

## SAMUEL BECKETT AND CENSORSHIP IN THE SAORSTAT

by *William Atkinson*

Official censorship in Ireland came limping in just seven years after the establishment of the Free State. In 1929, the first Irish Censorship of Publications Act was passed: “an Act to make provision for the prohibition of the sale and distribution of unwholesome literature” (Comyn 44). In a 1969 essay that criticizes the manner rather than the principle of censorship, Andrew F. Comyn claims that the act’s real purpose was “to prevent the sale of low-class English and American periodicals and books and worthless ‘paperbacks’, without arousing bitter resentment and acrimony” (44). But Comyn acknowledges that the Board was overzealous from the start; Mervyn Wall estimated that at the height of its energy the Board was proscribing an average of 70 books a month—or 840 a year (77). Included in this index of unwholesomeness were nearly all the Irish writers we now remember, three volumes of Proust, and, logically enough, Samuel Beckett’s short study of the Frenchman’s disreputable work. They also banned most of Beckett’s fiction. Not that the Board read all the books it banned: Connor Maguire, sometime Chief Justice of Ireland and Chairman of the Censorship Board, admitted as much to Mervyn Wall: “Of course we didn’t. If we had done that, we wouldn’t have been able to ban anything” (77). One wonders whether, as Chief Justice, he took such an accommodating attitude toward hearsay evidence. Clearly the Censorship Board saw more printed danger to the Irish nation than merely the low-class English and American material that Comyn refers to—today, some might regard such popular texts as the storm troopers of global capitalism’s new colonialism. Professor Magennis, another Chair of the Censors, speaking in the Dail in 1942, made clear just how much he believed to be at stake:

We all know that once the bonds of marriage are broken and when you put concubinage and promiscuity in place of the family you have begun to sap the foundation of the State. The very foundations of this higher community called the State is the family and if the family is to disappear as an institution in civilization then goodbye to everything. That is the cause the censorship is maintaining. It is trying—and if so far as it can is very little, that is to be regretted and not denounced—to save this country from further pollution. (Comyn 46-7)

The Board was trying to protect the Irish family, which is, according to Magennis, entirely coextensive with both the State and civilization itself. If the family goes, Ireland goes. The *Playboy* riots of 1907 had demonstrated how inseparable were the political and the poetic. Ireland’s writers were expected to play their part in creating their nation through their representations of Irishness, and Magennis and his ilk would have expected a wholesome family to be at the heart of any such Irishness. Traditional families had traditional fathers, who knew best. So the notion of a censorship board is entirely congruent with Magennis’s state and family metaphor. But the family arrangements of many of Ireland’s mythic heroes were not always as regular as the Professor would have wished—one thinks of Cuchulain’s

liaisons or of the marriage of Maeve and Ailill. With such domestic disorder among the epitomes of Irishness, the rootstock of cultural Irish authority is more problematic than I have implied.

Standish James O'Grady—widely acknowledged as a seminal influence on the Irish literary revival—wrote, in his “Introduction to the Bardic History of Ireland,” of national gestation and the delicate relationship between art and history. The first pages of O'Grady's essay are spent poking about for some solid fact in the “empurpled mist” of Irish legendary history—a fact as solid as that which Descartes sought once he had established his “adamantine” *cogito* (25). The Cartesian *cogito* is effectively the establishment of individual subjectivity, whereas O'Grady is referring to a moment when the discourse of Ireland as a whole became aware of itself as other than English or continental. The place to look for such a fact would be in history, but history is “the vulgarity of actual things” (27). O'Grady contrasts history with legends, which represent

the imagination of the country; they are that kind of history which a nation desires to possess. They betray [*sic*] the ambition and ideals of the people, and in this respect, have a value far beyond the tales of actual events and duly recorded deeds, which are no more history than a skeleton is a man. (27)

Because Irish history since the twelfth century had been a narrative of oppression from the neighboring island, “actual things” would indeed seem vulgar to an Irishman hoping for independence, so legend takes precedence over history; it is the soul to history's skeleton, projecting ideals and ambitions, manifesting independent life and will. Legendary history is the nation thinking itself into being—its *cogito*—and is proof of its identity. O'Grady posits the artist as the one who escapes from despotic fact and expresses “the nature of the race or nation” (42). The artist is expressing the pre-existing essence of Irishness, and the individual self takes second place to the plural *cogito*.

Thus, the door is opened for censorship since the communal takes precedence over the individual and the pre-existing over the newly created; and various representatives of the State will speak with the authority of the father. But O'Grady had posited an artist to express the nation and had acknowledged that to do so, he “needs that absolute escape from positive history and unyielding despotic fact” (43). So now we have a privileged individual *cogito*, albeit one who speaks for the whole.

As if in support of such individualism, in his 1934 article on modern Irish poetry, Samuel Beckett took the “Celtic twilighters” to task for their flight from self-awareness, for their failure to consider their individual *cogitos*. They believed that “the first condition of any poem is an accredited theme, and that in self-perception there is no theme” (“Recent Irish Poetry” 71). Beckett's aesthetic regards self-perception as central to a viable post Revival art. Yet having declared “the breakdown of the object, whether current, historical, mythical, or spook” (70), he goes on to allow the similar demise of the subject; for Beckett, both positions amount to the same thing: “rupture of the lines of communication” (70). So what is left to perceive and what is left to be perceived? In O'Grady's terms, the *cogito* as intending subject or desired subject-as-object, has crumbled to dust, so Beckett's preferred theme, self-perception, is going to be a reiterated narrative of failure: as he says in his dialogue on Tal Coat, relevant art will devote

itself to “the expression that there is nothing to express [breakdown of the object], nothing with which to express, nothing from which to express [breakdown of the subject], no power to express, no desire to express [no apprehension of subject or object], together with the obligation to express” (“Three Dialogues” 139).

Such selves as Beckett perceives in the poetry of the antiquarian twilighters are fugitive entities. The most these writers’ self-perception can achieve is “to land the practitioner into the correct scenery, where the self is most happily obliterated or else so improved and enlarged that it can be mistaken for part of the *décor*” (“Recent Irish Poetry” 71). Thus the independent self dissolves into an almost reified Irishness that Beckett dismissively calls “the Presence” (70), whose avatars are the familiar figures of Irish mythico-literary lore: Oisín, Cúchulainn, Maeve, and all the rest, “segment after segment of cut-and-dried sanctity and loveliness” (71). These had been important tokens in the creation of Irish nationality, symbols of an ancient Irishness that no longer existed, if it ever did. In their flight from self-awareness, the antiquarians have delivered themselves, and Ireland, to an authority, “the Presence,” that they have helped to define and empower, but over which they have little further influence. Beckett’s best-known play is famous for its representation of the non-arrival of an apparently all-powerful “Presence.”

The set of *Godot* is deliberately bleak, in contrast to the soft, green *décor* that the antiquarians prepared for themselves. In Beckett’s view, “the rupture of the lines of communication” has left a “no-man’s-land, Hellespont or vacuum” between the artist and “the world of objects” (“Recent Irish Poetry” 70). Most of his texts map out the harsh topography of no-man’s-land—sometimes the location seems little more than a vacuum. But Beckett is also much preoccupied with self-awareness, although all too often the self is hard to distinguish from a not-self exercising an illegitimate authority. Thirteen years after the article on modern Irish poetry, his novel *Molloy* begins a three-part examination of the paradoxes of self-awareness. *Molloy*—all of the trilogy—can be read as a struggle for censorial power between the representing self and the represented self, who, by virtue of the fact that he is not in the process of representing, is perceived by the representing self as other than self. The censoring voice never achieves the necessary independence of the moment that created it: to paraphrase O’Grady, that absolute escape from the unyielding despotic discourse from which it emerges. The theme becomes a commonplace in Beckett—from the splenetic Krapp, listening to “that stupid bastard I took myself for thirty years ago” to the more compassionate black-robed figure of *Not I*, shrugging helplessly at the Mouth’s refusal to abandon the third person, its flight from self-awareness. And in *Molloy*, the theme of self-separation is elaborated in a narrative about sons and fathers and sons and mothers, relationships that can be read as emblematic of protestant Beckett’s troubled responses to Old Mother England, wholly decrepit but still emotionally potent, and the bustling new father of the Irish Free State, eager to oversee every last element of his son’s life.

The novel is divided into two halves: Molloy’s narrative and Moran’s account of his search for Molloy. And two subtexts in particular underlie Molloy’s half of the novel: *The Odyssey* and *The Divine Comedy*. Both of these classic texts are transition narratives, rites of passage, but in significantly different ways. *The Odyssey* is a myth of return; *The Comedy* is one of transformation. This distinction will be important in an analysis of Beckett’s approach to the self of his Irish consciousness and to the question of censorial authority. A return is closer to what O’Grady describes in that the protagonist returns to a hitherto lost site of authority. A transformation grants authority to the initiate and in the process raises the problem of the

source of that authority. There is, in fact, a third subtext: the Gospels, which are both a transformation and a return myth. God transforms Himself to man, and the Son returns to the Father through the crucifixion. From the spirit to the flesh and back again.

*The Odyssey* concerns its hero's attempts to return to his homeland. We first meet him brooding on Ogygia. For the first dozen pages of *Molloy*, we are with the narrator in a room, always aware of the textuality of the narrative, that we are reading an account of someone recounting. These pages parallel Odysseus on Ogygia, waiting for the gods, the narrator, to send him on his way, into his narrative, toward his home. The narrative does not incarnate itself in the realm beyond the place of its own creation until Molloy announces the commencement of his odyssey: "But talking of the craving for a fellow let me observe that having waked between eleven o'clock and midday (I heard the angelus, recalling the incarnation, shortly after) I resolved to go and see my mother" (19). The angelus suggests the Gospels and hints at a parallel between the author and God, the deity who determined on the incarnation and mortality of his only son. But Molloy more closely parallels Odysseus, in that he is returning to the mortal world: he wants to visit his mother, his progenitrix, his Ithaca. However, whereas Odysseus has unmixed feelings about his own desire for home, Molloy's relationship with his mother is highly ambiguous and suggestive of Beckett's attitude toward his own cultural parents—Ireland and England. Molloy and his mother call each other Mag and Dan, syllables containing Ma and Da. The son has become the husband, just as a writer is both born of a culture and must mate with it to produce something new. Beckett is perfectly willing to confront the disturbingly incestuous nature of this culture-artist relationship. Mag, otherwise Countess Caca (Countess Kathleen?) is incontinent, deaf, and incoherent. Molloy communicates with her by rapping his knuckles on her head, but since he has little other to communicate than a request for money, a thump on the skull is all that counts. It is as if Beckett's relationship with Ireland is reduced to the annuity from his father's estate that was such an essential part of his income.

Odysseus travels by ship or raft, Molloy by bicycle. And while resting, head on handlebars, Molloy is waylaid by a policeman, much as Odysseus' party, taking their ease in the Cyclops's cave, is detained. There follows a parallel confabulation on identity. Whereas Odysseus calls himself Nobody, Molloy can't recall his own name. Finally, he remembers: "My name is Molloy," he cries out, like Odysseus calling his real name to the blinded Poyphemus as he leaves. But when the sergeant asks whether Molloy is his mother's name, the narrator is stumped for a while. He thinks it likely but cannot be certain (29). Odysseus was never in any doubt as to the names of his parents and their parents before them, but while Molloy knows his mother, and he knows his own name, he is not certain whether he shares a name with her, whether they constitute a legitimate family or not. Will returning to the mother country re-establish Molloy/Beckett's identity and repair the ruptured lines of communication?

We next find Molloy in the countryside, having trouble remembering the name of his native town.

I had been living so far from words so long, you understand, that it was enough for me to see my town, since we're talking of the town, to be unable, you understand. It's too difficult to say, for me. And even my sense of identity was wrapped in a namelessness often hard to penetrate. (41)

Words have been severed from the objects they refer to. Seeing the place chases its name from his mind, and even his own sense of self resists naming. Names come from others; language is given to us as a full system, and we are thus denied the autonomy of the Adamic namer. Odysseus knew who he was, and that identity was tied irrevocably to Ithaca. Had he stayed with Calypso, he would have been separated from the people and things that provided his identity—he would have been her creature. But Odysseus was lord of Ithaca. Molloy knows that his status in his hometown was, shall we say, equivocal.

After a stay with Lousse–Circe/Calypso–Molloy is washed up on the beach. He has some indirect and inconsequential contact with a Nausicaa figure. After this point, the *Odyssey* subtext fades away: a triumphal return to Ithaca is scarcely a plausible finale for Molloy. Yet he *has* returned because, as at the beginning of the novel, he is in his mother's room, and she is not there, so we can infer that he has taken over her identity, that the subject has been reunited with the object, but a senescent object, nearer death than life.

If we take the novel to be predicated upon an odyssey, a rite of return, then Beckett has returned to mother-Ireland, with all the inherent dangers of object separation, of a national self predicated upon a projection of dim mythic figures. And these fears are warranted in that Molloy's writing is generated, if not controlled, by an external authority: Youdi, via Gaber, his messenger. The Dante rite, on the other hand, is a myth of transformation. The subject does not return to what he was but becomes something other than he was. Dante is lost in a dark wood, and Beatrice sends Virgil to lead him through hell, purgatory, and heaven to a vision of God that will make him into a new and independent man.

Beckett's novel contains a number of Dantean hints: Molloy declares that his journey began at the moment "when over what is called our hemisphere the sun is at its pitilessmost and the arctic radiance comes pissing on our midnights" (21), phrasing that echoes the time marking in "The Purgatory." The wood that is so important in both Molloy and Moran's narratives parallels the "selva oscura," the dark wood in which Dante declared himself lost in "The Inferno." Molloy moves in a great circle, as would be expected if he were in one of the circles of hell or spiraling up Mount Purgatory; and his manner of locomotion, flat on his stomach, using his crutches as grapnels and pulling himself forward, suggests an infernal torment. Even the town with its walls and ramparts is reminiscent of Dis. The Moran and son pairing echoes Virgil and Dante, but in this case the son deserts the father. The detective's return home is interspersed with preposterous theological questions and hindered by "the phantoms of the dead" (228) as on Virgil and Dante's journey. So with this subtext in mind, we can anticipate psychic transformation.

But transformation assumes a firm identity to begin with, and that we cannot always bank on. In a world where characters have but a feeble grasp of their own identity, *things*—objects—become important as a way of designating character, much as statues or pictures of gods can be identified by their physical attributes, clothing, and other tokens: Aphrodite's nakedness, Athena's armor, Zeus's thunderbolt. Thus we know Molloy by his one and later two stiff legs, his crutches, his greatcoat, and his hat secured to buttonhole by a long lace. Moran, who goes in search of Molloy in the second half of the novel, wears a straw boater, carries an umbrella, and develops two stiff legs. These points are important in order to disentangle the events in the wood that are the climax of both Molloy's and Moran's narratives, to find our way in the "no-man's land, Hellespont, or vacuum," the space between the artist and the world of objects.

Both narratives—Molloy’s and Moran’s—agree that Moran was extinguished; like a twilighter, he has lost interest in himself and has become “resigned to being dispossessed of self” (204). All the evidence points to Molloy as the perpetrator. So who is the narrator of the last part of the Moran report?

If Molloy killed Moran, and the Moran /blacks out before discovering the corpse, we can infer that Moran transformed into Molloy. The matter is clinched when the narrator finally returns home. He writes his report, which begins, “It is midnight” (125, 241). But he tells us that it was not midnight, which makes good sense if Moran is Molloy—we know that Molloy is writing for Youdi (8), who wants a report from Moran (240). If we read the text as a Homeric myth of return, Molloy’s homecoming is just what we would expect. He has taken over his mother’s room, so the narrative suggests some degree of triumph or mastery over the maternal voice. The Homeric parallel makes Molloy, who looked more like a very down-at-heel ascendancy figure, into an Ireland recovering independence, with Moran as the usurping suitors. But his attempts to control all elements of his son’s life, from his bowel movements to his stamp collection, echo the Censorship Board.

A more coherent reading may come from the Dantean subtext. If we regard the text as a transformation, then Molloy has not returned home. Instead, Moran, has become Molloy, the broken-down son of an even more decrepit mother. Moran, when he *was* Moran, knew both Molloy and his mother by reputation, and held both in low regard, rather as a nationalist might have thought of England and the protestant ascendancy. But the distinction between the two characters will not hold: the novel’s protagonist is at the same time both Molloy and Moran, and therefore neither of them since they are no longer differentiated.

*Molloy* is thus a paradigm of the impossibility of self-perception, and by extension, a critique of national identity. Moran became Molloy and so lost his identity. And what is Molloy’s identity? He used to be Moran, and since we privilege origination, Molloy must really be Moran, who is now dead, and anyway was never anything more than an invention of Molloy. The thing parallels Ireland itself: a projection of men and women who were Irish in a culture that wasn’t truly Irish since it wasn’t independent, and by 1929 was an independent state based on a projection generated at a time when Ireland wasn’t Ireland. The perceiving self is constantly fading into the perceived self. Or to put it another way: by taking over his mother’s room, Molloy has declared his independence of the mother-nation, decolonized himself. Simultaneously, by means of enemas and suchlike, Moran is attempting to control, to censor, his own son. His son eventually deserts him, possibly confirming Professor Magennis’s dire warnings about the breakdown of the family. But that very breakdown comes when Moran’s son sees that his father has become someone else (212-13), the progeny of the old power. The text, however, won’t let us rest there since the Molloy-Moran-Molloy’s mother distinction constantly fades in and out. Moran’s identity, Ireland’s identity, was maintained by an act of will. And if the will should weaken, so will the identity.

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## JEFF DANIEL MARION

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### LETTERS HOME

Year after year looking back from the seat of his Farmall,  
 my uncle Gene watched the loamy April world of his forty  
 acres peel open in furrows, hillsides rise up dogwood speckled –  
 nothing like this wide wake the USS *Gilmore* plowed in his  
 thirty-fourth year. Drafted and set to sail the Pacific of 1943,  
 he knew little of secret codes but told his Clara,  
 "I'll let you know best I can where I am."  
 His first letter home she held to the light, hunted for  
 the hidden message, scoured each phrase. Not until she  
 walked outside into the fields where a thousand green  
 arms of corn lifted and waved his semaphores,  
 did she remember the postscript: "Read in the *Rogersville*  
*Review* you sent where Verly Marshall got married."  
 Verly was eighty-eight and the town's avowed spinster.  
 My aunt returned to the house, the blue globe spinning  
 in her hands, until at last her fingers came to rest  
 on those tiny Morse dots of faraway islands  
 where his pen had tapped the code of his love  
 and she had found him.