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Dirk Van Hulle

## **Samuel Beckett, *Molloy* – *Malone Dies* – *The Unnamable* (1951-1958)<sup>1</sup>**

### **Abstract**

This chapter situates Samuel Beckett's so-called 'trilogy' of novels, *Molloy*, *Malone meurt/Malone Dies* and *L'Innommable/The Unnamable*, in the context and chronology of his entire oeuvre. Special attention is paid to the periodization of his work into an early, middle and late period, and the 'watershed' status of the three novels, in addition to Beckett's habit to self-translate his bilingual work after he adopted French as a second language of composition. Although he disliked the term 'trilogy', *Molloy*, *Malone meurt/Malone Dies* and *L'Innommable/The Unnamable* are closely connected through Beckett's fascination with linguistic scepticism, as well as their shared focus on denarration and undoing, which increasingly disintegrates the traditional notions of character and fictional universe. Beckett's characters and storyworlds are quite different from what he dismissed as the 'clockwork cabbages' and 'chloroformed world' of Honoré de Balzac, whose programmatic writing style Beckett did not appreciate. Judging from the manuscript notebooks of his own novels, Beckett experimented with a more processual form of composition that self-reflexively thematizes incompleteness, closely resembling what H. Porter Abbott has termed 'autography'. These characteristics earned Beckett the praise of such early prominent commentators as Maurice Blanchot and Georges Bataille. Subsequent generations of critics have focussed on the novels' relationship to postwar notions of humanity and the dominant philosophy of existentialism, followed by political and often heavily theorized readings in the 1980s and 1990s. Since then, the range of critical perspectives has only continued to broaden, including an archival field of study. The openness of Beckett's 'trilogy' to such a variety of approaches is precisely what makes it such a vibrant part of his work today.

**Keywords:** Samuel Beckett, trilogy, *Molloy*, *Malone Dies*, *The Unnamable*, autography, self-translation, archival studies, bilingual literature

### **1. Context: Author, Oeuvre**

The Irish writer Samuel Beckett is best known as a playwright. *En attendant Godot/Waiting for Godot* is one of the most influential plays of the twentieth century. But Beckett's prose fiction is certainly as innovative as his dramatic works, and the three novels *Molloy*, *Malone Dies* and *The Unnamable* play an important role in the development of his career as a novelist. Like *En attendant Godot*, they were

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originally written in French and subsequently translated into English by the author himself (*Molloy* in collaboration with Patrick Bowles). Although these three novels are often referred to as a trilogy, Beckett did not like this label. He wrote to his British publisher John Calder “Not ‘Trilogy’, I beseech you, just the three titles and nothing else” (Beckett qtd. in Ackerley and Gontarski 2006, 586). But at the same time Beckett did mention on several occasions that he saw the three novels “as a unity” (Tucker 2014, 23).

To situate these three novels in Beckett’s oeuvre, various periodizations have been suggested. And although Peter Boxall rightly problematizes these periodizations, he also recognizes their pragmatic use. He therefore summarizes the evolution of Beckett’s prose fiction in a nutshell, “from the Joycean extravagance of his early, mannered work, through the comic agony of frenzied becoming in his middle period, to the bleached impossibility of his later prose” (Boxall 2015, 34). Building on this three-phase periodization, and with the caveat that periodizations entail the danger of doing injustice to the singularity of each separate work (Van Hulle and Kestemont 2016), the early period can be said to consist of the collection of stories *More Pricks Than Kicks* (which Beckett started writing in 1931; published in 1934) and the novels *Dream of Fair to Middling Women* (written in 1932, published posthumously in 1992), *Murphy* (started in 1935, published in 1938) and *Watt* (started during World War II in 1941, published in 1953). John Bolin distinguishes the early period from the middle period by means of the Beckettian voices of the professor and of the poet, the voice of the professor being characterized by ironic commentary, whereas the poetic voice is more open to the contingent. Bolin argues that the voice of the poet becomes more prominent in the novel *Watt*, Beckett’s last novel in English before he switched to writing fiction in French. As a result, *Watt* appears as a pivotal text, marking the border between the early period and Beckett’s mature work.

The middle period is often considered to start immediately after World War II with the *Nouvelles* (*La Fin*, *L’Expulsé*, *Premier Amour*, *Le Calmant*) and the novel *Mercier et Camier*. The reason for drawing the line between the ‘early’ and ‘middle’ period is often linked to Beckett’s decision to start writing in French. But this needs to be nuanced. Beckett started writing the first of the *Nouvelles* in English and he ‘drew the line’ between English and French by literally drawing a line in the manuscript in the middle of his story *La Fin*, which was originally called *Suite* in March 1946. After that, he continued writing in French for several years. After *La Fin* (or *The End*), he wrote the novel *Mercier et Camier* (started in 1946, published in 1970 in French and in 1974 in Beckett’s English translation) and the other *Nouvelles*: *L’Expulsé* (1946; *The Expelled*, published in 1962); *Premier Amour* (1946; published in 1970; *First Love*, published in 1973); *Le Calmant* (1946, published in 1955; *The Calmative*, published in 1967). The immediate post-war years were a period of remarkable creativity, known as “the siege in the room,” in Beckett’s own words (Knowlson 1996; Bair 1978, 346).

This is the period in which Beckett wrote the three novels *Molloy* (started in 1947, published in 1951; English version published in 1955), *Malone meurt* (started

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in 1947; published in 1951; *Malone Dies*, published in 1956) and *L'Innommable* (started in 1949, published in 1953; *The Unnamable*, published in 1958). Even though Beckett regarded the three novels as a unity and even though in some editions they are published as a "trilogy,"<sup>2</sup> some critics have categorized the three novels in separate periods. Brian McHale, for instance, marks a border between *Molloy* and *Malone meurt/Malone Dies*. In *Constructing Postmodernism*, he suggests a demarcation between modernism and postmodernism characterized by "the distinction between the cognitivist and the postcognitivist Beckett" (McHale 1992, 34). According to McHale, the cognitivist Beckett is "still preoccupied with modernist issues of reliability and unreliability of narrators, radical subjectivity, and multiplicity of perspectives, as in *Watt* and *Molloy*" (34). The "postcognitivist Beckett," however, "focuses instead on the status of fictional worlds, the power (and impotence) of language to make and unmake worlds, and the relationship between fictional being and elusive 'real' being, as in *Malone Dies*, *The Unnamable*, and many of the later short texts" (34). Usually, however, critics shift the border to the end of the so-called "trilogy." H. Porter Abbott, for instance, situates the border after *The Unnamable*, because it is only after the "trilogy" that Beckett stops working with the structure of the quest: "*Watt*, *Mercier et Camier*, the *Nouvelles*, and the 'trilogy', all conform to the quest structure, despite the manifold incompetence of the questers" (1996, 89). But the next work, *Textes pour rien* (1955; *Texts for Nothing*, published in 1967), "marks a pause in the story of the œuvre" (Abbott 1996, 89). This pause corresponds with the end of the "great creative period" (Federman and Fletcher 1970, 63), followed by a feeling of exhaustion, which is reflected in the "willful shredding of narrative linearity within the *Texts [for Nothing]*" (Abbott 1996, 90), followed by *Foires* (started in 1954; published in 1973; *Fizzles* published in 1976) and *From an Abandoned Work* (started in 1955, published in 1956; *D'un ouvrage abandonné* published in 1967).

*En attendant Godot* (première in 1953) had been written in the "great creative period" (between *Malone meurt* and *L'Innommable*), but it was not until January 1953 that the première took place. Whereas the writing process of *En attendant Godot* had proceeded very smoothly, it took Beckett several attempts and multiple versions to write his next important play, *Fin de partie/Endgame* (1957). When the BBC took an interest in his work, he started writing radio plays (such as *All That Fall*) and while fragments of his novels were being broadcast, he continued to write plays, such as *Krapp's Last Tape/La Dernière Bande* (1958) and *Happy Days/Oh les beaux jours* (1961).

As for his prose fiction, *Comment c'est* (started in 1958, published in 1961; *How It Is*, published in 1964) is generally regarded as another pivotal work. The title has been interpreted as a "pun on beginnings (*comment c'est* is *commencer*)" (Abbott 1996, 102), marking the start of the late period. True to his later motto "Fail

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<sup>2</sup> The term "trilogy" was used for the 1959 Olympia Press edition of the three novels (Van Hulle and Weller 2014, 81).

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better” Beckett kept failing again and starting again with “false starts,” *Faux départs* (1965) and various short plays (such as *Breath, Come and Go, Play, Not I, That Time, Footfalls, Catastrophy, What Where*) and short texts, such as *All Strange Away* (1976), *Imagination morte imaginez* (1965; *Imagination Dead Imagine*, 1965), *Assez* (1966; *Enough*, 1967), *Bing* (1966), *Sans* (1969; *Lessness*, 1970), *Le Dépeupleur* (1970; *The Lost Ones*, 1972), *Abandonné* (1972), *Still* (1975), *Sounds* (1978), *Still 3* (1978), *As the Story Was Told* (1973), *La Falaise* (1975), *Un Soir* (1980; *One Evening*, 1980), *The Way* (1981). Toward the end of the 1970s and in the early 1980s, when Beckett was in his seventies, he wrote three slightly longer prose texts, which are sometimes referred to as the ‘second trilogy’ (although – again – he did not like this term) and which were published both separately and together under the title *Nohow on* (1989): *Company* (1980; *Compagnie*, 1980); *Mal vu mal dit* (1981; *Ill Seen Ill Said*, 1981) and *Worstward Ho* (1983). *Nohow on* was followed by the shorter texts *Ceiling* (1985; *Plafond*, 1985), *Stirrings Still* (1989; *Soubresauts*, 1989), and *Comment dire/what is the word*. This last text is so short that it is usually treated as a poem, although it can also be regarded as a prose text. For it is a text about the writing of a text, more specifically about a sentence that fails to get written: It ends in the middle of a sentence with the words “comment dire,” or “what is the word” in Beckett’s translation (Beckett 2012, 227; 229). He thus ended his œuvre by leaving it open, deliberately unfinished.

## **2. Basic Coordinates: Central Topics and Concerns**

This notion of ‘never finished’ is concisely summarized in the word ‘on,’ which is arguably the most important word in Beckett’s entire œuvre, summarizing a central concern in his works. It is also the last word of the three novels *Molloy*, *Malone Dies* and *The Unnamable*, which famously ends with the line: “I can’t go on, I’ll go on.” (Beckett 2010b, 134) When Beckett’s so-called ‘second trilogy’ was published under the name *Nohow on*, the title still expressed the same concern, always linked to the medium of Beckett’s art: language. In a letter to Axel Kaun (written in German in 1937), Beckett formulated a poetics of the “unword” (Beckett 1984, 172) and he used Gertrude Stein and James Joyce both as examples, but also as a contrastive background. Joyce’s approach had been the “apotheosis of the word” (Beckett 1984, 172); Beckett’s approach would be more “logoclastic,” as he wrote on 11 July 1937 to his friend Mary Manning (Beckett 2009a, 521). Beckett wrote this letter while Joyce’s final work, *Finnegans Wake*, was still called “Work in Progress.” Whereas this notion of a ‘work in progress’ still implied some form of improvement, Beckett preferred to think in terms of “mere gress” because of what he called its “purity from destination and hence from schedule” (Beckett 2009a, 186).

Beckett had already expressed his aversion to schedule during his lectures on Racine and the Modern Novel at Trinity College, Dublin, in the early 1930s. Whereas Racine and Gide served as examples of how modern drama and fiction could convey a character’s complexity, Corneille and Balzac were his counterexamples. With reference to the genre of the novel, the “schedule” of Balzac’s “chloroformed world”

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in which characters functioned like “clockwork cabbages,” as they are called in Beckett's early (posthumously published) novel *Dream of Fair to Middling Women* (Beckett 1992, 120). In the three novels under discussion, Beckett tried to avoid this danger of ‘scheduling’ by writing according to a method which Louis Hay (1987) has called ‘écriture à processus’, rather than ‘à programme.’ There are no traces of plans or schemes to structure his novels. The writing simply proceeded apparently without preconceived destination.

## 2.1 *Molloy*

*Molloy* consists of two parts. The first part, told by Molloy as a first-person narrator, consists of only two paragraphs, “the first of five hundred words, the second of about forty thousand,” as biographer Deirdre Bair put it (1978, 368). The first paragraph (or preamble) was written after the completion of the rest of the manuscript. It took Beckett only six months to write the novel, from 2 May to 1 November 1947, and he started with what (in the published version) is the opening of the second paragraph: “Cette fois-ci, puis encore une je pense, puis c'en sera fini je pense, de ce monde-là aussi” (Beckett 1951b, 9). In the English translation, which Beckett made in collaboration with Patrick Bowles, this becomes: “This time, then once more I think, *then perhaps a last time*, then I think it'll be over, with that world too” (Beckett 2009b [1955], 4; emphasis added). The addition of a third time in the translation may be due to the fact that, by the time Beckett was translating his French version, he had finished not only *Malone meurt* but also *L'Innommable*. Evidently there is no one-on-one identity between Beckett's writing project and the reports of his characters, but there is an element of what Abbott calls “autography” that plays an important role in these novels. Abbott differentiates “autography” or “self-writing” from *autobiography* (1996, 20), because the latter has the storytelling tendency to turn life into a narrative (usually told with hindsight), whereas the former presupposes a form of “continuing incompleteness” (1996, 20). With regard to the writing process of *Molloy*, Beckett told Charles Juliet: “When I wrote the first sentence in *Molloy*, I had no idea where I was heading. And when I finished the first part, I didn't know how I was going to go on. [...] I hadn't planned it, or thought it all out at all” (Beckett qtd. in Juliet 1995, 140). After *Molloy's* part – including his observation of two men (called A and B in the French version, A and C in the English text) his adventures at the police station, his bicycle accident leading to the death of Lousse's dog, his stay at Lousse's house, the scene with the sucking stones at the seaside, his deteriorating body, his crawling through the forest ending in a ditch – the second part is narrated by Moran. His report to ‘Youdi’ concerns his assignment to find *Molloy*, his procrastination before he leaves with his son, and his eventual return home after his unsuccessful quest. After having completed this second part, Beckett returned to the first page of the manuscript and added the opening paragraph or preamble, starting with “I am in my mother's room” (2009b [1955], 3).

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In this preamble, Molloy mentions a man who comes every week, gives him money and takes away the pages that he has written. “It was he told me I’d begun all wrong, that I should have begun differently. He must be right. I began at the beginning, like an old ballocks, can you imagine that? Here’s my beginning” (Beckett 2009b [1955], 4). That was indeed where Beckett had begun. By adding the preamble to the original opening, Beckett created a revised (and self-revising) narrator, who is a later version of the narrator of the second paragraph.

The complex doubling of character/narrator has been interpreted in terms of “what mathematicians identify as the orderly approach to chaos: the narrator (1) of the preamble (written last), divides into the pseudocouple Molloy-Moran (2), who each split into A and B/C (4), who further divide (8), and so on” (Moorjani 2015, 27). The narrators are not only doubled, the narrative is also “denarrated,” as Brian Richardson calls it, defining denarration as “a kind of narrative negation in which a narrator denies significant aspects of her narrative that had earlier been presented as given” (2001, 168). To illustrate an extreme form of denarration, Richardson chooses *Molloy* as an example. The second part of the novel opens with the words: “It is midnight. The rain is beating on the windows” (Beckett 2009b [1955], 95). In the last paragraph, Moran closes with the lines: “Then I went back into the house and wrote, It is midnight. The rain is beating on the windows. It was not midnight. It was not raining” (Beckett 2009b [1955], 184). As Richardson notes, “very little (if anything) is left over after the assaults of textual negation the narrative performs upon itself” (2001, 171). In Brian McHale’s terminology, these narrative instances of denarration are “Worlds under Erasure” (1991 [1987], 99–111).

A world that is literally under erasure in this work is the Molloy country, more specifically Moran’s description of the economy of the Molloy country, called Ballyba. After having described this region, Moran asks the rhetorical question “What then was the source of Ballyba’s prosperity? I’ll tell you. No, I’ll tell you nothing” (Beckett 2009b [1955], 140). In the manuscript and typescript, instead of saying “No, I’ll tell you nothing,” Moran goes on for more than a dozen pages about the fact that the citizens’ stools were the source of Ballyba’s prosperity. Every citizen has to contribute an annual amount of excrement to manure the land and grow vegetables. As a result, the citizens are supposed to stay at home. A travel order is very hard to obtain and can only be issued by the so-called Obidil, always dressed in white (cf. O’Reilly 2006; Van Hulle 2014, 28; Winstanley 2014, 91). Beckett eventually decided to cut this scatological passage, but he deliberately left a textual trace, which can be called a contextual memory (cf. Ferrer 2011, 109). This scar is the sudden appearance in the published text of the “Obidil,” who has not been introduced before and never appears again afterwards: “And with regard to the Obidil, of whom I have refrained from speaking, until now, and whom I so longed to see face to face, all I can say with regard to him is this, that I never saw him, either face to face or darkly, perhaps there is no such person, that would not greatly surprise me” (Beckett 2009b [1955], 170). In the storyworld of the published text, indeed, “there is no such person” because the character was cut at the stage of the typescript. But by referring to him anyway, Beckett creates the effect of “disnarration” (in addition to the “denarration”

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discussed above). The concept of the “disnarrated” according to Richardson (building on Gerald Prince's work) denotes “possible events that, though referred to, remain unactualized in a text” (2001, 169). The text of *Molloy* alludes to this unactualized passage, thus allowing part of the process of ‘worldmaking’ (Goodman 1978) to disrupt the finished product. Both the strategies of ‘dis-’ and ‘denarration’ tend to have a disconcerting effect.

## **2.2 *Malone meurt/Malone Dies***

As Molloy had announced, “this time” would be followed by “once more” (Beckett 2009b [1955], 4): like *Molloy*, *Malone meurt* was also written in only six months' time. Beckett started writing it on 27 November 1947, less than a month after he finished *Molloy*, and completed the manuscript on 30 May 1948. In many ways, the book is a continuation and radicalization of some of its predecessor's metafictional elements. As Ruby Cohn notes, it is “a more relentless parody” of the novel and “a more incisive probing into the narrative process itself” (2001, 169). Moreover, it “eclipses the protagonist into the narrator” (Cohn 2001, 169) in a more explicit manner. It takes almost fifty pages before the first-person narrator refers to himself as “Malone (since that is what I am called now)” (Beckett 2010a [1956], 49). And in the manuscript, he did not even have a name yet. He was simply referred to as “M – ?” (Van Hulle 2014, 31). Malone finds himself lying in a bed. All his possessions have been taken from him, except a few personal items such as a hat, his pencil and exercise book. His plan is to write four separate stories: about a man, a woman, a thing, and an animal. But then he considers dealing with the man and the woman in the same story, and he starts telling the story of Saposcat, whose name combines wisdom (*sapere*) with scatology, and who is transferred from his urban family to the farm of the Lamberts. The Lamberts are called ‘les Louis’ in the original French version. Through his self-translation, Beckett thus alludes to Balzac's novel *Louis Lambert*.

Malone's narrative is interrupted because he drops his pencil. When he can resume his narrative, Malone (or ‘M’) decides to rename his character, “Car Sapo – non, je ne peux plus l'appeler ainsi” (Beckett 1951a, 90), “For Sapo – no, I can't call him that any more” (Beckett 2010a [1956], 56). But in the manuscript he has no alternative name for him yet, only an initial. Again, the initial is the letter ‘M’ – thus continuing the proliferation of M-characters. This homunculus (Beckett 1951a, 84) is eventually named ‘Macmann.’ He wears a long coat and a hat that is attached to his upper coat-button, not unlike previous M-characters (such as Molloy). Eventually, Macmann is taken to an institution called St. John's of God. His attendant nurse is called Moll. They begin a sexual affair, until she does not return because Malone decides to kill her off – “En voilà toujours une de liquidée” [“There's one out of the way at least” (Beckett 1951a, 174; Beckett 2009b, 95). She is replaced by the male nurse Lemuel, who takes Macmann and a few other inmates on a trip to an island on Easter Weekend, and kills two men with a hatchet. After this inexplicable act of

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violence, the narrative peters out in a series of eight elliptic lines of text ending with “never anything / there / anymore” (Beckett 2010a, 119). The sudden moment of gratuitous violence is a recurrent element in *Molloy* (where both Molloy and Moran kill a man for no reason) and *Malone meurt*, recalling Beckett’s lectures at Trinity College, Dublin, when – according to one of his students’ notes – he referred to two concepts introduced by André Gide to discuss the role of irrationality in literature: the “geste gratuit” (Rachel Burrows’ notes, Trinity College Dublin TCD MIC 60, 39r) and the “crime immotivée” (Burrows, TCD MIC 60, 14r). Beckett valued acts that “cannot be reduced to motive,” as Burrows noted (TCD MIC 60, 14r). Apart from the excessive explanations à la Balzac, Beckett questioned the “Snowball act,” which releases a “purely mechanical setting of circumstance: ‘enchaînement mécanique fatale de circonstances’” with its “arbitrary direction” and “constant acceleration to crisis” (Burrows, TCD MIC 60, 40). After the disintegration of the narrative in *Malone meurt/Malone Dies*, the question is whether any narrative development is still possible after that.

### 2.3 *L’Innommable/The Unnamable*

The opening of what Molloy had announced as “then perhaps a last time” (Beckett 2009b [1955], 4) consists of the three crucial questions for any narrative: “Où maintenant? Quand maintenant? Qui maintenant?” (Beckett 1953, 7). In the English version, the order of these basic narratological questions is rearranged: “Where now? Who now? When now?” (Beckett 2010b [1958], 1). The text refers explicitly to the preceding novels:

All these Murphys, Molloys and Malones do not fool me. They have made me waste my time, suffer for nothing, speak of them when, in order to stop speaking, I should have spoken of me and of *me alone* (Beckett 2010b [1958], 14; emphasis added).

“Me alone” is of course what Malone was supposed to be. But apparently, it is extremely difficult for the narrator to talk about himself without the tendency to narrativize his “I” (whatever that is) and turn himself into a character with a name. The manuscript of *L’Innommable* shows the same pattern as the draft of *Malone meurt*: it features a character that is initially referred to by means of an initial ‘M;’ only later does ‘M’ become ‘Mahood’. The name has been read in terms of ‘manhood;’ (Cohn 2001, 188), just like ‘Macmann’ (or son of man) can be regarded as a representative of the human species. It is remarkable how often the word ‘humanité’ is deleted in the manuscript of *L’Innommable*. The unnamed narrator says he has been taught about love and intelligence, in other words “l’humanité quoi” (Beckett 2014, HRC MS SB 3–10, 6v). The first character introduced by the narrator is Basil, who is said to fill him with repugnance because he “sweats” humanity (“il suait l’humanité”; 6v). These references to humanity were eventually omitted, but Beckett questions the notion of humanism throughout the novel and it is not implausible that this is an implicit reply to Sartre’s 1946 lecture, “L’Existentialisme est un humanisme.”

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According to Beckett, the human was a concept that we tend to resort to in times of great massacres (1984, 131). By implicitly criticizing the recourse to this notion, Beckett takes a distance from existentialism.

The unnamed narrator wonders how he should proceed – “By aporia pure and simple? Or by affirmations and negations invalidated as uttered” (Beckett 2010b [1958], 1). This latter strategy is applied increasingly frequently in the form of epanorthosis (the correction or rephrasing of an immediately preceding word). The frequency of this figure of speech increases in *L'Innommable/The Unnamable* (Clément 1994, 180–187). In *Molloy*, Moran announced that he was going to tell the reader about the sources of Ballyba's prosperity, but then he invalidated the affirmation as uttered: “No, I'll tell you nothing” (Beckett 2009b [1955], 140); in *Malone Dies*, the narrator reintroduced Saposcat and immediately corrected himself: “no, I can't call him that any more” (Beckett 2010a [1956], 56); in *The Unnamable*, the unnamed narrator says: “I seem to speak, it is not I, about me, it is not about me” (Beckett 2010b [1958], 1). The narrator says his motto should have been “*De nobis ipsis silemus*” [About ourselves we do not speak] (Beckett 2010b, 42) – a line which Immanuel Kant took from Francis Bacon's *Novum Organon* and used as the motto of the *Critique of Pure Reason*. The unnamed narrator's aim is indeed to be silent, but he keeps on talking and in the manuscript the writing only stops when the text reaches the physical boundary of the notebook: the last lines are written on the back flyleaf, the very last page of the notebook (cf. Van Hulle 2012). In the English version, the last line reads: “you must go on, I can't go on, I'll go on” (Beckett 2010b [1958], 134).

### 3. Aesthetics: Narrative and Literary Strategies

As indicated above, the first sentence of the three novels under discussion is “I am in my mother's room” (Beckett 2009b [1955], 3). This simple sentence can be (and has been) read against the background of an aesthetic revelation (Weller 2009, viii), which according to Beckett took place in his mother's room, in Foxrock, close to Dublin, probably in the summer of 1945 (Knowlson 1996, 352). A literary evocation of this moment is referred to as “the vision at last” in his later play *Krapp's Last Tape*, when Krapp realizes that what he should be writing about is the “dark” he has “always struggled to keep under” (Beckett 1986, 220). But what exactly is meant by the “dark” is not made explicit.

What it meant in Beckett's case, becomes a little clearer in a letter to his friend Con Leventhal. Here, Beckett expressed the core issue of his aesthetics by quoting his favourite line from Petrarch's *Canzoniere*: “Chi può dire [sic] com' egli arde è in picciol foco” [He who can say he is burning is burning in a small fire] (Beckett 2014a, 136). As he explained to Leventhal, ‘arde’ (the burning) had to be “understood more generally, and less gallantly, than in the *Canzoniere*”: “As thus solicited it can link up with the 3rd proposition (coup de grâce) of Gorgias in his *Nonent*: 1. Nothing is. / 2. If

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anything is, it cannot be known. / 3. If anything is, and can be known, it cannot be expressed in speech” (Beckett 2014a, 136). Beckett’s suggestion implies that he read Petrarch’s line against the background of linguistic skepticism, which he had expressed a decade earlier in his “Three Dialogues with Georges Duthuit”: “The expression that there is nothing to express, nothing with which to express, nothing from which to express, no power to express, no desire to express, together with the obligation to express.” (Beckett 1984, 139). This statement was actually part of a comment on the paintings of Tal Coat.

Two years earlier, in March 1947, Beckett wrote another text on painting, notably the painters Bram and his brother Geer van Velde, called “Peintres de l’Empêchement,” in which he wrote another passage that has also been interpreted as an implicit statement on Beckett’s own poetics: “An *endless* unveiling, veil behind veil, *plane after plane* of imperfect transparencies, light and space themselves veils, an unveiling towards the unweilable, the nothing, the thing again” (Beckett 2011 [1948], 880; emphasis added). With reference to the three novels under discussion, this statement is important because it was written only two months before Beckett started writing *Molloy* on 2 May 1947. Against this background, John Bolin reads the passage as an indication of Beckett’s “interest in a form of internal duplication as a central motif and governing formal characteristic of the artwork” (2013, 122). The word “plane” in the passage from “Peintres de l’Empêchement” recalls the terminology Beckett had first used in his discussion of the structure of André Gide’s *Paludes* and *Les Faux-Monnayeurs* in his lectures at Trinity College, Dublin in the early 1930s (TCD MIC 60, 33; 37). In these lectures, he advocated what he called the ‘integrity of incoherence,’ which is why Racine (unlike Corneille or Balzac) was comparable to Gide.

In his 1947 essay Beckett is talking about the paintings of Bram and Geer van Velde, but as Bolin suggests, he may also be talking about his own poetics at that moment, a poetics in which modernity is inseparable from the use of “a self-reflexive form that depicts the process of unveiling that brought it into being” (2013, 122). Each M-character in the series (Molloy, Moran, Malone, Macmann, Mahood) may seem to hold the promise of unveiling the ‘self,’ according to Daniel C. Dennett’s notion of “narrative selfhood” (Dennett 1991, 418). But although this human tendency to narrate a ‘self’ is clearly recognized by Beckett, he seems to undermine and criticize this urge, which Dennett calls a “fundamental tactic of self-protection, self-control, and self-definition” (1991, 418). In the process of writing, Beckett’s characters seem to be counteracting this tactic, undoing their carefully constructed or narrated selves. Moran’s report is particularly telling in this respect. The world he neatly composed for himself gradually decomposes in the course of his report, thus undoing this self to come closer to the integrity of incoherence that was so crucial in Beckett’s lectures at Trinity College, Dublin. Much later, Beckett told Lawrence Shainberg:

It’s a paradox, but with old age, the more the possibilities diminish, the better chance you have. With diminished concentration, loss of memory, obscured intelligence – what you, for example, might call ‘brain damage’ – the more chance there is for *saying something closest to what one really is*. Even though

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everything seems inexpressible, there remains the need to express. A child needs to make a sand castle even though it makes no sense. (Beckett in Shainberg 1987, 104; emphasis added)

This statement recapitulates not only the "obligation to express" (Beckett 1984, 139), but also the project of "saying something closest to what one really is," or, in other words, "an unveiling towards the unweilable." (Beckett 2011, 880). But when Beckett wrote "Peintres de l'Empêchement," he was also aware that this is a process without end, an "endless unveiling." (Beckett 2011, 880) Paradoxically, while attempting to unveil, every text simultaneously weaves a new veil, "veil behind veil, plane after plane of imperfect transparencies" (Beckett 2011, 880).

#### 4. Reception and Theoretical Perspectives

Beckett's favourite critic among the early readers was Maurice Blanchot, according to whom the unstoppable utterance in *The Unnamable* is not the antithesis of silence, for silence is constantly present within it (1953, 678). According to Georges Bataille, one of the earliest critics reviewing *Molloy*, the novel was characterized by its "absence d'humanité" (Bataille qtd. in Moorjani 2015, 21). As we have seen, Beckett indeed made a conscious effort to, even literally, erase the high-flown notion of 'humanity' in these three novels, which are indelibly marked by the experience of World War II. But the War was not the only reason for this post-humanist approach. Even before the War, Beckett had already expressed his wish to find a poetics that was not anthropocentric: "I am not interested in a 'unification' of the historical chaos any more than I am in the 'clarification' of the individual chaos, & still less in the anthropomorphisation of the inhuman necessities that provoke the chaos" (qtd in Nixon, 2011, 177–178).

Angela Moorjani has provided an overview of the different stages in the reception of Beckett's three novels. As she notes, the first generation of Beckett reviewers interpreted the "decomposing bodies, the *informe*, and the nullity of language and meaning" in his novels as "signs of human-lessness" (2015, 22), not in terms of existential humanism: "If reading Beckett through the lens of existential humanism applies to some second-generation critics' investigations of authentic being and the quest for self, the label clearly does not fit the trilogy's earliest readers" (Moorjani 2015, 22).

Theodor W. Adorno opposed the tendency to read Beckett in light of existentialism. The problem with existentialist ontology, according to Adorno, is its "hieratic language": "The hieratic language alone turns the radicalism of existential ontology into a lie. While one confronts nothingness, while everything is being questioned, the bathos of this questioning already warrants the meaning it pretends to know nothing about" (2010, 170). Against this "sacred language" Beckett posits his "regressive language," according to Adorno (1982, 119), by means of "subtraction" (1982, 123). The last of Adorno's notes on *L'Innommable* reads: "Not abstraction but

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subtraction” (2010, 78). Beckett’s writing is an engaged form of literature, but not in the Sartrean sense, Adorno argues. Beckett’s work is engaged by what it subtracts. Through its negativity, it is a truly engaged form of literature (Adorno 1984, 353–4; Critchley 2004, 183).

The 1980s and 1990s were marked by political readings, such as Peter Gidal’s or Alain Badiou’s reading of Beckett’s work in terms of his “ethico-political aesthetic” (cf. Gibson 2002, 93–94, 102). In this period, the role of language was central in Beckett criticism, for instance in Steven Connor’s chapter on self-translation in *Samuel Beckett: Repetition, Theory and Text* (2007 [1988]).

In the twenty-first century, however, this role has been reassessed, notably by Connor himself in the preface to his edition of *The Unnamable*, where he refers to Badiou’s urge to move beyond “language-centred post-structuralist criticism” (2010, xx). Whereas, in the 1980s and 1990s, Beckett studies may have been dominated by a preoccupation with such thinkers as Kristeva, Derrida, Cixous, Foucault, Deleuze and Lacan, this focus on what Jean-Michel Rabaté refers to as “capital-T Theory” (2011, 700) gradually shifted to other topics. As Moorjani notes, “Renewed critical interest since the 1980s in affect and the material body has led scholars to a focus on the abject and dwindling corporeality in the trilogy that for the first French critics placed the human in question” (2015, 30).

At the same time, another shift took place from an ahistorical view on the human condition and the critical construction of a ‘universal’ Beckett towards a renewed awareness of the importance of the particulars. This trend was initiated by such landmark publications as the biography by James Knowlson (1996) and *Beckett before Godot* (1997) by John Pilling. The publication of such documents as *Beckett’s ‘Dream’ Notebook* (1999), the *Letters of Samuel Beckett* (2009–2016), Beckett’s notes on Arnold Geulincx (2006) or *Samuel Beckett’s Library* (Van Hulle and Nixon 2013), as well as the digitization and transcription of Beckett’s manuscripts in the Beckett Digital Manuscript Project ([www.beckettarchive.org](http://www.beckettarchive.org)) have facilitated intertextual research and investigations that historicize and contextualize Beckett’s works in ways that were not possible before. This historicizing approach is part of what Andrew Gibson has called “a new phase” in Beckett studies: “A young generation of scholars have abandoned the theoretical turn that dominated work on Beckett from the late 1980s onwards” (2011, 926). Especially since the Beckett Centenary in 2006, Beckett studies are thriving – which sounds like a very un-Beckettian concept and raises Moran’s rhetorical question: “What then was the source of [this] prosperity? I’ll tell you. No, I’ll tell you nothing” (Beckett 2009b [1955], 140).

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