observations on the nature of existence and the suffering associated with it. They concern the meaning of existence and whether there is a God that can lend significance to life. It is here that Buddhism as a tool to interpretation can be of considerable help. Buddhism contains something of both religion and philosophy yet remains essentially a means of liberation from just those spiritual knots that Beckettian characters find themselves in and from the distress that such entanglement brings.

¶2. This paper will deal with five of Beckett's novels as follows:

Part I: The Transitory Novels (*Murphy* and *Watt*)

Part II: The Trilogy (*Molloy*, *Malone Dies* and the *Unnamable*)

Part I: The Transitory Novels

- ¶3. First let us explore Buddhism. What is Buddhism? It is neither a religion nor a philosophy. It is a path of liberation. It is liberation from precisely those dilemmas from which Beckett's characters suffer. Buddhism is a tool, a means to an end. Buddhist methods are applicable to all human beings and to the spiritual situation in which they find themselves. Buddhism maintains that the experience of life for all is one that is involved in suffering (*Dukkha*)
- ¶4. The situation of suffering and dissatisfaction is brought about by desire. It can be described as a thirst (*Tanha*). The basic motivation in all human beings is seeking satisfaction. But this thirst for satisfaction, Buddhism claims, is misdirected. It fastens upon the wrong objects for relief, wrong because they are misguided. They are misguided since in the end they do not bring the lasting satisfaction that the mind craves. Moreover, they are frequently injurious. Knowing this but not being able to find a way out or to find peace of mind results in frustration, a dilemma resulting from our ignorance (*Avidya*).
- ¶5. Buddhism maintains that these situations are demonstrable wherever human beings are to be found. They comprise the first two of the Four Noble Truths^[1], which are the basis of Buddhist teaching. The Third Truth is often posed as a question: Recognizing the first two to be true, can we do anything to change the situation? In extended commentaries on the Third Truth, the contents of the First Truth (*Dukkha*) and the Second Truth (Cause of *Dukka* = *Tanha*) are thoroughly treated so that one naturally asks: If this is so, what hope is there for us? The answer Buddhism gives is: yes, there is hope. An escape from the dilemma is achieved by abandoning desire.
- ¶6. The first three truths are directed to those desirous of obtaining liberation from the state of *Dukkha* and are concerned, respectively, with a correct understanding of the situation in which we as human beings find ourselves. The Fourth Noble Truth is concerned with the ethical prerequisites to liberation and with the means, both mental and spiritual, whereby this may be achieved.^[2]

- ¶7. In this essay, I shall be concerned primarily with showing how the first two truths are relevant to the Beckettian impasse. I shall touch upon the third truth, from time to time, while the fourth will be mentioned only occasionally as a point of reference. Buddhism is relevant to our discussion, it is neither philosophy nor religion exclusively, nor psychology, yet it embraces them all. It is free from dogma, since it does not have a code of divinely inspired rules to explain the circumstances of our existence, and it is not divided into mutually exclusive schools of thought. Lastly, individual development is possible since Buddhism is a path and not a system.
- ¶8. Buddhism would hold that the "Discovery of the Self" is and always has been the most crucial aspect of life. This is why the ancient Buddhists used every occasion in life to "Wake Up" the aspirants with whom they came in contact. To "Wake Up" means to become aware of the mind built dream, which in our ignorance we believe is real; to see, suddenly, that this is not the case is to be at once enlightened. To deepen this enlightenment is the Buddhist life. This, one is told in the monastery, is where true religious life begins. For with the deepening of enlightenment comes understanding, and with understanding comes compassion. All that is required of us is that we see with an inward eye what this means for ourselves. But Beckett's heroes have no such inkling; they struggle on in a veritable hell of not knowing. A simple Zen aphorism sums up the situation:

"The eye sees but cannot see itself
The sword cuts but cannot cut itself".

Beckett's first novel, *Murphy* (1938), should be briefly discussed because it contains elements which are elaborated in Beckett's later work. *Murphy* is also interesting as a point of reference in showing how different the later work is from Beckett's earlier writings. In any discussion of Beckett, this metamorphosis, approximating to the interval occupied by the Second World War, is abrupt and spectacular. The prewar novel, with its linguistic furbelows, arcane references, and scholastic flourish together with its effervescent academic banter and its amused, aloof, third-person story-teller never found expression again after 1938. Perhaps Beckett felt that Joyce's manner was a borrowed mantle, a most sincere compliment to his friend and countryman but not true to himself. *Murphy*, then can be regarded in the main as experimental, the expression of a Beckett who has not yet found his true metier.

- ¶9. *Murphy* is concerned with impotence of a kind, or at least with worldly disinclination. The main character is lazy and shiftless. The novel could be seen as representing two camps, that of worldliness, "The big, blooming, buzzing confusion"[\[3\]](#) portrayed by the interaction of Wylie, Neary, Cooper, Miss Counihan, and the rest, and the other of *Murphy* himself, withdrawn and unworldly, while Celia acts as a neutral between the two. All the characters of the first camp, including Celia, desire a closer communion with *Murphy*, but *Murphy* himself wishes to be free of them all. Finally, he does manage to escape by taking employment in a mental hospital. Even here he shuts himself off from the company of his fellow-warders by arranging for an attic to be at his disposal and reached only by a ladder, which he is able to draw up after him. The novel has the form of a quest, that of those seeking *Murphy* and that of *Murphy* seeking inner peace. We can see, too, Beckett's preoccupation with mental processes in his description of *Murphy's* mind, for example, and in his interest in the insane. In *Murphy*, Beckett's "imperative" is that which succeeds always in deflecting *Murphy* away from attaining bliss in a semi-permanent state of deep introspection.
- ¶10. The problem of time is also posed in this way. *Murphy* desires to be rid of its demands by retreating into himself but is always brought back to the world of time (and therefore change) by the interruptions of others. Time, described in *Murphy* as an "old fornicator", is ridiculed in its remorseless re-enactment of celestial movements: "The encounter, on which so much hinges, took place on Friday, October 11th . . . The moon being full again, but not nearly so near the earth as when last in opposition".[\[4\]](#) There are similar references throughout the book to the "sun in the virgin" and "the sun shone, having no alternative, on the nothing new". This is the opening sentence of the novel. Such references and those dealing with *Murphy's* concern with astrology are scattered throughout the book. They form a subsidiary theme closely interwoven with *Murphy's* convictions. Indirectly implied is the implacability of time, its role in the world, as Beckett sees it, which cannot be transcended.
- ¶11. The hopelessness of the sentient, thinking being, trapped in samsara, is already foreshadowed in the much-quoted observation.

- ¶12. So all things hobble together for the only possible.^[5] In connection with this and because of this, there is the suggestion of the theme to be developed later, that it is better not to have been born:

"Never fear, sergeant", he said, urging Neary towards the exit,
"Back to the cell, blood heat, next best thing to never being born..."^[6]

Transcendence of life's predicament, which is unsuccessfully attempted by *Murphy*, is asserted as impossible by Neary. He says:

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.^[7]

Neary is the most prominent example in the book of a person enslaved by attachments. This suggests that the book could have been written from a Buddhist's point of view; since it is attachment that imprisons one in the temporal world and binds one to constant activity.

- ¶13. In that strange, almost, frightening scene where the intrigued *Murphy* bends over the comatized Mr. Endon and looks into the schizophrenic's eyes, he sees nothing but a reflection of himself. Apart from the fact that *Murphy's* death is adumbrated in this short scene, what was it that *Murphy* wanted to see in the patient's doll-like eyes? Was it that he wanted to find confirmation of himself by seeing himself, perhaps hinted that in the use of the Latin *Percipere* and *Percipi*^[8], a page before this incident? The matter is difficult to determine since Beckett uses the word "sorrow" in the quotation just alluded to and yet, a moment later, describes *Murphy* as "incandescent" compared with the cold, grey winter's morning. In making his way to the male nurse's home, he casts off his clothes, lies in the grass a moment trying to recollect himself, gives up, and hastens to his garret where he ties himself to the chair. He then enters into his customary meditation, his object being to attain freedom. But he dies in the attempt by inadvertently gassing himself.

- ¶14. In later 1940, Beckett began working for the French Resistance. He narrowly escaped from the Gestapo, fleeing from Paris by train and on foot. He then proceeded south to the unoccupied zone, and stayed in a dilapidated hotel with other refugees from Nazi persecution. Beckett's state of mind at this time is important to a fuller understanding of the novel *Watt* (1953), which he now began to write. Apart from the fact that *Watt* contains a great deal of autobiographical detail, it also reflects a state of mind. The geographical and psychological isolation, the absence of his friends together with the uncertainty of their whereabouts or even existence, the uncertain outcome of the war, and its abrupt termination of his career as a writer all combined to produce feelings of acute frustration and desperation. There is an undeniable element of madness in *Watt*. *Watt* is the story of someone who goes to work for another, whose identity is unclear and whose habits are mysterious. He is not the first to have worked as a servant to the enigmatic Mr. Knott. *Watt* leaves Knott's service in disappointment but not before having met a friend, Sam, who later becomes the narrator and reports *Watt's* thoughts. Both end up in what is probably a mental hospital where the narration continues. The title, *Watt*, is indicative, as is frequently the case in Beckett's work. it asks: What? What is the nature of existence?
- ¶15. The novel begins with an unusual prologue before embarking on the details of *Watt's* quest for knowledge. It appears to have nothing to do with the subsequent events and soliloquies. it involves one, Hackett, a hunchback, in a dilemma. When he is out for a walk, someone occupies his favorite seat. He does not know whether to return or stay. He looks at the occupants and finds that they are lovers. After calling a policeman and complaining of the couple's indecent behavior, Hackett claims his seat and settles to look at the trams of the evening. After a time, he is joined by a man and a woman, who talk in a manner reminiscent of well-bred English people. The figure of *Watt* appears, ejected from the tram after an altercation with the conductor, ostensibly for not paying his fare. Mr. And Mrs. Nixon, the lady and the gentleman referred to above, are about to take their leave. On seeing *Watt*, Mrs. Nixon remarks that she can not tell whether the figure is that of a man or of a woman. Hackett thinks it might be a parcel or a roll of carpet.
- ¶16. From this point onwards, the novel changes its course. Mr. Nixon crosses the street and argues with the figure over a small sum of money that is owed to him. When Nixon returns, Mr. Hackett inquires twice after *Watt's* name. Neither Hackett nor Mrs. Nixon has heard of *Watt*. We may ask ourselves what relationship there could be between Beckett's anthropomorph, *Watt*, and these two, Hackett and Nixon. In the story there is no structural relationship since the last two do not appear again. What in short, is the meaning of this prologue? We can recognize the humanity of the three characters of this introductory quartet, viz, Mr. And Mrs. Nixon, and Hackett. The figure of *Watt*, however, is little more than a strange presence. The kernel of the issue under consideration is whether *Watt* is human. Certainly he is not quite as human as the characters that first appear in the novel. Beckett makes this clear. To all appearances, *Watt* is a human being. Most of what we are told about him as a human

being in the first twelve pages, from his arrival at the station to his entry into Mr. Knott's house, is reasonably plausible although strange. Thereafter, he suffers attrition, and we know him in mind only. *Watt* arrives at Mr. Knott's house where he encounters difficulties in getting in. *Watt* gives all the possibilities of this situation. When all the permutations are exhausted, the truth must lie in one of them. Beckett wants the reader to experience directly the problem of knowledge and also the impotence experienced at not being able to choose the correct possibility. Implicit in *Watt* is that there must be another kind of mind than that which the word normally encompasses. Although another kind of mind might be implied, it is always negated or we are simply diverted from its serious contemplation. Beckett's humor distracts us from *Watt's* agony of not being able to know. We should, at this point, review the points already alluded to: First, *Watt* is the account of a man on a spiritual quest. Second, this quest is concerned with a search for fundamentals as, for example, a clarification of the act of knowing. Third, the knowledge so far available on these matter, i.e. Cartesianism and the dicta of traditional religion, are of no help in providing an acceptable solution to the author.

- ¶17. We can see that instead of facing up to the problem directly and inquiring further into the what, our *Watt* retreats again to the position of self-affirmation and takes his dilemma with him. He cannot live comfortable with his realization. He does not see that it is mind giving rise to objects, including his idea of himself, because he cannot think mind. Here, one is reminded of an interview with Huang-Po[9], in which a monk earnestly inquires about the means to attain understanding of that which cannot be named. Part of the interview is represented below:

Q: What is the Way[10]and how must it be followed?

A: What sort of thing do you suppose the Way to be, that you should wish to follow it?

Here the monk is a little put off but rallies to:

Q: What instructions have the masters everywhere given for Dhyana, practice [11]and the study of the Dharma?

A: Words used to attract the dull of wit are not to be relied on.

Q: If those teachings were meant for the dull-witted, I have yet to hear what Dharma has been taught to those of really high capacity.

A: Do not look to what is called the Dharma by preachers, for what sort of Dharma could that be?

The master is attempting to get the monk off the hook of both attempting to seek for

something and hoping to find something. Huang-Po wants the monk to dismiss all such concepts and their associated objects. At this point, there is clearly a dead lock. The monk counters, perhaps more out of despair at not finding satisfaction than from a need to justify himself:

Q: If that is so, should we not seek for anything at all?

A: By conceding this, you would save yourself a lot of mental effort.

For the first time in the interview, the monk has said the right thing, but he cannot acquiesce to it entirely. By simply "doing nothing", he feels that nothing can be "attained". In samsaric existence, such an attitude is valid; the monk forgets (or cannot yet realize) that the nirvanic view cannot be grasped; what he is dealing with here is not an object and does not belong to the world of objective values. Thus, he is using the wrong tool for the job, so to speak. Desperately, he proceeds:

Q: But in this way everything would be eliminated. There cannot just be nothing.

A: Who called it nothing? Who was this fellow? But you wanted to seek for something.[\[12\]](#)

Yes, *Watt* could not accept ... that nothing had happened with all the clarity and solidity of something. If he had been able to accept it, it would not have revisited him, and this would have been a great saving of vexation, to put it mildly. But he could not accept it, could not bear it.[\[13\]](#) *Watt's* conduct and utterance is a philosophy that accords exactly with that of the Buddhist. The difference between the two is that where the one ends in brilliant but brick-wall theory, the other finds a way over the wall in practice. Where the one, like *Watt*, screams in an impasse of despair, the other initiates a revolution of mind that transcends both self and impasse.

Part II: The Trilogy

- ¶18. Beckett began writing *Molloy* (1951) in September 1947 and finished it in the following January. "After absorbing much knowledge, Beckett became aware that one can know too much to know that one must return to the innocence of stupidity in order to have feeling."[\[14\]](#)

- ¶19. This would certainly seem to be supported by the phenomenon of progressive reduction that occurs in the Trilogy, from *Molloy's* difficulty in walking to Malone's supine state and finally to the total immobilization of the Unnamable, who is stuck in his jar.
- ¶20. In style, *Molloy* is altogether freer than that of the transition piece, *Watt*. It is written in the first person, without paragraphs, homogenous in both its parts, free of intractable number, save for the short sucking -stone meditation, and of the constipating, self-communing cerebration of the earlier work. Both selections of *Molloy/Moran* involve a man on a quest. Both contain elements that are autobiographical. As in *Watt*, the landscape is that of Ireland. Outwardly, the scene is one of utmost peace and natural beauty. Inwardly, there is the human heart to contend with: the village may contain a man like *Moran*, an agent who is paid to spy on other men, a brittle, lipserving martinet, and a book-keeper. This inharmonious relationship between nature and the restless human heart must have often occurred to Beckett during the long walks he took with his father and brother when he was a boy.^[15] Now and again it finds expression as poetic utterance in *Molloy*. This play of thought and feeling, this inner activity, is the substance and expression of Beckett's writing, now brought to full declaration in *Molloy* and the works that follow. Underlying the inner activity is a condition of restlessness, one known to Buddhism as *Uddhacca* in Sanskrit. It precedes expression of any other kind. It is allied to the thirst for satisfaction (*Tanha*). In Beckett's work, the restlessness expresses itself in search, which is not outwardly directed as is usually the case but inwardly. An inward search is generally the mark of someone who is dissatisfied with the fruits of outward seeking. This dissatisfaction is reflected in several places throughout *Molloy* and also in subsequent works.^[16] Into this landscape, the outer and the inner, steps *Molloy*, the seeker. We meet him first in "my mother's room", to which he has returned after the adventures of succeeding pages. After a little light banter, which sets the tone of the novel, its key so to speak, the narration passes insensibly into a scene of observation from afar of two persons, A and C, who are walking towards each other and are at some distance from one another. After a little while they meet, exchange the time of day and pass on in opposite directions. The one, uncertain of the way, moves on hesitantly, accompanied by his Pomeranian dog. The observer, *Molloy* himself, hesitates to run after the walker and rehearses in his mind the possible disadvantage of such an attempt to introduce himself. In this way the reader is introduced to *Molloy*, and immediately after to *Molloy's* problem. *Molloy* stays where he is but continues to reflect on the figure. Attention now centers on *Molloy* himself. He hints at his impending journey, which is to his mother, whom he now describes in revolting detail. The whole interview is hideous and pitiful, laced throughout with outrageous, deliberate indifference. Herein, Beckett acknowledges aspects of existence that are not normally spoken of in polite society or even among normal, civilized human beings. One fact of existence is aging. Old age and impending death, often entailing weakness and dysfunction, ugliness and mental disorientation, are matters that we instinctively put away from ourselves. This relegation is also ego-

confirmation. Buddhism draws our attention to the dangers inherent in such ostrich-like behavior if we are serious about acquiring the liberating view of enlightenment. It asks in its three warnings:

1. You are also subject to decay and cannot escape it.
2. You are also subject to disease and cannot escape it.
3. You are also subject to death and cannot escape it.

Beckett draws our attention to the breeding and systematic killing of animals, which in the Buddhist canon, is immoral. "Thou shalt not kill" is to be applied literally to all creatures. It is the first of the Five Precepts.[\[17\]](#)

- ¶21. In both *Molloy* and *Moran*, the slaughter-house and butchery are mentioned without demur. The tendency then, is to call the name of God into disrepute. How could a loving Creator bring all this hateful mess together in the world? The Buddhist answer to this is that he who complains is looking in the wrong direction. The fault lies in the nature of humans not in the world of phenomena nor with God. A small adjustment in the way of looking at things especially at oneself, or, as Huang-Po puts it, "A Hair's breadth and Heaven and Earth are set apart," is sufficient to clear away the dilemma. For Beckett, the only solution is, "To let the mess in," by which we assume he means to look at it squarely and not be deceived. This, again, is a Buddhist attitude, preliminary to entering into the deeper aspects of its philosophy.
- ¶22. *Molloy* sets off on his journey, which he says, to find his mother. Rather, it is a psychological undertaking, a quest in search of his own identity. To a policeman and at a police station he cannot prove his identity. This demonstrates that *Molloy*, although he exists, cannot prove his identity officially. Officially, he does not exist. The question the Buddhist now puts forward is: Is that all we are? Buddhism has a method of systematic analysis which begins with the contemplation of the body. In its simplest terms, it asks: Is this body me? Analyzed, the body is then divided into its component parts (*Rupa-Skandha*) and a demonstration follows that this body is not me. There remains the fact of consciousness and the mental faculties allied to the body. After dealing with feeling (*Vedana-Skandha*), perception (*Sanna-Skandha*), and mental formations or volition (*Sankhara-Skandha*), consciousness itself (*Vinana-Skandha*) is considered. The arising of consciousness is dependent on conditions. The same applies to the consciousness of smell, taste, touch, and hearing. The whole is termed the Dependent Origination of Consciousness. The conclusion to its reasoning is that a self is not to be found in any of the individual aspects of consciousness.[\[18\]](#)

¶23. If *Molloy* is to a large extent a "Holy Fool", *Moran* is his worldly counterpart. To give an indication of his character, Beckett makes great use of the short sentence, a device that characterizes the entire section. The result is to convey the impression of general nervous irritability and uncertainty. We learn that this man has a son whom he brings up with an iron hand. In this respect he is a veritable "Moron" without the slightest understanding for the boy: a loveless figure-head and petty tyrant, whose small-minded repression earns him what he deserves, desertion in time of need. The novel begins its preoccupation with *Moran's* quest to find *Molloy*. One of *Moran's* principal characteristics is his suspicious nature. *Molloy*, we will recall, is devoid of this characteristic. *Moran* wants to be sure of everything. By suspecting everything that comes within his purview, he can at least be sure of some things. As *Molloy* is unworldly and uncaring, *Moran* is narrow and discriminating. "I don't like men and I don't like animals. As for God, he is beginning to disgust me." [19] *Moran* takes pleasure in humiliating both his son and his cook not, perhaps, from motives of sheer sadistic pleasure but because it gives him temporary, pleasurable experience in projecting his ego, and, at the same time, his existence as a force in the world. In his *Essays in Zen Buddhism*, D.T. Suzuki says of the assertive state of mind of which *Moran* is typical: while a man is attached to individualism, asserting it consciously or unconsciously, he always has a feeling of oppression which he may interpret as sin; and while the mind is possessed by it, there is no room for the "other power" (the unconscious) to enter and work. The way is effectively barred. At this point the transformation begins whereby *Moran* is coalesced with *Molloy*. Twelve and a half pages follow with further arrangements for the journey and further confrontations with the other two inhabitants of the house. *Moran* sets off at last. While on the journey he is kicked in the knee by a horse. He can no longer walk. He sends his son to get a bicycle in the town of Hole. While he waits for his son to return he sees the figure of a man with a stick. *Moran* offers him a piece of bread that he was keeping for his son. The stranger puts the bread in his pocket. Now *Moran* realizes that his son will go hungry. He asks if he might look at the stick that the stranger is carrying. He receives no reply. Placing his hand under the stranger's, he takes the stick gently. Soon the stranger goes, leaving him alone to his own thoughts. *Moran* pores over his condition, "...on me so changes from what I was. And I seemed to see myself aging as swiftly as the day-fly." [20] The stranger disappears with swift steps, his course uncertain and wayward, reminding one of the opening of the novel where A and C are seen from a distance. *Moran's* memory fails. He cannot think clearly anymore. He forgets what he has to do with *Molloy* when he finds him. He finds a man of somewhat imperious manner speaking to him. *Moran* kills this man, he does not know how. He has in effect killed himself, his old self. Finally, his son returns with the bicycle. *Moran* is critical. The boy is incredulous. Although *Moran* has undergone an inward change, vestiges of this old self linger. What Suzuki called "Attachment to Individualism" a moment ago and its accompanying sense of spiritual heaviness, which the individual feels must be expiated as sin, find outlet in other directions now that *Moran* is temporarily separated from his church. Feelings of "selfloathing and sadness" arise because he no longer believes in himself; he hates what he now sees himself to be. He is sad because he finds himself in the dilemma of not being able to

follow the shepherd, which involves following a profession that he has come to detest. The state of dilemma, as is well known, involves the individual very often in frustration. It is precisely this that now begins to boil over as *Moran* has a furious row with his son. This is so tense, that his son, hitherto obedient and cooperative, leaves him in the night, taking his possessions with him. *Moran* is alone. *Moran* is weighed down by a sense of sin, stemming from a sense of inadequacy. Buddhism does not thrust sin into the center of its teaching. Instead, it sees sin as the result of ignorance. It likens wisdom to a candle lit in a cave; as more candles are lit, so the darkness recedes of itself. *Moran* is now relieved. Some of the grosser encrustations of his ego have dropped off with the suffering that he had to undergo. This does not disturb him unduly, however. He has found a truer identity than that of his old self, now that he has become half a *Molloy*. The riddle of identity remains unsolved; he is no longer *Moran* but not yet *Molloy*.

- ¶24. Beckett began *Malone Dies* (1951) in the winter of 1947 and completed it in May of the following year. The idea of freedom found in Beckett's writing at this time could be interpreted as an autobiographical account of his desire to leave the values of middle-class Protestant Ireland.
- ¶25. In the trilogy, there is progressive restriction of locomotor freedom. The inability of *Molloy* and *Moran* to walk properly, *Malone's* restriction to the hospital ward, and finally the *Unnamable's* incarceration in a jar are means whereby the narrator/character hopes to find more inner freedom.
- ¶26. *Malone Dies*, like much of Beckett's work, constitutes a dilemma; indeed, one is justified in saying that all his major work represents a series of dilemmas. The dilemma that we speak of is made up of, first, the desire to be free from the limiting ego, which is felt to be a burden, free from the realization that mental stasis is virtually impossible in this situation, and therefore, offers no relief, free from the compunction to act. Second, the sense of failure that this futile desire evokes, the frustration that failure, in turn, instigates, and a longing for death. The net result of these interacting forces is impotence.
- ¶27. The one solution, death, is not conveniently at hand; one must go on with what is clearly a hopeless, joyless task. It becomes a "Mortal Tedium". What is the nature of this "Tedium"? In a superficial consideration of *Malone Dies*, this tedium concerns the actions of one *Sapo* and his relationship with his family and of a certain Mr. Lambert, who is a pigsticker by trade, and his family. Halfway through the novel, *Sapo's* name is changed by the narrator, "I wonder how I was able to stomach such a name till now." [21] Like the narrator himself, *Sapo* becomes the inmate of an institution, which is more clearly a mental hospital than *Malone's* place of confinement. As *Sapo* becomes *Macmann*, so *Malone* seems to coalesce with *Macmann*. While in the hospital, *Macmann* is cared for by *Moll*, a female attendant. Finally *Moll* dies and is succeeded by *Lemuel*. This particular attendant takes a group

of patients for a sea outing. He kills four of his charges and goes out to sea with the rest. The novel ends in oblivion.

- ¶28. Freedom is the desire and sustaining force behind Beckett's work. He "would have done with it all" as soon as possible. Then indeed it will all be over with these *Murphys, Molloys, Morans, and Malones* and their accounts of what Beckett calls in sympathy their "miserable existences", but how? The exit from this "issueless misery" is embodied in putting a stop to thought and implies ending both the natural associative processes of our everyday minds and the willed act of thinking, that is intellection. In so doing, the mind and its passions are brought under control. It is not an attempt to control by violence since the mind is not amenable to such a form of control. Violence implies willed assertion and is, therefore egoistic."[\[22\]](#) Neither can one subdue the passions with passion which the Buddha himself attempted in the period of his experimentation with the meditative techniques of the Brahmins in the time prior to his great enlightenment. He referred later to these as "vain and unprofitable". However "holy" the passion, it remains passion. The means conceived by the Buddha's followers in order to obtain relief from the dilemma of being human was one by which the mind's activity is simply cut off by an act of inward looking, one of observation of the mind's content and movement. After a time, which may be months or years of practice, the mind, like the fire of the comparison, undergoes something like a death, a "going out" and in the silence, in which there is Zen's "no thing existing", the One Mind (Prajna) is apprehended. Hui-Neng (638-713), one of the great patriarchs of Chinese Ch'an Buddhism, puts it thus: Wu Nien ("no mind") is seeing all things and yet to keep your mind free from stain and attachment. This is "no-thought-ness".[\[23\]](#)
- ¶29. This, then, is the way out that Beckett's work very occasionally intimates but never explores. He is mainly concerned with the state of mind which is prior to the "no-thought-ness" mentioned above. In *Malone Dies* there is a marked shift from the outer quests of *Molloy* and *Moran* to the static, inner quest of old Malone. The novel is a record of this associative thought processes, in the fictions that he invents for himself. The attempt to write fiction also provides a thread running through the novel, from which he digresses and to which he returns. In *The Unnamable*, even the thread disappears.

- ¶30. Zen Buddhism refers to the mind as a monkey and the word "monkey - mindedness" is frequently found in its literature. It means that our minds, like the antics of a monkey, are always "on the go". They flit from one thing to another, fiddle with this and toy with that from the moment we are born until we die. We must remember that the mind can be dangerously powerful too, especially when passion runs strong. For this reason, it is also likened to an ox, which must be tamed. It is a complex of different mental states, compounded of memories, perceptions, feelings, and tendencies, both conscious and unconscious. Sometimes one aspect dominates, sometimes another, but there is always movement or seeking. It is this, primarily, that Beckett portrays in *Malone Dies* and *The Unnamable* in particular, the latter being a development of the former in this direction.
- ¶31. *The Unnamable* (1953), the last novel of what has come to be known as the "Trilogy", took approximately nine months to write. Like the novels that precede it, it is characterized by first person commentary. The novel is not built upon the interplay of human activity. Except for Marguerite, there are no palpable characters; and Marguerite is barely described. This is a one man novel. But the "man" is only a man's mind. The body is devoid both of limb and feature. The Narrator refers to himself as "a big talking ball", a wedge-shaped, egg-like creature, whose eyes are "streaming sockets", stuck like a sheaf of flowers in a deep jar, its neck flush with my mouth, on the side of a quiet street near the shambles ... at rest at last".[\[24\]](#)
- ¶32. At one point in the novel, the narrator recalls the incident of killing a family, presumably his own since he refers to his mother and father, in an act of particularly savage mutilation. These, too, are the "they" against whom he is set throughout the narrative. Although this "they" has no physical tangibility and although it does not concretely utter an opinion, it is nevertheless a part of the novel similar to the unseen wires that enliven a puppet. The juxtaposition of the "they" with its implied viewpoint is vital to the coherence of the novel. Beckett rejects all its opinions and beliefs, and thereby, substantiates his own position. There is, therefore, a dialogue of sorts, in which the implied values of the other, the "they", are denied. This, by further implication, brings forth issues of serious import.

- ¶33. The novel opens with the words: "Where now? Who now? When now? Unquestioning. I, say I. Unbelieving. Questions, hypotheses, call them that. Keep going. Going on, call that going, call that on.[\[25\]](#) These words and the eleven pages that follow constitute what might loosely be called an "exegesis", the narrator questions his motives for beginning, wondering in one place whether it would not be better not to begin at all, to remain silent. At the same time he considers his position. He is in some kind of limbo apparently. Orientation is difficult. There is the curious phenomenon of Malone passing and re-passing with the punctuality of "clockwork" before the narrator's eyes. Malone neither speaks nor shows any inclination to change his course. Many critics have assumed from this that the narrator throughout *Molloy/Moran*, and Malone Dies is now dead and speaks from purgatory. It is possible, but it is an assumption. One might well assume this from Beckett's abiding interest in Dante. The reference now and again to "them" as "up there in the world" would support the assumption that the narrator is in purgatory, but this is the only textual evidence we have.
- ¶34. After the approximately eleven-page "exposition" referred to a moment ago, there follows what we might regard as a second section. It is true that one section passes without any kind of interruption into the other, but the second section is nevertheless identifiable. It can be recognized by its sudden, intense focus upon the subject of the narration. It gathers up the strands of disquisition, which have gone before, and leads them to a formal conclusion. Suddenly, there is a sense of orientation, which has been sought in the preceding pages:
- ¶35. Nothing then but me, of which I know nothing, except that I never uttered, and this black, of which I know nothing either, except that it is black, and empty. That then, is what, since I have to speak, I shall speak of, until I need speak no more. And Basil and his gang? Inexistent, invented to explain I forget what. Ah yes, allies, God and Man, nature and the light of day, the heart's out pourings and the means of understanding, all invented, basely, by me alone, with the help of no one, since there is no one, to put me off the hour when I must speak of me. There will be no more about them.[\[26\]](#)
- ¶36. What is left? There is nothing left that he can recognize but a blackness and an emptiness of which he knows nothing but which is himself. He is convinced of its ultimate reality because he says that everything else is lies.

- ¶37. This is the stage at which the Zen master, ever on the lookout for such symptoms, comes to the aid of the struggling student.^[27] His search has brought him to the point where he has his back against the wall. This is the point where the master will deliver his *Coup de Grace* of deliverance. It is possible, and very likely, that when the student has come this far, especially in the case where he has applied only his intellect to the problem and not his entire being, that he will retreat from this apparent cul-de-sac and seek solace among the familiarities of conceptual thinking. If he has worked alone up to this point, he can hardly be blamed for such a withdrawal because he will lack moral support to take the last step into the dimension that is called satori in Buddhism. The student familiar with Buddhist tradition will usually go on, not, however, without some fear and often under the influence of the strangest presentiments.
- ¶38. Beckett's work is the incorporation of a spiritual journey. The Unnamable is an account of the later stages of the *Idee Fixe*, which is centered on the nature of "I" and which is also the preoccupation of students of Zen. The title itself at once reveals the nature of the absorption of the rest to the novel. In dismissing all the concepts current on God and his nature suggested by the dubious accounts disseminated by the "they", Beckett suggests that the nature of "I" is ineffable. In short he is concerned with that for which there is no name.

END NOTES

1. The Four Noble Truths:

1. All life is suffering.
2. Suffering is due to desires.
3. The cure for suffering is the elimination of desire.
4. The way to eliminate desire is to follow the Eightfold Path.

2. The Path is summarized as:

Right Understanding, Right Intention, Right Speech, Right Conduct,
Right Livelihood, Right effort, Right Mindfulness, Right
concentration.

3. This phrase, often erroneously attributed to Beckett, was first used by William James in his William James, *Some Problems of Philosophy; a beginning of an introduction to philosophy*, New York: Longmans, Green & Co (1911), 48.
4. Samuel Beckett, *Murphy*, New York: Grove Press Inc. (1970), 67.
5. *ibid.*, 127.
6. *ibid.*, 29.
7. *ibid.*, 112.
8. Not 'of perceiving' (*Percipere*), but 'of being perceived' (*Percipi*). This statement can also be found in Berkley's philosophy.
9. Huang-Po, died 850. One of the greatest Chinese Ch'an (Zen) masters.
10. 'Way' here means enlightenment.
11. Meditation
12. John Blofield, *Taoism*, Boulder: Shambala (1978), 51-53.
13. Samuel Beckett, *Murphy*, New York: Grove Press Inc. (1970), 73.
14. Bernard Cohn, *Back to Beckett*, New Jersey: Princeton University Press (1973), 119.
15. James Knowlson , *The Life of Samuel Beckett*, New York: (1996), 50.
16. Samuel Beckett, *Murphy*, New York: Grove Press Inc. (1970), 40.
17. This reads, "I undertake to abstain from killing all living beings". (Sanskrit: Pamatipata Veramani Sikkha Padam Samadivami).
18. Francis Story, *The Four Noble Truths*, Kandy, Sri Lanka: M. Manoharin (1968), 23.

- [19.](#) Samuel Beckett, *Murphy*, New York: Grove Press Inc. (1970), 106.
- [20.](#) *ibid.*, 149.
- [21.](#) *ibid.*, 229.
- [22.](#) Erich Fromm, *The Anatomy of Human Destructiveness*, New York: (1973), 177.
- [23.](#) D.T. Suzuki, *The Zen Doctrine of No-Mind*, London: Allen & Unwin (1958), 126.
- [24.](#) Samuel Beckett, *Murphy*, New York: Grove Press Inc. (1970), 329.
- [25.](#) *ibid.*, 293.
- [26.](#) *ibid.*, 306.
- [27.](#) Essential to Koan is paradox. It cannot be solved by reason. Solving a Koan requires a leap to another level of comprehension.

ISSN 1548-6001

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